

AN AFFINITY THAT CONTINUES

By Fr. FRANCESCO D. COLACELLI

Three citations in just five months of his pontificate. Benedict XVI too, like his predecessor seems to want to hold Padre Pio up as an example to Christians of the third millennium. On 23 September, speaking to the staff of the pontifical buildings, he praised *"Padre Pio's love for the Eucharist and the Cross and his docility to the Church, that inspired his whole life"*. Five days previously he had pointed to him as an exemplary minister of the Altar, who *"found his strength in the imitation of Christ through his daily and intimate celebration and adoration of the Eucharist"*, adding that *"when he celebrated holy Mass he relived the mystery of Calvary with such fervor that he edified everyone's faith and devotion"*, and describing *"the stigmata that God had granted him as a sign of close conformity with Jesus Crucified"*. On 20 August, in Cologne, during the World Youth Day, he invited the young to look to Padre Pio, as well as to another eight exemplary saints, so as to learn *"what it is to 'adore' and what it means to live according to the teaching of the Child of Bethlehem, of Jesus Christ and of God Himself"*.

This is not the first time that a Pope has expressed admiration for our saint. The admiration of John Paul II, based on his personal, human and mystical acquaintance of Padre Pio is

known to all. Benedict XV, the first of the Popes in Padre Pio's life, was from the beginning convinced that *"Padre Pio was an extraordinary man and one of those that from time to time God sends into the world in order to lead mankind back to Him"*. Another Pope and a "mystic", Pius XII, invited *"many to visit Padre Pio, because he was convinced that everyone would reap spiritual benefit from the encounter"*. And again, once, when he was speaking with the sculptor Francesco Messina (a spiritual child of Padre Pio who created the stations for the "Way of the Cross" in San Giovanni Rotondo), he said: *"Padre Pio is a great saint... He is certainly a holy man"*. And then we have the often repeated and famous words of Pope Paul VI who, in 1971, defined the stigmatic friar of the Gargano *"a marked representative of the Lord"*.

Each of these demonstrations of affection, esteem, admiration and devotion are important. Above all because they come from the supreme head of the Church, who is elected to his ministry by the Holy Spirit. However in the praise of Benedict XVI for Padre Pio, we have not just his authority as the Vicar of Christ but also his authority as a theologian and as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is that of the former Holy Office that sought to examine so meticulously the mysteries of

Padre Pio, both during his life and after.

A great spiritual affinity exists moreover, between this Pope and our holy confrère. We need only remember the recent request made by the Pope on 6 October, for the 40th anniversary of the approval of the dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, of the Second Vatican Council, in which he invited all to rediscover *"the Word of God that leads believers, through the action of the Holy Spirit, to the fullness of Truth"* for *"the Church lives by the Gospel and from the Gospel always finds its direction"*. Already in 1914, that is 61 years prior to the *Dei Verbum*, Padre Pio writing to Raffaelina Cerase, recommended her to diligently apply herself *"to reading Holy Scripture and books dealing with divine things, or else listening to God's word as expounded by holy preachers, confessors, etc"* (Letters II, p. 250).

My wishes for you for the coming festivities is that you may find, through the embracement of the teaching of these two great teachers, in the pages of the Gospel that authentic Christmas joy, that is much more gratifying than that passing and superficial joy that comes from the bright illuminations, décor and over laden tables characteristic of this time. ■