

# NOT ICONS BUT TEACHERS

By Fr. **FRANCESCO D. COLACELLI**

One year ago the passion of a great devotee of Padre Pio was consumed – perhaps his greatest devotee. This devotee from the outset of his priesthood, back in 1948, began to follow closely the footsteps of Padre Pio. From then on their lives followed parallel paths that intersected only on few but significant occasions. The last being on 16 June 2002, (the canonisation ceremony of Padre Pio) where all the world saw the resemblance of their heroic fortitude when John Paul II, ill and weak, was forced to celebrate the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection seated, recalling to many the historical images of the last Mass of Padre Pio who also, at the end of his life, was unable to celebrate Mass standing. John Paul II's funeral too was turned into an occasion of great faith and devotion similar to that which brought the town of San Giovanni Rotondo, on 26 September 1968, to a standstill. And wonderful cures are already attributed to the Pontiff, soon to be raised to the honours of the altar. These, however, are only the more apparent aspects, not the most important, that unite two existences lived in great accord, because both modelled upon the same example: that of the Gospel.

Above all they were men of prayer - unceasing, intense, authentic prayer. Prayer that was a true dialogue with God and that raises man to the infinite. They were courageous prophets, with the ability to speak with clarity the language of love that, at times, in order to correct and proclaim the truth must also be stern. Through their words but mostly through their example they were witnesses to the redeeming value of suffering. In essence they were authentic Christians.

Now both are living their Easter in the reign of God. Having lived their lives united to Christ on the cross, they now share in His glory. People queue to visit their respective tombs. Images of them are found in countless homes and places of work. One invokes their intercession to overcome the small or less small trials of life. And Padre Pio already has his first churches dedicated to him and John Paul II will soon have his. However all this risks becoming fruitless devotion if the two "saints" remain prisoners of their icons, enclosed in their niches, hidden behind a candle or votive lamp. We must not forget they are living and want to continue to live, within us, through that same love that made them capable pastors of their flock, and, before us, as

examples who manifested to us by their lives that the 'narrow path' of sanctity is possible even in this age of endless temptations and stupefied consciences.

Both the Capuchin saint and extraordinary Pontiff considered the salvation of souls the main purpose of their ministry. Because of this they lived their lives till the end consuming their very last energies. Because of this they did not hide their own frailty, so that they could manifest God's infinite love reflected in their own limited but tangible human love.

These two figures, who are so revered, are for us then principally an incentive in our spiritual lives. And since – as Padre Pio wrote – that "*Christ rose immortal to a life of glory*" so that "*we too must rise immortal in the life of grace*", we too must be "*firmly resolved to never again subject our souls to spiritual death*".

My wishes to you therefore for this holy Easter, is that you may become, and myself too, fervent disciples to these two great teachers. And I conclude with words borrowed from our saintly friar: "*May the Lord confirm with His blessings these wishes of mine, for your happiness is very close to my heart and I work and pray continuously for this end*". ■