

TRUE FACTS OR A FALSE SCOOP?

By Fr. **FRANCESCO D. COLACELLI**

A lot of indignation and not just among Padre Pio's devotees has recently been caused with the publication of two articles in a well known Italian daily newspaper. The first article was by a university professor of history and the author of a book fresh from the printers (Sergio Luzatto: "Padre Pio. Miracles and Politics in Twentieth-Century Italy"); the second written by a journalist who drew his information from that same fount.

The articles and book are about Padre Pio. But, while the book shows evidence of some objectivity, the newspaper articles present the testimonies and documents in such a way as to raise doubts on the authenticity of the Capuchin saint's stigmata and sanctity.

In the first article one reads that Padre Pio in 1919 would acquire for himself carbolic acid and veratrine, and asked the pharmacist for his utmost discretion. The conclusion is not explicit, but it is clear enough: carbolic acid is "a substance that is able to cause wounds in the hand." This assertion, which is the subtitle, is commented on in the text of the article and one goes on to read: "Rather than the perfume of violets and the odour of sanctity, there seemed to emanate from Padre Pio's cell the odour of acids, poisons and fraud."

We are not told by the author of the article from what scientific source he was able to ascertain that carbolic acid and veratrine are

able to cause real and proper perforations in one's hand and feet.

However, any medical dictionary will tell you that carbolic acid was commonly used in the past as a disinfectant and that veratrine is used as a local anaesthetic. In 1919 Padre Pio had the stigmata. He had wounds to disinfect and which caused him pain. Wounds which caused him such "shame," such "confusion" and such "humiliation", that when he received the invisible stigmata for the first time when he was living in Pietrelcina, he did not speak of it to his spiritual director until a year later. How could he have explained all this to a pharmacist? He told him, at first, that the carbolic acid was "to disinfect the syringes he used for the injections he gave to the novices" (these were the seminarians to whom he was spiritual director). And this was quite true. However, in a later request on the note that he wrote for the pharmacist he said that the carbolic acid was needed only for "sterilization."

However what shatters all doubt that one might have is the experiment that was carried out in 1919, by Professor Amico Bignami, the most sceptical of the doctors summoned by the superiors to look at Padre Pio's stigmata. Bignami put forth the hypothesis that "the lesions were of pathological origin and that they were perhaps unconsciously and through the power of suggestion completed and artificially preserved by some chemical agent." And to prove this thesis he forbade "the use of all

medicine, especially carbolic acid and then he ordered that the wounds be bandaged and sealed in the presence of two witnesses and that these seals be checked for eight days in the presence of these two witnesses... On the eighth day when the bandages were finally removed from Padre Pio – Fr. Paolino da Casacalenda was the witness – so much blood flowed from his hands, when he celebrated Mass, that they were forced to give him handkerchiefs so that he could dry them."

In the second article some annotations were printed written by Pope John XXIII who, on the basis of "very grave information" received by him on Padre Pio, said: "if what has been reported to me is true... I can only foresee definite disaster for souls." On this matter Mgr. Andrea Cesarano sheds light. He was at the time (1961) the Archbishop of Manfredonia and he was able to clear up all the misunderstanding that surrounded Padre Pio to the Pope, to the extent that John XXIII would later affirm: on Padre Pio "I was misinformed!"

To have ignored all these facts that are available to everyone, I consider it poor historical method and reasoning.

My wishes for you this holy Christmas is that your hearts may be filled with a real love for truth and with the peace and joy that comes with it and that has emanated for the last 20 centuries from the grotto of Bethlehem. ■

