



## A SPECIAL FRIEND

*By Bro Mariano Di Vito, OFM Cap.*

We learnt from quite accurate and reliable sources that the Holy Father John Paul II would be visiting the dioceses of the Capitanata region.

It was 1987 and the canonical process of Padre Pio's beatification and canonisation was progressing with ups and downs. A lot of material still had to be examined and assessed and the obstacles at times seemed insurmountable. Nevertheless, we never doubted for a moment that the Holy Father would come to San Giovanni Rotondo on the Gargano to visit Padre Pio as a friend and moreover, now as Peter's successor, a truly special friend!

Any delays or setbacks were completely eclipsed by the events of those splendid and unimaginable days in that May of 1987: a Eucharistic celebration in the Parco del Papa (the "Pope's Park" and still called that today), an encounter with the friars and authorities in Our Lady of Grace Church, a visit to the hospital of the "Home for the Relief of Suffering," with the sick and employees who welcomed him in their wards with great fervour and emotion... and then photographs taken of him together with the friars gathered around him with their rosaries to be blessed and shaking his hands. It was a great, beautiful and unique day!

How can we forget the Pope on his knees in prayer with his hand on Padre Pio's tomb with that far away look as if he was asking the venerated Padre, his friend, for

help and strength in the difficult office to which he had been called? I was there and will never forget... He, the Pope who had come from afar, together with the Bishops and faithful from the *semper fidelis* Poland, had from the very beginning recognised in Padre Pio a guide and support during the very hard years of atheistic and communist dictatorship that tried in vain to eradicate the light of faith from the hearts and minds of its people.

Pontiff and pilgrim, a devotee and friend, an interlacing of personal memories and current historical events... all these apparently irreconcilable aspects were highlighted during his address given that afternoon in the Church of Our Lady of Grace.

After he had held up Padre Pio as an example to priests, because of the central importance he gave to the celebration of the Eucharist and to the ministering of the sacrament of Reconciliation in his life, John Paul II, almost as if he was thinking of the past and of his personal and intimate relationship with Padre Pio, said: *"With you I want to thank Our Lord for having given us this dear Padre Pio. For having given him to our generation, living in such a tormented century."*

*"For having given us this dear Padre Pio..."*, these are magnificent and authoritative words that come not just from the Successor of Peter, but from an extraordinary man and certainly based on a profound spiritual vision and understanding of our times, redeemed by the Blood

of Christ, but in need of opening itself without fear to the Saviour.

It was Pope John Paul II who inscribed Padre Pio first in the album of the Blessed, and then in that of the saints and who on countless occasions underlined this holy friar's very important mission as a witness and prophet for our times suffering tragically from ideologies which, if not openly hostile to God and the transcendent, considered them to be realities of no use and even damaging. *"Let's get Padre Pio moving. Let's get him moving!"* These were the Holy Father's words in his address given to the then Minister General of the Order of the Capuchin Friars Minor, Bro Flavio Roberto Carraro. At the time, he probably had in mind the process of Beatification that seemed then to have come to a standstill.

Here, I would like to interpret these words as an invitation or rather as an order, loud and clear, to bring again Padre Pio to the world of today, to all of mankind so that he can show us again just how much God loves us, and give us the courage to overcome our fears and to open the doors of our hearts full of trust to Christ the Lord.

As we recall during these days John Paul II, the Great's visit to San Giovanni Rotondo that 23 May of 1987, these words he addresses to us again.

They are the words of a great Pontiff, very dear to all of us... and a special friend of Padre Pio! ❖