

A PLACE OF GRACE



» by Bro FRANCESCO DILEO OFM^{Cap}

Seventy years ago, on 31 January 1955, the construction of a new friary church began next to the old one. The traditional strike of the pickaxe marked the start of work, as the centuries-old building, after withstanding over three centuries, had become too small to accommodate the increasing number of faithful wishing to attend Masses celebrated by Padre Pio.

The proposal for this new church came from Father Benigno Re-Ceconi of Sant'Ilario Milanese, the General Minister of the Order of Capuchin Friars, who, on 6 July 1952, unexpectedly arrived in San Giovanni Rotondo. He quickly recognised the need for a larger space to hold the liturgical assemblies. The project was entrusted to the architect Giuseppe Gentile of Boiano, a town in the province of Campobasso, who received a clear directive from the mystic Capuchin: "Let the church be a song of praise to the Lord for His art and His richness, but, above all, let it be the true house of prayer and reflection."

The construction was remarkably swift, taking just over three years. On 1 July 1959, the

new church was consecrated by Monsignor Paolo Carta, Archbishop of Foggia. When Padre Pio saw its size, he exclaimed, "What... have you made a matchbox?" much to the astonishment of those present. The capacity, however, was more than adequate for the pilgrims of the time, and it remained so for many years, especially since the decrees of the Holy Office were still in effect, advising people not to come to San Giovanni Rotondo for devotional reasons. But Padre Pio had a vision for the future. The new *Our Lady of Grace* proved to be, in fact, "a matchbox," meaning too small, as early as the second half of 1987, following the pastoral visit of Pope John Paul II, who knelt at the tomb of the revered Brother. That act rendered the two declarations of the Supreme Congregation, which had never been officially revoked, obsolete.

On 8 December 1973, the then Archbishop of Manfredonia, Valentino Vailati, granted that the new church be "elevated to the dignity of a diocesan sanctuary" for the following reasons: "The centuries-old devotion of the people of San Giovanni Rotondo and neighbouring towns towards Our Lady of Grace. The solemn Coronation of the Madonna's portrait, decreed by the Vatican Chapter

and carried out on 2 July 1959 by Cardinal Federico Tedeschi. The artistry with which the church was constructed, the decorum of the sacred functions held there according to the new liturgical norms. The continuous and growing influx of faithful not only from the province or the Apulia region, but from all over Italy and many from abroad, drawn by devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the tomb of the Servant of God, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, a Capuchin, a remarkable example of tender Marian devotion for many years."

The decree concludes with the hope that "many souls may find in this new Sanctuary all the graces and blessings they desire, leading to greater holiness and peace."

Since 1959, this church, where I had the honour of serving as rector for 16 years, has not only been the place where Padre Pio celebrated his final Masses, but also a source of graces both requested and received. It remains a wellspring of divine mercy that, through the mystic Capuchin in the past and through his confrères today, continues to transform countless confessions into true conversions.



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