

To Suffer and Never to Die': The Concept of Suffering in the Cult of Padre Pio Da Pietrelcina.

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Abstract

The life of Padre Pio, a Capuchin monk who bore the stigmata of Christ can be seen as an imitation of the death of Christ. As a priest he was not only empowered to make real the death of Christ through the ritual of the Mass, but he embodied it in himself by virtue of his stigmata. In transforming his understanding of suffering he transformed himself into a living crucifix, a symbol of death through which eternal life is gained. The article then examines the attitudes and responses of his followers.

'TO SUFFER AND NEVER TO DIE': THE CONCEPT OF SUFFERING IN THE CULT OF PADRE PIO DA PIETRELCINA

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The life of Padre Pio, a Capuchin monk who bore the stigmata of Christ can be seen as an imitation of the death of Christ. As a priest he was not only empowered to make real the death of Christ through the ritual of the Mass, but he embodied it in himself by virtue of his stigmata. In transforming his understanding of suffering he transformed himself into a living crucifix, a symbol of death through which eternal life is gained. The article then examines the attitudes and responses of his followers.

Introduction

The ethnography of southern Italy often describes a society where deprivation, poverty and sickness are the common lot. The picture drawn is one of people who suffer. During my fieldwork in the pilgrimage town of San Giovanni Rotondo, the idea of suffering was frequently discussed; and it was something which all of my informants had experienced in one form or another. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the concept of suffering not as a peculiarly southern Italian one but as it is expressed in the mystic journey of the Catholic priest Pio da Pietrelcina, and in the cult of this 'Servant of God' which is based in San Giovanni Rotondo.¹ Suffering in its many forms was a main feature of Padre Pio's lifestory and spirituality. It forms a great part of his appeal to devotees from throughout the Catholic world. The case of Padre Pio serves to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the Catholic concept of suffering.

As a concept, suffering has a theoretical, religious basis. Most of my informants had some acquaintance with the problem which theologians call theodicy. As active or merely 'cultural' Catholics they were familiar with the idea that suffering is the result of the fallen state of humanity; that it occurs as the result of the malevolence of evil people, or spirits; that it is allowed by a loving God as a trial or as a means to achieve a greater good. They were also able to tell me that suffering differs according to the world one inhabits. In paradise it is absent, while in hell it is eternal. In purgatory it is purifying, while on earth it can be a trial, or an impossible burden.

In real terms, the earthly experience of suffering takes many forms. It ranges from a generic sense of deprivation, such as that which people told me was integral to 'the problem of the south', to very specific, personal experiences: hardship, loss and, above all, physical sickness.





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