

“60 MINUTES” ATTACKS PADRE PIO AND MOTHER TERESA

By Father Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R.

Shortly after Sunday, October 12, I was saddened to receive phone calls of outrage from friends who had watched a cynical attack on Padre Pio and Mother Teresa on the CBS show “60 Minutes.” I was saddened because of the time people wasted watching this program, which like so much of the secular media has a strong anti-Catholic bias.

Please, if you insist on watching this stuff, be sure to do a little penance afterward. Write or e-mail the sponsors and tell them you will not buy their products until they stop giving their advertising dollars to TV programs that present offensive garbage like this. *And then follow through.* I am very serious about this. I know from experience that we have been able to bring some of the mighty down in this way.

Of course, this show gave the appearance of being objective, giving both sides of the story. It was, as always, a trap. Very well informed people, like Msgr. Robert Sarno, were placed opposite critics like Rev. Richard McBrien, who repeatedly attacked the canonization of Saint Pio on the basis that he simply did not believe in extraordinary events that are reported in Saint Pio’s life. So what? I have just reviewed a transcript of the “60 Minutes” program, and I find it an insult to me personally because I am devoted to both of the saints who were ridiculed on the program. I should mention that I was part of CBS’s coverage of Mother Teresa’s funeral, and that day they were singing a different tune. ABC, on the other hand, which to me stands for Always-Bashing-Catholics, had on Christopher Hitchens with his outrageous commentary at Mother Teresa’s funeral. God bless the Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists of India—they honored this great woman, who has been

declared Mother of India.

I am very familiar with the exacting process of canonization. For almost two decades I have been diocesan postulator of the cause of Cardinal Terence Cooke. In addition, I knew Mother Teresa for well over thirty years, and I received a remarkable blessing in an astonishing way from Padre Pio. Therefore, I would like briefly to take on Rev. McBrien, as well as Christopher Hitchens, who wrote a scurrilous book about Mother Teresa.

Let's begin with McBrien's hostile observations about Padre Pio. I suspect he has never seen a person with the stigmata. In my book, *A Still, Small Voice* (Ignatius Press), I seriously examine the nature of reported supernatural phenomena and consider the different possibilities ranging from the psychosomatic to the miraculous. I don't think any of the several stigmatics I have examined exhibited supernatural markings; in fact, I was able to help one devout and sincere person recover from this unusual symptom. Uniformly these wounds were superficial—something like blood blisters. Padre Pio's wounds were deep, and they bled constantly but without any infection. Although I have scientific training and a degree, I need not simply dismiss *a priori* something I do not understand or something that does not fit into my range of experience or my prejudices. To do so would be eminently unscientific.

The fact is that stigmata are paranormal phenomena (a scientific term referring to things having no scientific explanation at present), examples of which have been investigated for centuries since a nobleman roughly examined the wounds of Saint Francis at his funeral. Padre Pio's wounds were undoubtedly the most examined stigmata in history. Naturally, many stories and legends began to develop around such a person. Nevertheless, it is simply illogical to dismiss all such reports out of hand, as McBrien does, by saying, "I don't believe any of that." That incredible response tells you

nothing about Padre Pio; it might tell you something about McBrien. One needs to review the evidence. In Padre Pio's case, this is not difficult for anyone to do.

Several serious and sober biographies of Padre Pio are available. One that reports and sifts all the evidence is *Padre Pio: The True Story* (Our Sunday Visitor) by a Lutheran pastor and well-known biographer, Pastor C. Bernard Ruffin. He gives a careful account of the many reported paranormal phenomena in Padre Pio's life, as well as the reaction of skeptics and the response of this humble and most generous friar to the mysterious things that happened to him. The extraordinary phenomena, including reports of what is called bilocation, are often very well documented by competent witnesses. But none of these extraordinary things were evidence for Padre Pio's canonization. What was taken into account when considering his sanctity were his life and virtues, his behavior in the face of these unsought mysterious phenomena, and his humility and generosity. His concern for others is seen in the great hospital he built with offerings given to him and the Capuchin friars. Yet Bob Simon, the "60 Minutes" co-host, disparaged the Capuchins in a most insidious way.

The following quotation from Pastor Ruffin's biography sums up his research on Padre Pio, and casts McBrien's statement, "I don't believe any of that," into a ridiculous light:

"Even the most cursory reading of Sacred Scripture will reveal that the sanctity to which all Christians are called is a total, absolute, and unconditional dedication and surrender of the self to God in Christ Jesus. Padre Pio lived this commitment in a striking and intense way. Whatever one may think of his *charismata*, the propriety of his offering himself as a Victim of Divine Love, whatever one's opinion may be of his ministry or his theology, or even of his personality, there can be no doubt that Padre Pio gave himself over entirely to his Lord. The most fervent atheist will be forced

to admit, even if he believes that the padre dedicated his life to a delusion, that his commitment was total. His entire life was given over to God and to the service of mankind. The only thing Padre Pio cared about in this world was saving souls. To him, every soul was the object of a concern so powerful that he was willing to immolate himself in its behalf.

“Padre Pio was a man who, like all men, was influenced by his family, by his environment, by his education. . . . He was, unlike most men and women, an individual who had surrendered himself *totally* to his Savior, Christ, a man who strove from childhood to his last breath to be an imitator of Christ. No suffering—physical, spiritual, or emotional—was so great as to stay him in this mission. When his total dedication to his faith is considered on the basis of Scripture as well as of Christian tradition, no one can seriously deny that Padre Pio was—and is—one of history’s greatest exemplars of Christian humanity.”

I know several sophisticated people—including a nonbeliever—to whom Padre Pio revealed the state of their souls. Indeed, there was one very dark moment in my own life when I had been misjudged and hurt by people who later apologized. Within two minutes of the axe falling on me, I received a personal note from Padre Pio. I had never had any contact with him, but I did admire him. This little message of hope and encouragement, written in his own hand on the back of a devotional card, made all the difference in the world to a young man who should have been crushed but was not. Unlike McBrien, I have every reason to believe that Padre Pio is a saint of God.

Now for Christopher Hitchens’ continuing vicious attacks on Mother Teresa. Out of the many calumnies he has made about Mother Teresa, he chose to present her in his book, *The Missionary Position*, as a religious fanatic, uninterested in the poor, concerned only in making converts. During the thirty-two years when I knew Mother Teresa well, I never

observed in her behavior anything like fanaticism. Moreover, he distorts her quotations on the nature of charity toward the poor. The following excerpt is from a letter Mother Teresa wrote to the Missionaries of Charity on the subject of charity; it brings together her love for God and her tender compassion and love for her neighbor in a life of great spiritual darkness known only to a few.

“Try to increase your knowledge of the mystery of redemption. This knowledge will lead you to love, and love will make you share through your sacrifice in the passion of Christ. My dear children, without suffering our work would just be social work—very good and helpful, but it would not be the work of Jesus Christ, not part of the redemption. Jesus wanted to help us by sharing our life, our loneliness, our agony and death. All that He has taken upon Himself and has carried it in the darkest night. Only by being one with us has He redeemed us. We are able to do the same. All the desolation of the poor people, not only their material poverty but their spiritual destitution, must be redeemed, and we must have our share in it. Pray thus when you find it hard: I wish to live in this world which is so far from God, which has turned so much from the light of Jesus, to help them—to take upon myself something of their suffering. Yes, my dear children, let us share the sufferings of the poor, for only by being one with them can we redeem them; that is bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God.”

Hitchens’ wholly distorted picture of Mother Teresa reminds us of a remark of Josef Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister: “Don’t tell a little lie; no one will believe you. Tell a big lie, and everyone will believe you.”

I can say categorically that Hitchens’ characterization of Mother Teresa is a scurrilous distortion of a truly great human being. When a supposedly Catholic publication ran an article several years ago mocking the Missionaries of Charity for their sari, which they said looked like a dish towel, I

wrote a rebuttal, which was never printed. I wrote my response despite Mother Teresa's disapproval. She had lots of critics, and she prayed for them all but never answered them. She used to say, "It is not between me and them; it is between me and God, and them and God."

I pray to Padre Pio and Mother Teresa, and I ask you to pray for the conversion of McBrien, Hitchens, and Simon, and the whole crew at "60 Minutes." I ask you to pray for my conversion too. We're going to need it. After all, in the end it is between each of us and God.

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