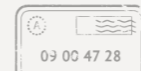


PILGRIM'S TRAVEL COMPANION

August 27 - September 9, 2025

A JOURNEY OF HEART, HEALING, & HOPE
WITH FR. JC MERINO



The Quiet Fire of the Heart

I write to you with gratitude as Papa has now returned home, staying at his sister's place where he can continue to rest and recuperate. His journey of healing continues slowly and quietly. There are moments when it strikes him deeply—how very weak he has become—and those moments can be heavy for him. Yet, it is there that I try to stand beside him: to encourage, to give support, and to remind him that weakness does not mean defeat, but rather the tender space where God's strength is revealed. The journey continues—day by day, step by step. Healing comes not only through medicine and rest, but also through prayer, patience, and the love that surrounds him. There is a quiet fire at work: hope that refuses to go out, faith that holds us steady, and love that carries us forward.

I am reminded of the words of St. Padre Pio, which bring comfort and strength in times such as these: *"Pray, hope, and don't worry. Worry is useless. God is merciful and will hear your prayer."* *"The more you are afflicted, the more you ought to rejoice, because in the fire of tribulation the soul will become pure gold."* *"Jesus will assist you and give you the grace to live victoriously every day of your life."*

These words kindle courage in Papa's heart, in my own, and I hope also in yours. We walk together as pilgrims of hope, healing, and heart—never alone, always in the company of Christ who heals, strengthens, and loves without end.

Between Heaven and Earth: *San Giovanni Rotondo + Monte* *Sant'Angelo + Gargano Peninsula*

September 6, 2025



Day II: The Quiet Fire of the Heart

This morning, as sunlight warms the red roofs of San Giovanni Rotondo, we rise with grateful hearts and return to the place where heaven once brushed the hem of a friar's robe. In the stillness of the sanctuary, we celebrate Mass at the tomb of St. Padre Pio, whose life was a living chalice—poured out for the suffering and the searching.

Here, time slows down.

We stand before the crucifix where the stigmata bloomed like invisible fire upon his flesh. We kneel near the confessional where broken spirits found direction, and sorrow was met with the balm of mercy. Before his incorrupt body, silence becomes a prayer, and the heart learns again how to hope.

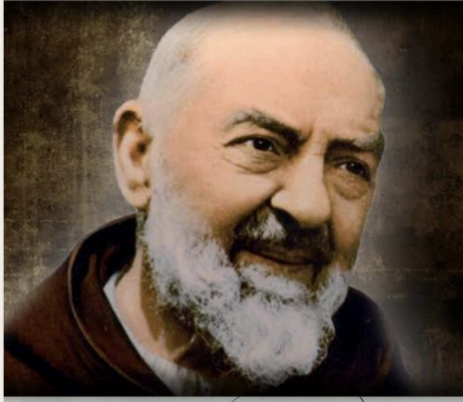
But our pilgrimage does not end in stillness — it presses on, pulled by grace into the wild heights of the Gargano Peninsula. As our coach winds upward, the sea shimmers below and the sky opens wide above. Stone and air seem to meet in a sacred embrace.

Soon we arrive at the Grotto of St. Michael the Archangel, carved not by human hands, but by a celestial visitation. This cave, cloaked in mystery and steeped in centuries of devotion, has echoed with the prayers of saints, soldiers, and sinners. Here, the veil between seen and unseen thins. The sword of St. Michael still guards the weary, and his presence fills the stone walls with a strength not our own.

We light candles for battles seen and unseen. We whisper names. We offer prayers. We leave with hearts steadied.

*From San Giovanni Rotondo ~
Monte Sant'Angelo
~ Gargano Peninsula*





Padre Pio

In the rolling hills of southern Italy, in a humble Capuchin monastery in San Giovanni Rotondo, lived a man whose life would radiate the mercy, mystery, and majesty of Christ in astonishing ways. St. Pio of Pietrelcina, known simply as Padre Pio, remains one of the most beloved and mystifying saints of the modern era.

For those of us on a pilgrimage, Padre Pio is not only a companion from the communion of saints—he is a guide whose life mirrors our deepest spiritual longings.

Born Francesco Forgione in 1887, in Pietrelcina, Italy, Padre Pio entered the Capuchin Franciscan Order at the age of 15. From his earliest years, he had a tender devotion to Jesus and Mary, a mystical awareness of God's presence, and a fervent desire for holiness. Yet his life was marked not by ease, but by intense suffering—spiritual, physical, and emotional. He was often misunderstood by his superiors and even accused of fraud. He endured long periods of illness and isolation, yet never lost hope.

For pilgrims seeking hope in the face of pain, confusion, or uncertainty, Padre Pio offers a profound lesson: ***"Pray, hope, and don't worry. Worry is useless. God is merciful and will hear your prayer."*** Hope, for Padre Pio, was not wishful thinking—it was a radical trust in God, born in the furnace of suffering.

On September 20, 1918, while praying after Mass, Padre Pio received the stigmata—the visible wounds of Christ—in his hands, feet, and side. He would bear these wounds for 50 years, a mystical participation in the Passion of Jesus.

People flocked to him—not only because of the stigmata, but because of the healing they experienced through his intercession. He spent countless hours in the confessional, reading souls and offering absolution with supernatural insight. Miraculous physical and spiritual healings were reported by those who came to him in faith. He carried the sufferings of others with compassion, often offering his own sufferings in reparation for their sins. Pilgrims who walk in search of healing—of body, mind, or spirit—find in Padre Pio a priest who embodied Christ's healing love, not just by miracle, but through the Cross. He reminds us that healing is not always immediate or physical. Sometimes, it is the deep interior transformation that comes when we unite our wounds with the wounds of Christ.

A Heart for Christ and His People

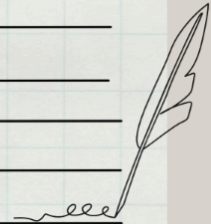
Above all, Padre Pio was a man of tremendous heart—a heart consumed by love for Christ in the Eucharist, Our Lady, and the suffering souls entrusted to him. His celebration of the Mass was said to be so intense, so reverent, that it would leave him in tears. The altar was not a stage, but Calvary itself, and he invited others to enter into the depths of that mystery with him. He founded the "Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza" (Home for the Relief of Suffering), a hospital that continues his mission of compassionate care today. It was not just a building—it was a living embodiment of his belief that charity is the soul of faith. For us pilgrims seeking to rediscover our heart—our compassion, our prayer, our mission—Padre Pio points the way with simplicity and humility: ***"It is easier for the earth to exist without the sun than without the Holy Mass."***

Visiting San Giovanni Rotondo or praying before his relics is not a journey into superstition or nostalgia—it is a living encounter with a saint who knew Jesus intimately, and who still intercedes powerfully for those in need. As we walk this Pilgrimage of Hope, Healing, and Heart, Padre Pio offers us three invitations: To cling to hope, even in darkness. To seek healing, and offer our wounds for others. To live with a heart rooted in prayer, sacrifice, and love.

May we, like him, surrender to grace. May we, like him, let the wounds of Christ shape our hope, heal our souls, and inflame our hearts.

SHARE =YOUR= STORY

trust your
JOURNEY





Sanctuary: Monte Sant'Angelo

High upon the limestone cliffs of the Gargano Peninsula in southern Italy—not Spain, as is sometimes mistakenly thought—lies a place unlike any other: the Sanctuary of Monte Sant'Angelo, one of the oldest and most revered pilgrimage destinations in Christendom.

Known simply as the Grotto of St. Michael the Archangel, this sacred site is a beacon of hope, a place of healing, and a summons to engage the Christian journey with heart and courage.

According to tradition, around the year 490 AD, St. Michael the Archangel appeared to Bishop Lawrence (Gallus) of Sipontum in a nearby cave on Mount Gargano. The archangel instructed him not to consecrate the cave with human hands because he himself had already consecrated it—declaring it a place where the faithful would receive divine mercy and protection. Over the centuries, this sanctuary became a major focal point for Christian worship and devotion to St. Michael, whose name means "Who is like God?" The site has welcomed pilgrims ranging from simple peasants to popes and saints—including St. Francis of Assisi, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and St. Padre Pio.

The cave itself—raw, ancient, and holy—is the spiritual heart of the complex. It is here that St. Michael appeared, and where pilgrims have knelt for over 1,500 years in prayer and penance. The grotto is not only a historic relic, but a living place of grace and forgiveness, echoing St. Michael's own words: "Where the rock opens wide, the sins of men may be forgiven." The sanctuary emerged during a time when devotion to angels, particularly St. Michael, spread rapidly across Europe. The grotto became a template for other Michaelic shrines, including Mont-Saint-Michel in France.

Built around the grotto is a cluster of structures—the Sanctuary of Monte Sant'Angelo—rising from the rugged cliffs of Monte Gargano. The architecture reflects centuries of faith layered into stone: Romanesque, Lombard, and Gothic elements converge, all leading the eye and the heart to the cave below.

HOPE: St. Michael is the Heavenly Defender, the one who stands against evil and proclaims the triumph of God. For pilgrims today, this site is a symbol of hope in the face of modern spiritual warfare, discouragement, and suffering. It reminds us that we are not alone—the forces of heaven fight for us.

HEART: Pilgrims come here seeking not only physical healing, but spiritual renewal. The cave is a place of deep silence and confession, where one can unburden the soul and receive grace. The sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist, are central to the pilgrim experience here.

HEART: St. Michael invites us to stand firm in faith, to live with courage and clarity. In a world that often compromises truth, the grotto becomes a training ground for saints—calling each pilgrim to leave fear behind and walk forward with purpose and conviction.

THE ST. MICHAEL PRAYER

"St. Michael the Archangel,
defend us in battle.
Be our protection against the wickedness
and snares of the devil.
May God rebuke him,
we humbly pray, and do thou,
O Prince of the Heavenly Host,
by the power of God, cast into hell Satan
and all the evil spirits
who prowl about the world
seeking the ruin of souls.
Amen."

Pilgrim Tip:

As you walk this Pilgrimage
of Hope, Healing, and Heart,
let the echo of St. Michael's
faithfulness stir your own.

And may his sword not just
shield you—but ignite in you
a heart set on fire for God.

And as the sun lowers its gaze, we return to San Giovanni Rotondo – not unchanged, but deeply marked by the touch of wounded hands and the wings of a warrior.

Tonight, we rest between earth and eternity, reminded that the path of the pilgrim is always lined with hope, shaped by healing, and lit by the quiet fire of the heart.

"Walk cheerfully with
your heart always
focused on heaven."

~ St. Padre Pio ~

Hope lights
THE
WAY

Victory
OF
Grace

Pilgrim Tip:

This evening, sit quietly and name your battles—not to be won, but to be handed over. Write a simple prayer to St. Michael: for courage, for clarity, for protection.

And to St. Padre Pio: offer one unspoken ache that you carry, and ask him to pray for your healing.

Tonight, we dwell in a holy hush—between wounds and wings, between earth and eternity.