

A Golden Crypt for Padre Pio. The Saint's Followers Protest Against the Capuchin Friars of San Giovanni Rotondo

Maria Rita Latta (April 18, 2010)



On Monday, April 19 at 4:30 p.m. the body of St. Pio of Pietrelcina will be moved from the crypt in the small Santa Maria delle Grazie sanctuary to a crypt covered with gold mosaics designed by Jesuit Father Marko Rupnik, located in a magnificent new church designed by Renzo Piano. Many of the Saint's followers find it unacceptable, considering the new sanctuary too modern, too majestic, and above all, too removed from the way Padre Pio lived his life.

On Monday, April 19 at 4:30 p.m. the body of St. Pio of Pietrelcina (more commonly known as Saint Padre Pio or simply Padre Pio) will be moved from the crypt in the small Santa Maria delle Grazie sanctuary to the new church of San Pio nearby. The announcement was made by the Capuchin friars at San Giovanni Rotondo. Since 1968, Padre Pio's body has been in repose in the old sanctuary but it will soon be moved to the magnificent new church designed by [Renzo Piano](#) [2]. More precisely, his body will lie in a crypt covered with gold mosaics designed by Jesuit Father Marko Rupnik.



This decision has been controversial from the outset since many of Padre Pio's followers find it unacceptable that the religious community of Capuchins would determine that the most logical place to house the saint's body would be a crypt covered in gold located in a monumental church. The gold used to decorate the crypt was primarily derived by using the ex-votos left by devotees from all over the world. So why not put Padre Pio's body in a place that they consider worthy enough for their fellow religious brother who became one of the most beloved and venerated saints on every corner of the globe?

The monks' reasons, as well as some of the religious authorities, however, do not coincide with those who view the move as a breach of the promise made at the time of Padre Pio's death – that is, Padre Pio's final request to be buried there.

Among those who immediately protested the Capuchin friars' plans were the members of the organization [Padre Pio Uomo della sofferenza](#) [3] (Padre Pio, Man of Suffering), and scholar Francesco Colafemmina whose [website](#) [4] provides readers with interesting details about the Pharaonic sarcophagus that will contain Padre Pio's body: "The urn is decorated with 16 different types of semiprecious stones (sodalite, serpentine, rock crystal, amazonite, jade, rose quartz, jasper, frosted glass, tourmaline, tiger's eye, hematite, falcon's eye, agate, Australian aventurine, chalcedony, lapis lazuli) and incorporates the theme of building the church: the rectangles of hammered silver in various shapes symbolize the living stones with which the Church is built (with a capital 'C,' understood as the mystical Body of Christ), taking the fourth verse of the dedication hymn of the church which says: "Blessed Church, God's dwelling among men, holy temple, built with living stones on the foundation of the Apostles, in Jesus Christ, center of unity and the cornerstone." Colafemmina then concludes that "Padre Pio will be placed in a sarcophagus of sodalite, serpentine, jade, tiger's eye, etc. Perhaps only Pacal the Great or Ramses II is missing – and other things to shame his followers!"

The scholar's impressions reflect the majority of the faithful who do not seem to appreciate the "new" church, viewed as too modern, too majestic, and above all, too removed from the way Padre Pio lived his life.

For their part, Padre Pio's fellow religious brothers have attempted to defuse the controversy by explaining to news agencies their reasons for deciding to move the saint's body: "The new crypt has a surface area of 500 square meters, almost double that of the previous sanctuary. Moreover, those with disabilities, the sick, the elderly, and children can access the tomb by three elevators or by using a wide ramp, recently embellished with mosaics by Father Rupnik that depict the lives of St. Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio, while the crypt in church of Santa Maria delle Grazie was only accessible by descending two flights of stairs or one elevator which was frequently out of service."

These reasons, however, do not convince the faithful and Padre Pio, Man of Suffering's president, attorney Francesco Traversi. In a note addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and Monsignor Michele Castoro, the Archbishop of Manfredonia-Vieste-San Giovanni Rotondo, Traversi sought to prevent the transfer of Padre Pio's body to the new crypt and ultimately dismiss the Capuchin friars. The transfer, says Traversi, would constitute "a seriously detrimental action of force by friars with contempt for the law and the will of the faithful who have opposed the exhumation and transfer." Traversi notes that April 22 is the date set for the next hearing before a Foggia court for the case brought by his organization and a nephew of the saint, Pio Masone, to prevent the transfer and ascertain whether the body currently kept in the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie is that of Padre Pio.

Meanwhile on the [Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno's](#) [5] website, Padre Pio's followers cannot hide their disappointment over what is happening in San Giovanni Rotondo. It is enough to call for a "pilgrimage strike in the face of ecclesiastical arrogance." Onofrio from Giovinazzo declares that "Padre Pio wanted a big church, not for extravagance but to gather many people together in his religion of the poor so that all could be rich in the Holy Spirit, love, and humility."

Pasquale from Andria is critical of the Capuchins: "Instead of spending all that money on meaningless work wouldn't it have been better to build a practical structure to help so many people in need? Don't you know that there are many Catholic missionaries around the world who



desperately need help rather than a cathedral in the desert? There is so much talk in Sunday homilies about the need for modesty among laypeople and then.... If the example is not set by the clergy who took vows of poverty why ask lay people to live a simple life?" He then concludes: "I don't think that I'll come back to San Giovanni Rotondo because all of this ostentation distracts me from meditation; I prefer to remember it by praying in a place that is more poor, more humble, and closer to Franciscan spirituality."

What about the Capuchin brothers? How are they reacting to the anger and the insults coming from the overwhelming majority of the faithful? How do they view the criticisms that are raining down on them from halfway around the world? Indeed it doesn't seem to upset them that much; they respond, in fact, by maintaining a dry and detached tone: "They will slowly become accustomed to it.

Besides, the same happened in Assisi with St. Francis." It will not be easy, however, for many pilgrims to get used to such splendor while seeing the images of the beloved Padre in the small and humble abode he had chosen as his place of burial. And then if the faithful truly cannot adjust, who knows.... If the friars are faced with a massive "pilgrimage strike," could they change their minds?

Translated by Giulia Prestia

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