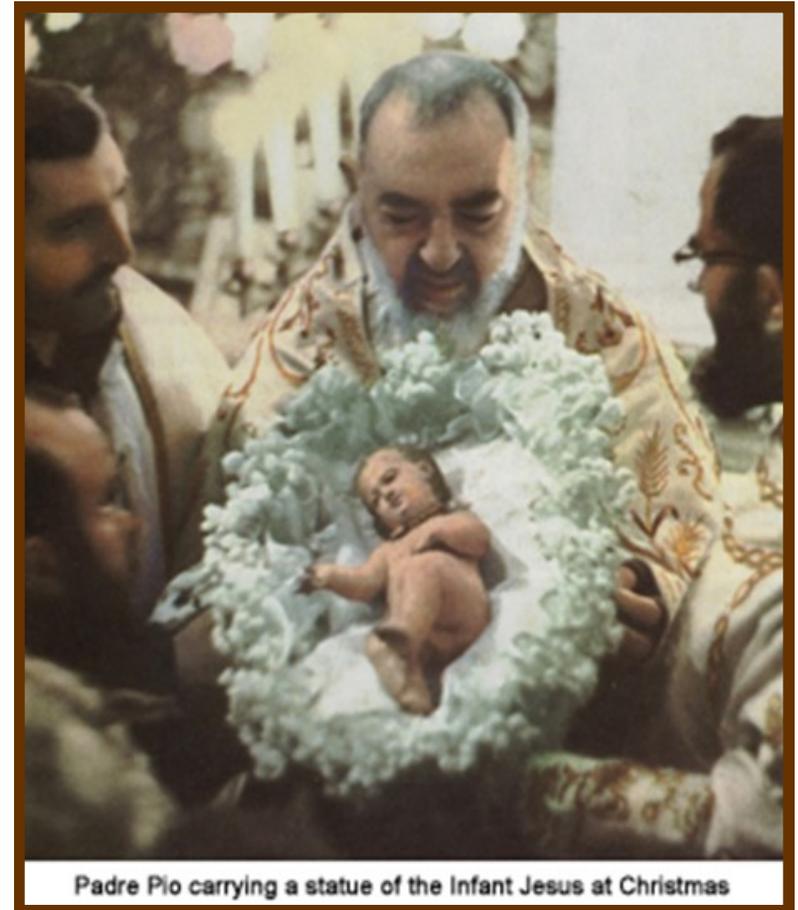


THE INFANT JESUS FLYING INTO THE ARMS OF PADRE PIO
ON DECEMBER 24, 1922

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Padre Pio and Antoinette (Toni) Masone Reali



Padre Pio carrying a statue of the Infant Jesus at Christmas

"For the feast of the Infant Jesus, my wish for you is that your heart may be His cradle adorned with flowers, where He can rest without the slightest discomfort."

St. Pio of Pietrelcina

Padre Pio and Antoinette (Toni) Masone Reali

Antoinette (Toni) Masone Reali was born in the small farming town of Pietrelcina in Southern Italy, the same town where Padre Pio was born and raised. All of Toni's relatives and friends in Pietrelcina either knew Padre Pio or knew of him. They loved to share stories about him and never tired of retelling them.

Toni's family, especially her mother Maddalena Masone and her Aunt Lucia (Lucia Iadanza) were very devoted to Padre Pio. Toni had the grace to receive her first Holy Communion from the hands of Padre Pio. Toni's Aunt Lucia, a highly-favored soul, was the sister of Toni's mother, Maddalena. A devout spiritual daughter of Padre Pio, Lucia's reputation of holiness was well known in Pietrelcina. She was held in great esteem among the townspeople.

Lucia Iadanza never married. As a young woman she had consecrated her life completely to the service of God. Her home in Pietrelcina was very close to the home of Padre Pio's family, the Forgiões. Near her home was the well that Padre Pio used to drink from as a youth. Lucia lived just a few doors down from Our Lady of the Angels parish and Padre Pio passed by Lucia's home every day on his way to Mass. The Iadanza's had a farmhouse in Piana Romana that was next to the farmhouse of Padre Pio's family. It was in Piana Romana that Padre Pio received the invisible stigmata in 1910. Eight years later, while praying before a crucifix in the monastery church of Our Lady of Grace, the wounds of the stigmata on Padre Pio's body became visible and permanent.

Fr. Salvatore Pannullo was the pastor of Our Lady of the Angels, the parish church of Pietrelcina. Fr. Pannullo was the uncle of Toni's school teacher, Graziella Pannullo. He used to unlock the church for Padre Pio so that he could go inside and pray in solitude. After his ordination to the priesthood, Padre Pio stayed in Pietrelcina for a number of years due to his very fragile health. In Pietrelcina, he assisted Don Salvatore Pannullo at the parish and the two became very close friends.



Forgione Family Well .

Mario, Toni, Michael and his wife Lisa have also been active members of the Padre Pio prayer group in New York as well as Florida. In 2007, Toni and Mario celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. They treasure their faith, their beautiful family, and their abundant blessings. They are well aware that many of those blessings have come to them through the hands of Padre Pio. His presence and his love have remained with the Reali family through these many years.



Padre Pio Prayer Group, New York

Padre Pio was transferred to the monastery of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo in 1916. He lived on in the memory of the local people of Pietrelcina. They shared a deep sense of gratitude and pride that their town had been the birthplace and residence of the saintly priest. Many of the residents of Pietrelcina saved their money in order to make the trip to see Padre Pio and attend his Mass. At that time, the road from Pietrelcina to San Giovanni Rotondo was very poor, but the people did not mind the inconveniences or the hardships. Toni made the trip to visit Padre Pio every month, either with her mother or with her Aunt Lucia.

Aunt Lucia would often stay for long periods of time in San Giovanni Rotondo in order to be close to Padre Pio. She used to cook his favorite vegetable, broccoli rabe, and take it to him at the monastery. In San Giovanni Rotondo, she continued to live a life of prayer, service and sacrifice, happy to be close to her spiritual father.

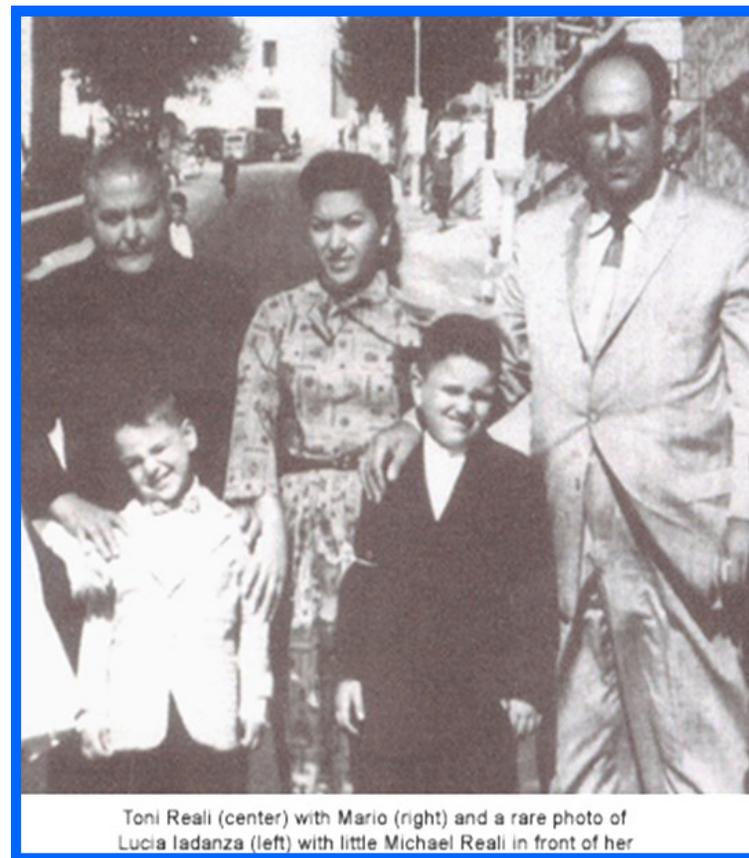
It was a well-known fact that every year Padre Pio looked forward to the holy feast of Christmas with great joy and anticipation. As a child, he loved to sculpture little clay figures of the Infant Jesus in the manger and Joseph and Mary. Throughout his life, he had a tender devotion to the Nativity of the Lord. Long before Christmas, if anyone asked Padre Pio if he knew how many days there were until the feast, he could always answer immediately and with accuracy. He counted the days until Christmas with a childlike simplicity. He loved the Christmas Carols, the special devotions, the beautiful gold vestments, the Nativity scenes, and all of the preparations. He once wrote, "All the feasts of the Church are beautiful. Easter, yes, is glorification, but Christmas has a gentleness, a childlike tenderness, that captures my heart." Being with Padre Pio at Christmas time captured the hearts of many of his spiritual children as well.

No one who had the good fortune to attend the Christmas Midnight Mass that Padre Pio celebrated could ever forget it. As the Mass began, Padre Pio became profoundly recollected in prayer. Some noticed a kind of spiritual light that seemed to surround him. His face was beautiful, marked by an expression of wonder and deep joy.

Traditionally, during the Christmas Mass, Padre Pio would carry a statue of the Baby Jesus, in procession, from the choir loft of the church through the cloister of the monastery, and down the corridors and halls. In the darkened church, the friars held candles and sang hymns of praise. Padre Pio finally made his way to the altar and from the altar to the Christmas crib where he placed the little image of Jesus. Softly glowing candles illuminated the rustic 16th century church of Our Lady of Grace and added to the beauty and solemnity of the occasion.

The Baby Jesus would remain in the crib throughout the holy days of Christmas. Padre Pio had the crib placed where he could see it from the confessional and he would often gaze lovingly at the Infant. He once wrote to one of his spiritual children, "Stay very close to the crib of this most beautiful Child."

On December 24, 1922, Aunt Lucia Iadanza was to witness a Christmas Eve in San Giovanni Rotondo like none before. She arrived early to attend Padre Pio's midnight Mass and on that particular night, the church was so cold that the Capuchins brought a stove into the sacristy hoping to take the chill off. Lucia along with three other women, sat beside the stove to warm themselves. Lucia's three companions soon fell asleep but Lucia remained awake and was praying the Rosary. When Padre Pio came down the stairs that led to the sacristy, Lucia saw that he was holding the Baby Jesus in his arms. It was not the little statue that was used each year at the Christmas Mass. It was the real Infant Jesus, a baby very much alive. A halo of light encircled the Infant and Padre Pio's face was shining with a beautiful radiance. Lucia stared wide-eyed in astonishment. It was then that Padre Pio noticed that she was staring at him. As he walked toward her, the halo of golden light and the Infant Jesus suddenly disappeared. So too did the radiance on his face.



After the cure of little Michael, the family visited San Giovanni Rotondo almost every year until Padre Pio's death in 1968. In thanksgiving for the many blessings they have received, they were instrumental in the construction of the Way of the Rosary which was built on the road that leads from Pietrelcina to Piana Romana. It was the road that Padre Pio used to walk when he went to his family's farmhouse. The Reali's also helped in the restoration of two churches in Pietrelcina, both of which Padre Pio attended in his youth – the church of Our Lady of the Angels and the church of St. Anne where Padre Pio was baptized and received his first Holy Communion.

It was not long before Toni and Mario's family and friends learned that what Padre Pio had told them was true. There at Kew Gardens hospital in Forest Hills, New York, Toni had a beautiful and healthy son and had named him Michael. It was a name especially dear to Padre Pio as he had a great devotion to St. Michael, the Archangel. Toni knew that the prayers of her loved ones and Padre Pio, had saved her. But it was only when she learned what had transpired in the operating room that she realized to what extent she had been helped.

The surgeon who was attending told Toni's doctor that he had an experience in the delivery room unlike any other in all his years of medical practice. As he was about to make the incision in Toni's abdomen to take the baby by Caesarian section, he felt what seemed like "invisible hands" guiding his own. These "invisible hands" seemed to move and direct his hands. He had no choice but to follow. It almost seemed as though someone else was performing the surgery. The area where he was guided to make the incision, turned out to be perfect. The whole procedure had been flawless. It could not have gone smoother. The baby was healthy and Toni's recuperation too was very fast.

When little Michael Reali was just a toddler, he contracted tuberculosis. Under his doctor's care, his condition did not improve but grew steadily worse. Toni was so worried about little Michael's declining health that she decided to take him to San Giovanni Rotondo to see Padre Pio. At the monastery of Our Lady of Grace, the Reali's waited near the sacristy of the church, hoping to speak to Padre Pio about their son. Aunt Lucia was holding little Michael in her arms and just as she passed him to one of the Capuchins to hold, Padre Pio walked into the hallway. He looked at Michael and said, "So this is the famous little Michael that everyone is talking about!" Saying that, he put his hand momentarily on Michael's chest. When the family returned to the United States, X-ray tests revealed that the tuberculosis had vanished as well as the hole that had been in Michael's lung. He was never troubled again by the disease. Mario, Toni's husband, who had not been convinced of Padre Pio's authenticity, became a believer after his son was healed.



Padre Pio asked Lucia what she had seen. "I saw you holding the Baby Jesus surrounded by a halo of light," she said. "Lucia, you must never tell anyone what you saw. Do you understand? Never!" Padre Pio said to her. It was always his desire to keep the many graces that God had given him hidden from others. He rarely ever spoke about his spiritual experiences and if he did it was usually with great reluctance.

Lucia Iadanza was not the only person to have the blessed experience of seeing Padre Pio with the Christ Child. Father Raffaele of Sant' Elia a Pianisi was also privileged to be a witness to the same. Father Raffaele had been the Superior of the monastery of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo from 1928 to 1941. Altogether, he had lived with Padre Pio for forty years.

In September 1919, while Raffaele was preparing for ordination to the priesthood, he had obtained permission to spend four days in San Giovanni Rotondo. He was able to make his confession to Padre Pio, who welcomed him with great love and told him that he would always assist him in his spiritual life. Raffaele was given a cell in the monastery right next to the cell that belonged to Padre Pio. One night Raffaele found that he could not get to sleep. At midnight, he finally decided to get up. He opened the door of his cell when he saw Padre Pio walking down the hall very slowly, immersed in prayer. His face was radiant, suffused with a beautiful light. In his arms was the Child Jesus. As was the experience of Lucia Iadanza, Raffaele saw that he was not holding a statue or an image, but a real baby. Padre Pio did not notice that Raffaele was standing in the doorway staring at him. This occurred on September 20, 1919. Raffaele later learned that September 20 was the one year anniversary of Padre Pio's stigmata.

When Toni Masone moved to the United States with her family and settled in New York, she took her precious memories of Padre Pio, her Aunt Lucia, and the good people of Pietrelcina with her. It was in New York that she met Mario Reali and married. Soon they had two beautiful children. Both of the births were very difficult. After her second child was born, because of complications, it took Toni more than seven months under a doctor's care to recuperate. The doctor talked to Toni and Mario and explained to them that they should never have any more children. Toni would not be able to survive it. When Toni found she was pregnant for a third time, her doctor explained to her the harsh reality of her situation and the danger she was in. Toni was filled with fear. Uppermost in her mind were her two little ones. She wanted to live at all costs and could not bear the idea of leaving her children without a mother. However, when she felt the first

movements of the new life within her, she knew she would go forward with the pregnancy. She would have to completely trust in God and let His will be done.

All of Toni and Mario's relatives and friends in Pietrelcina were notified about the gravity of her situation and were praying for a safe delivery for Toni. When the doctor set the date for the Caesarian delivery, Toni's mother, Maddalena wrote to Aunt Lucia, asking for special prayers on that day. The family trusted in the efficacy of Aunt Lucia's prayers. There had been many proofs through the years.

On February 12, 1953, the day that the doctor set for the birth, Toni's family and friends in Pietrelcina, including her grammar school teacher, Graziella Pannullo, and her Aunt Lucia, traveled to San Giovanni Rotondo to pray and to ask for Padre Pio's intercession. It was wintertime and transportation from Pietrelcina to San Giovanni Rotondo was difficult. It took three hours to make the journey.

Padre Pio happened to be in the balcony of the church praying when he saw the family and friends of Toni Reali gathered together in the church below. "What are you doing?" Padre Pio asked. "We are praying for Toni Reali," they answered. "You must go home now. It is late and it is getting dark outside. The Rosary beads are working." Padre Pio replied. "But we can't go home," they answered. "Toni's life is in danger. The new baby is supposed to arrive today. The doctors do not think Toni will survive it." Padre Pio answered them, "Go home now because everything is all right. Toni has already had her baby. It is a boy. His name is Michael." Aunt Lucia was so surprised by his words that she said to him, "Are you sure?" He answered her, "Yes, I am sure. I am telling you the truth. I was there." Realizing that he had said too much, Padre Pio seemed to regret his words. But the words had slipped out and it was too late to retract them. He would not say any more about it.