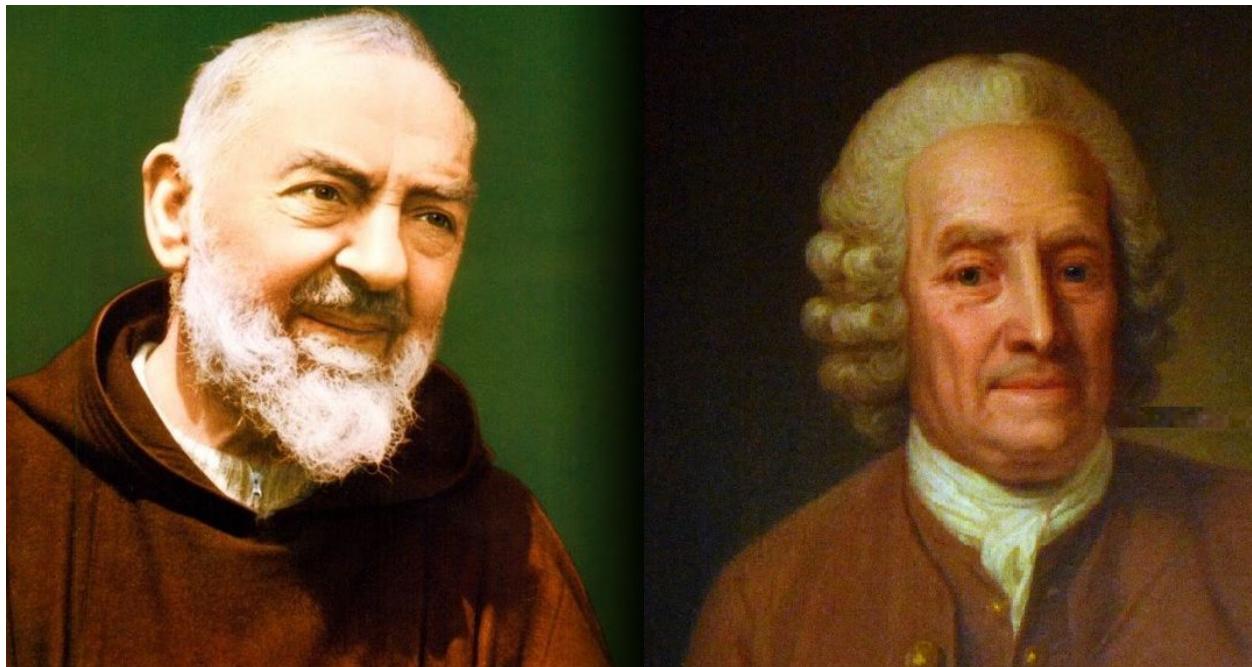




Ex Divina Misericordia: God's Mercy in Swedenborg and St. Pio of Pietrelchina

Rev. Thom Muller



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Padre Pio of Pietrelcina is a very recent saint, in fact he was canonized by John Paul the 2nd in 2002. He only died in 1968. Pio is a classic folk saint, in the sense that he had controversial mystical experiences that went against the grain of the church, which actively tried to censor him, but a huge grass-roots following among the layety, both because of his supposed spiritual visions, his clairvoyance, spiritual healing powers, etc., and because he began to show the stigmata, the wounds of Christ, like St. Francis had. This is why there is still some interest in popular culture about Pio, and whether the wounds were “authentic” or self-inflicted. And these wounds, the stigmata, were a big part of what characterized the life of St. Pio. Really agonizing emotional and physical pain. In fact there was a 6 week period in Pio’s life where he was in such agony that he would be seen shaking and crying, literally weeping, and proclaiming that God had forsaken him. Truly, a dark night of the soul, a concept he would have been familiar with.

It was after this crisis that that he appeared most at peace, he supposedly healed hundreds of illnesses, and really took on much of a role of what we would now call a pastoral counselor. People flocked to him for taking confessions and being blessed. And, of course, his example of endurance, and his dedication to a life of love and care for others in spite of the darkness he was experiencing, has inspired millions to live a more christ-like life. He has also been a force to re-vitalize the traditions of contemplation and meditation in the western world.

One of my favorite quotes of his , which I think we as Swedenborgians should really take to heart is

“Through the study of books one seeks God, through meditation one finds God.”¹

Now, when you do research on Padre Pio these days, one of the disappointing things is that for the most part what you’ll find is pieces either written by his devotees, who view him through pious rose-colored glasses, (sound familiar, Swedenborgians?), or people dismissing him as a fraud and mad man. (Also a common charge against the old Swede). And this is not a sermon about the life of St.

¹ Pio. *Padre Pio: In My Own Words*. Edited by Anthony F. Chiffolo. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001.

Pius, so I'm not going to go through the different arguments. The truth is, as to the stigmata and miracles etc. the jury really is still out.

I personally am inclined to believe that Pio was, in fact, severely mentally ill, and that's partly why I think he's such a remarkable mystic and saint. And by meditating on his life, I've personally felt really inspired in times of inner darkness.

Now, there are two famous sayings associated with Padre Pio. You'll find them as quotes on statues, icons, prayer cards etc. One is "Hope, pray, and don't worry. Worry is useless." The other is "Deus est misericordia."

The word *misericordia* is what I'd like to take a look at today. When you look the world up in any Latin-English dictionary, you'll find three most common translations: Mercy, Compassion, and Pity. In most cases, in the English language, the word is almost always translated as "Mercy". And unfortunately most translations of Swedenborg translate *misericordia* as mercy. I find the idea of a merciful God problematic from a Swedenborgian perspective. One of the things that sets Swedenborg's image of the Divine apart from that of many others is that God is literally unable and unwilling to judge or condemn, and that there is absolutely no debt that we have to God. The term mercy can be seen as implying a transactional relationship. One of debt and a forgiving of debt. It feeds into the "Old Church" idea that we are born wretched and wicked and that God demands something in return for this, in many cases in the form of blood sacrifice.

Swedenborg of course rejects this idea. On thanksgiving we talked about his statement: "*The Lord does not demand anything at all from souls, spirits and angels in return for Divine blessings.*"²

²-SE §2098

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *The Spiritual Diary*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1978.

And then there's the famous and much quoted statement in *Divine Love and Wisdom*:
“God [cannot] condemn anyone, curse anyone, throw anyone into hell, predestine anyone’s soul to eternal death, avenge wrongs, or rage against creation or punish anyone [...] God cannot turn away from us or even look at us with a frown. To do any such thing would be against his essence, and what is against his essence is against himself”³ -DLW§56

Clearly then, the statement that God is Mercy, through a Swedenborgian lens, is problematic or at the very least distracting and confusing. Because we tend to associate Mercy with either undeserved blessing, or the choice not to condemn or punish someone who deserves to be punished. And it's particularly the image of God being unable to frown at us that makes the idea of a God who is merciful, who was just about to punish his kids, but decided not to because he could. Swedenborg's God cannot and does not withhold blessings.

In one of Padre Pio's visions, we get a very different image. He has a vision of Jesus looking at the world, the church, and the suffering with a face filled with agony and tears. Suffering at the sight of the cruelty with which we treat each other. Remember, Pio lived through both world wars, and was intimately familiar with the suffering and agony that was going on on the planet.

This kind of example of misericordia, I personally find to resemble not a state of withheld punishment, but of pity. And I'm not talking about the kind of pretentious pity that we sometimes experience on the human plain, which often comes with a superiority complex. I think it's the kind of pity that is closest to empathy, which is really just one very pure form of love.

In fact, there's Swedenborg's statement that to feel another's joy as one's own is true loving, let's think about that in the reverse. Isn't a part of true love also feeling the others pain? I think part of what has so drawn so many people to Padre Pio is the image of the wounded healer. Someone who's been there and chose amid terrible physical and emotional anguish, to serve others for the simple reason that you love them. This is a concept which is at the center of Swedenborg's view of God, and is especially important in his Christology, his interpretation of the Christ narrative. Many Christian

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Love and Wisdom*. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

traditions hold the belief that Christ came down as a sacrifice, to be punished for the sins of a fallen human race. And that this is where the act of Mercy lies. Swedenborg strongly rejects this idea. His belief about Christ is a lot more like what we see in the East, with the concept of an Avatar. The idea that God had compassion and pity, because there was so much hatred and cruelty in the world. And by being born into the world, with all the external flaws that come with that experience, and choosing love of others and the divine within Himself, which he only gradually realized, he restored a balance between the heavens and the hells. Not to bypass punishment. But to distribute love.

A big part of what makes the Christ narrative so profound and universally relevant is that it is not a story of bliss and success. It's not the kind of prosperity Gospel you'll find at a megachurch. It's a story of sharing in the suffering of others. It's a story of a perfect entity reaching rock bottom, because of a love for its fellow beings.

I used to be very skeptical of the notion of saints and gurus. In our modern culture, which rightfully and fortunately values independent thinking and skepticism, what's the use of these idealized people. These super-humans. After all, isn't my spiritual growth something that's between me and the divine? Union with God, who is love and wisdom? Why do I need some semi-divine teacher or saint or guru to mediate this relationship?

A few years ago, my perspective on this changed somewhat when I read "Be Here Now"⁴ by psychonaut turned spiritual teacher Ram Dass. He describes the moment he meets his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, in India. And he talks about what a guru really is. A true guru, a true saint, is a mirror to our true, idealized self. By meditating on the qualities and states that we associate with particular figures, we open up our inflow of those qualities in ourselves. Wilson Van Dusen, probably my favorite Swedenborgian ever, picked up on this concept when he speaks about meditating on icons.

⁴ Ram Dass. *Be Here Now*. San Cristobal: Lama Foundation, 1987.

I invite us all to channel our inner Padre Pio. To be aware of our own wounds, as well as those of others, and be a force for compassion, healing and love. And be reminded that we do not need to bear the physical stigmata to be the hands and feet of Christ.