

"I did very well. I had a boat. I had a mistress, too. Don't forget to put that. I don't want people to think I'm a saint," he said.

SUMMONED AGAIN

But the inner voice returned in 1962, after an exhausting day at work. Falco found himself drawn to a statue of the Virgin Mary outside a nearby church. There, each night, he'd pray the rosary.

Falco, who is now hard of hearing, describes a series of rattling voices, inner commands that he always obeyed. One night, the voice made no sense. He found himself driving his car down Flagler Street, down to Biscayne Bay.

There, the voice "became a ball rolling on the water."

Would you give your life to me?

Falco dove into the bay and spent hours in the warm water. That's the night, he believes, that he became a new man. After that, life took on a different speed.

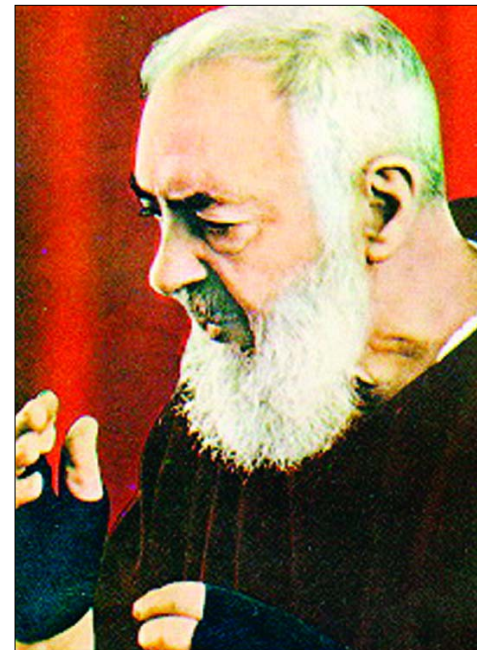
He sought out charity projects. He took in a group of paraplegic teenagers who lived with him for nine years. He divorced his wife and married again, and had a son.

The years dulled his good intentions. It wasn't until he discovered the Padre Pio relic that he reconnected with his sense of mission. Through friends, he learned how to work printing machines. Then he set up his own booklet-making system.

He relies on word of mouth to get the booklets out, but he

dreams of the day when he can distribute one million a year.

"I don't care if 99 out of 100 are thrown away," Falco concluded, cranking up his trusty mini collator. "It only takes one to do the job."



San Pio de Pietrelcina

PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/HERALD STAFF



Above, Falco works on prayer booklets in his Miami Beach home.

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THE SAINT & THE SERVANT

Padre Pio's life of deep piety leads an admirer to faith, service

Echoes of miracles come often to the Miami Beach home where Vincent Falco, retired plumber, woodworker and inventor extraordinaire, spends his days making prayer booklets devoted to Padre Pio, the Capuchin friar and controversial mystic canonized into sainthood last week.

Falco hears stories about sick people healed by the words of Padre Pio, words the 73-year-old devotee reproduces, free of charge, by the millions and ships out to faithful around the world. When he hears such a story, he'll offer a polite nod.

"Oh, that's very good" he'll say before returning to his painstaking mission and to the boggling contrasts of his life.

It is a detail-driven life marked by equal doses of mathematics and mysticism. He spends hours hunched over complex machines that duplicate, collate, staple and fold Padre Pio's rousing words into crisp, 5 1/2 x 4-inch booklets.



LIZ BALMASEDA



PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/HERALD STAFF

LABOR OF LOVE: Vincent Falco, 73; a retired plumber living in Miami Beach, contemplates the labor he has carried on for the last 10 years, using his own funds; producing prayer booklets with the words of Padre Pio, a Capuchin friar who died in 1968 and was canonized last Sunday.

► PLEASE SEE VINCENT FALCO, 19A

* This information is not part of the Miami Herald Article *

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www.saintpadrepio.com

Saint, servant share bond of commitment

► VINCENT FALCO, FROM 1A

He moves through each step as if he were a part of the machinery, creasing paper folds with a lead-filled jar, stacking copies in homemade wooden bins, securing each stack with 20-pound weights.

When he glances up at the living room wall, there's Padre Pio, the revered stigmatic – now St. Pio da Pietrelcina – on eight identical, varnished homemade plaques. Eight might seem redundant, considering the collection of angels and *Madonnas* that fills his home.

But to Falco they reinforce the invisible threads that guide his days. They take him back to the southeastern hills of his native Italy, back to a mind-bending time 46 years ago when he spent 11 days waiting to meet Padre Pio. And they remind Falco that he is not the saint in the house, but the servant, the well-intentioned, twice divorced sinner who admits to former mistresses and rarely goes to church.

“There's an understanding between me and him,” he says, nodding up to his Padre Pio wall. “I say, ‘I'm very poor in prayer. My work is my prayer, OK?’”

He knows it's okay. After all, Padre Pio, who died in 1968, is the ideal saint for the unconventional devotee. A figure venerated by the masses since word spread in 1918 that he bore stigmatic wounds, Padre Pio was investigated

repeatedly by the Vatican for rumors of fraud and sexual misconduct. He was even banned from saying Mass. Years later, he would be canonized by his most famous devotee, Pope John Paul II, who once asked him to pray for a cancer-stricken friend. That friend attended the canonization Mass last Sunday.

ECHO OF A MIRACLE

It was the echo of a miracle that brought me to Falco's door. My mother, a cancer patient, received a Padre Pio booklet from a friend days before undergoing kidney surgery three years ago. But even her doctors were stunned when the tumor, which at first sight looked like “your garden variety renal cell carcinoma,” turned out to be benign. A miracle, my mother believes, now in her seventh year of battling a breast cancer metastasis that, by most calculations, could have wiped her out long before the kidney surgery. Even her cancer doctor would later travel to San Giovanni Rotondo, the remote Italian town where Padre Pio lived, and pray in gratitude.

My mother celebrated by taking her favorite excursion, a day cruise on a casino boat. Back home, the edges of her Padre Pio booklet curled from so much use.

If Padre Pio was working overtime for my family, I wondered who was working overtime for him. On the back of the booklet, I found the phone number for Vincent Falco,

305-673-8403. I wondered what his story might be. He must be a very holy man, I imagined.

HARD AT WORK

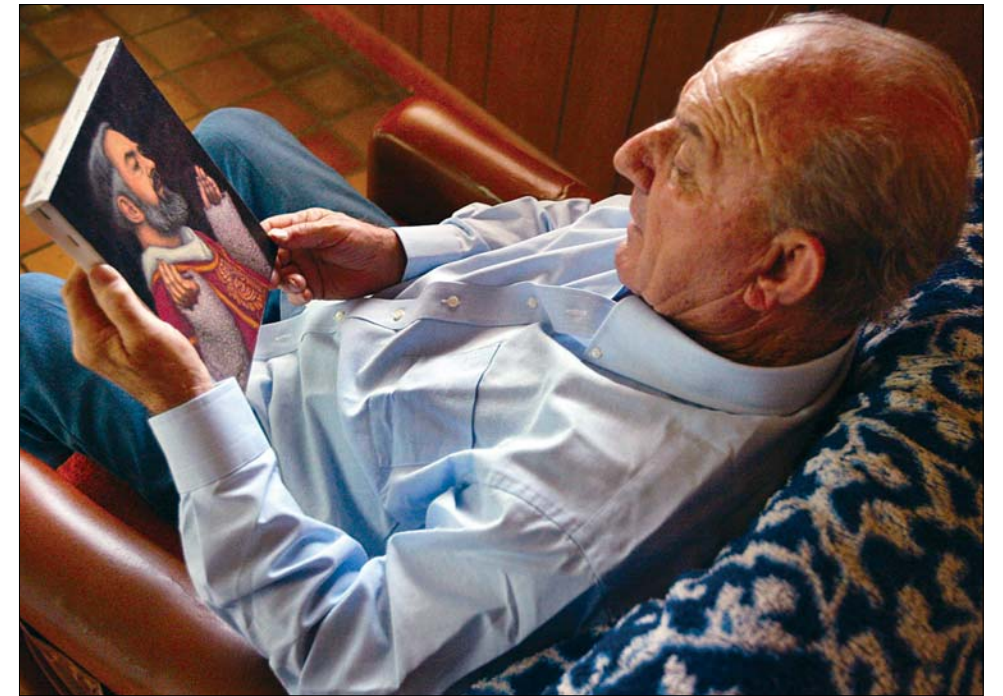
The day I visited his home, I found him at his duplicator-printer, running copies of his booklet in Spanish. A Panasonic boom box pumped an Earth, Wind & Fire tune: “*Every man has a place, in his heart there's a space, and the world can't erase his fantasies...*”

But there wasn't enough room for Falco's vivid storytelling and the prophecies of Earth, Wind & Fire, even in a context so laden with cosmic illuminations. Falco snapped around and clicked off the boom box – “Shut up, you!”

The booklet-maker commands a dizzying amount of numbers. He has printed 2.7 million booklets in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian since he began this work eight years ago, sending them to churches, doctors' offices, pizzerias. He expects to hit the three-million-booklet mark by year's end.

He knows it takes 1,040 of the English booklets to fill a shipping box, but only 920 of the Spanish, Portuguese or Italian booklets to fill the same box, because “you know, in our Latin languages, we like to talk more.” He keeps monthly tabulations, pinned in neat stacks to a corkboard. Even when he talks about the things that cannot be measured – such as love, pain, faith and fancy – he

DEVOTION: Retired Miami Beach plumber Vincent Falco looks at a painting of Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, at right. In the last 10 years, Falco has produced and shipped more than 2.7 million prayer booklets with the words of the Capuchin friar, who died in 1968 and was canonized last Sunday.



PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/HERALD STAFF

punctuates his stories with detailed references to distances, quantities, the exact degrees of angles.

The only number he will not discuss is the amount of money he has spent making the booklets, for which he accepts only shipping charges.

“How much money do you think I'm taking with me when I die?” he'll ask.

Unlike the numbers, he finds the printed words a challenge. Ever present though they are in his work, they often elude Falco, a self-taught man who grew up in his family's coffee bar in Naples and came to be known for making intricate nativity scenes, complete with grottos and waterfalls. For the words in his booklet, which he reproduced from a prayer book he bought in San Giovanni Rotondo in 1956, he relies on a good typesetter.

He found the tattered booklet as he dug through an old box some years ago. The discovery brought back a flood of memories and a long-forgotten inner voice that had

resounded at critical moments in his life.

Falco first heard this voice in 1956, five years after he left his native Italy for the United States with his new bride. Shortly after he moved to Miami, he was recruited to the U.S. Army and sent to Germany. After a two-year tour, he stopped in Italy to visit his family.

During that visit, he met an odd, sickly woman who frequented his family's bar. Perplexed by her mysterious condition, he went to see a well-known medium in Sorrento. The medium sent him to see Padre Pio.

“I said, ‘What the hell is a Padre Pio?’ I kind of rejected the idea,” he recalled.

But the same night he returned to Naples, he says he felt “something pulling me like a magnet.”

Come see Padre Pio. Come see Padre Pio.

He hopped a train to Foggia, the closest station to San Giovanni Rotondo, intent on making a quick

trip. But that would be the start of a decades-long journey. Shortly after the train left the platform, he felt a tremendous joy.

“I cried tears like Niagara Falls. It was beautiful,” he said.

Once there, he says he was led by instinct and unseen forces, “like a puppet.” He describes days spent in a trance amid a multitude, a blur of characters and pre-dawn Masses.

Finally, on the 11th day, they called his number, “1,256.” He slipped into a small confessional where Padre Pio sat, and knelt at the friar's side.

“He showed me the statue of Michael, the archangel, and told me he was protecting me,” he recalled. “Then Padre Pio told me, ‘You must go back to where you belong.’”

Falco knew that meant the United States, where his wife awaited. He spent the next few years building a life in Miami, making a living installing sprinkler systems, constructing a home and office on Northwest 27th Avenue.