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ST. PIO OF PIETRELCINA GUIDED SOULS AND ALLEVIATED SUFFERING

VATICAN CITY, 21 JUN 2009 (VIS) -

At 8.30 a.m. today the Holy Father departed by plane from Rome's Ciampino airport for the military base of Amendola near Foggia in southern Italy. Due to poor weather he was unable to make the trip by helicopter as had been planned. On arrival he was taken by car to San Giovanni Rotondo where he was welcome by the political, civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

He then travelled to the shrine of Our Lady of Grace where he was greeted by Fr. Mauro Johri, minister general of the Friars Minor Capuchins, and by other members of that order. After pausing in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament the Pope visited the cell of the convent where Padre Pio of Pietrelcina died, then descended to the crypt where he venerated the mortal remains of the saint.

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At 10.30 a.m. Benedict XVI celebrated Mass in front of the church of St. Pio of Pietrelcina.

Speaking of St. Pio in his homily, the Pope explained how he "'prolonged' the work of Christ: announcing the Gospel, remitting sins and healing the sick in body and spirit".

"The greatest 'storms' that threatened him were the attacks of the devil, from which he defended himself with 'the 'armour of God', with 'the shield of faith' and with 'the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God'. Remaining united to Jesus, his gaze was always fixed on the profundity of the drama of human life and for this he offered himself and his many sufferings, expending his efforts for the cure and relief of the sick, a privileged sign of God's mercy. ... Guiding souls and alleviating suffering: this is how we can summarise the mission of St. Pio of Pietrelcina".

After then highlighting how St. Pio's legacy to his spiritual children was sanctity, the Holy Father explained how the saint's "main concern, his priestly and paternal solicitude" was "that people should return to God, that they should experience His mercy and, renewed within, rediscover the beauty and joy of being Christian, of living in communion with Jesus, of belonging to His Church and practising the Gospel".

"In the first place came prayer. ... His days were a living Rosary, a continuous meditation upon, and assimilation of, the mysteries of Christ, in spiritual union with the Virgin Mary. This explains the unique simultaneous presence in him of supernatural gifts and of concrete human qualities. And the culmination of everything came in the celebration of Mass. ... From prayer, as from an endless font, arose charity. The love he carried in his heart and transmitted to others was full of tenderness, ever attentive to the real situations in which individuals and families lived. Towards the sick and suffering he nourished the predilection of the Heart of Christ, and it was from here that the idea for a great social project dedicated to the 'relief of suffering' was born and took shape. We cannot adequately interpret or understand this institution if we separate it from the source that inspired it: evangelical charity animated ... by prayer".

Yet "the risks of activism and secularisation are ever present", warned Benedict XVI. "Many of you, religious and lay people, are so absorbed by your many obligations in serving pilgrims or the sick in hospital, that you run the risk of neglecting what is truly important: listening to Christ and accomplishing the will of God. When you realise that you are close to running this risk look to Padre Pio, to his example, to his sufferings, and invoke his intercession that he may obtain from the Lord the light and strength you need to continue his mission, imbued with love for God and fraternal charity".