Prayer as Relationship. 
An Analysis of Padre Pio Prayer Group Leaders

Mario Salisci

Prayer has often been considered as a social archaism, but it still represents one of the most common practices that manifests itself in different ways. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the practice of prayer and its significance in the largest system of Prayer Groups in the world. The Prayer Groups of Padre Pio are very strong in Italy but they also encompass 60 countries and involve thousands of groups. The results of this study suggest a concept of prayer that goes beyond the traditional definition of coping and embraces more complex sociological categories such as those of the relationship.

Introduction: prayer, a brief literature analysis

Prayer was for a long time a substantially unknown subject, often considered a superstition, a repetition of empty verbal formulas and therefore not worthy of scientific study. However, it is difficult to deny that it is a primary cultural object and a very common form of behavior. As Wuthnow says: «Our emphasis on prayer stemmed from the fact that prayer has been part of every known culture and in various forms has been present in every known religion» (2008, 334).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, cultural anthropology broached the subject tangentially. Tylor considers the ritual prayers characterized by «amazing ecstatic phenomena» as the forms that allow the relationship with the divine and as the expression of a desire directed to the supernatural powers (Tylor 1871).

A significant step in the evolutionary design by Frazer is the moment when some of the most intelligent members of the primitive community, recognizing human impotence in front of the imponderable, began looking for a better approach to nature and to the world: «Sacrifice and prayer become the resource of the pious and enlightened portion of the community, while magic is the refuge of the superstitious and ignorant» (1922, 84).

However, the first author to develop an in-depth study of prayer was Marcel Mauss who, in the introduction of his work, complained about the scarcity of studies on this important issue. Prayer for him is an act and it is a social institution at the same time, not to be confused with other dimensions of religion, such as the mythical narrative or theological speculation. Prayer is structured as a highly complex phenomenon, articulate and polymorph that cannot be exhausted by a definition (Mauss 1909, 40). The complexity of the object is expressed in its
ambivalent nature which includes ritual and belief and whose complexity and elusiveness could justify the lack of studies. Having distinguished between oral and manual or physical rituals, Mauss describes prayer as a religious oral ritual that allows the connection of the faithful with the sacred dimension without the presence of an intermediary priesthood. The classical division of religion between mythology and ritual dimension fell in the interpretation of Mauss, who considers prayer as the union of both and as a creative phenomenon itself. Through prayer, the believer can have access to the energy of the divine. In his work, the social character of prayer is supported with decision, as well as its ability to affect reality. As an act, prayer always involves an investment by the subject. This effort implies an expenditure of physical and moral energy, aimed at producing effects which become social, regardless of the type of prayer performed. The effects presuppose the effectiveness of the practice which appeals to supernatural forces to obtain the power of God, whose main property is the ability to generate and to create out of nothing: «La création par le verbe est le type de la création ex nihilo» (Mauss 1909, 26).

Friedrich Heiler (1932) is recognized for compiling one of the most comprehensive Christian studies into the phenomenology of prayer. This typology proposes six types of prayer: primitive, ritual, Greek cultural, philosophical, mystical, and prophetic. In these we can see a sort of progression from man-centered to God-centered prayer (Erickson 1998). In America, William James worked on the theme of religious experience and in his monumental work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, prayer is considered as: «Any kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine [...] The prayer in this broader sense is the soul and essence of true religion» (James 1902, *Italian ed.* 1945, 400).

After the Second World War, with the emergence of functionalism, the rich current of studies on religious experience, especially of phenomenological matrix, gradually lost momentum. In the Parsonian model there is no space for transcendence and everything is locked up in a rational system. In that cultural context prayer was considered as a coping mechanism that would help people in times of difficulty. The rational choice theory applied to religious phenomena suggests the idea that the lack of resources to achieve material wealth can lead people in attempts to protect themselves with otherworldly guards. In this case, people of lower socio-economic status would be more likely to pursue a religious claim. The analysis of Baker (2008) sought to test this assumption: individuals who have undergone the experience of suffering and privation can turn to prayer as a coping mechanism. The work of Pargament (1997) is particularly important in this respect. He believes that individuals turn to God in order to maintain a feeling of control and justice in difficult situations: it follows that those who are more vulnerable are
also more likely to use religion as a coping mechanism. In this vision, the social position may change the perception of individuals and of what they can do in the world and, therefore, of what God can or should do to help them. So, prayer can be understood as an attempt to communicate with the divine, in the hope of receiving assistance to cope with their difficulties and needs.

According to Baker, this shows the influence of socio-demographic variables, including income which would be the most accurate predictor of the content of prayer: low income earners are more likely to ingratiate themselves to the divine to obtain benefits in terms of safety and welfare, and if you look at the prayers of request, this assertion is confirmed fairly obviously.

However, as for the concept of secularization, reality is far more complex and a number of studies cast strong doubts on the assumption just mentioned (McFarland, Wright and Weakliem 2011; Coreno 2002; Lehrer 1999; Albrecht and Heaton 1984). For example, the General Social Survey of 2008 gives details on the relationship between frequency of prayer and education level in a representative sample of the United States population: among graduates, over 52% pray at least once a day (almost 23% pray even more times a day). At lower levels of education we find that those who pray the most are graduates of junior college (over 66% at least once a day, almost half pray several times a day). Of course, there are differences between the extremes of the scale, but the practice of prayer is distributed across all segments analyzed. These data are confirmed also in Italy in the national surveys on religion (Lanzetti 1995; Garelli 2011).

The Prayer Groups of Padre Pio were themselves started by highly educated people. A real class of doctors and researchers became his assistants. The founders of these groups were often educated and came from all over the world. In reference to the existing groups, the analysis of the data indicates that college graduates make up 12% of group leaders, a fact that confirms the national average of graduates in Italy.

1. Method

The Catholic movement of Padre Pio has been so far essentially unknown to sociological analysis. Because of the total absence of literature it was better to lean towards a qualitative approach. Therefore this research used an interactive approach that welcomed the suggestions arising from the field.

The research design remained unstructured, open and emerged during the research itself. This essentially qualitative approach has not prevented, however, a triangulation with other data. With the consent of the General Secretary of the Prayer Groups, I was able to attempt an identification of the organization and of
all the 3,383 groups that make up the movement. This allowed me to structure a descriptive phase obtained through the analysis of secondary data emerging from a survey based on semi-structured questionnaires to group leaders. The texts used in this paper were obtained through transcripts of the twenty-five semi-structured interviews carried out between the group leaders from six different regions of North Western Italy, Monaco and California. The texts were treated as a single corpus and underwent thematic analysis. The respondents were all between the ages of 50 and 75, lay people, Catholic and with different levels of education. A large majority were women and they were characterized by assiduous religious practice. Given the homogeneity of the material master data, I found it more useful to specify at the foot of the citations only sex, area of residence and age. The corpus of texts available was analyzed through the text analysis program WEFT-QDA.

The choice of cases was not given by a statistical representation. The research does not advance the claims of statistical representativeness, but rather of «sociological representativeness» (Bourdieu 1993; Corbetta 1999; Kaufmann 2004). It is complied with the three principles of qualitative research described by Bertaux (1997): the variability of the positions, the differentiality and the variability of research evidences. The same principle of seeking the «negative case» was respected and allowed to refine the interpretation model, which I believe to be sufficiently stable. I tried to lead the «sampling» «on the basis of evolution of the theoretical relevance of the concepts» (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 179). The construction of the sample was gradual, according to the Ethnosociological approach – the theoretical sampling of Glaser and Strauss (1967). This research is concerned with meaning and not making generalised hypothesis statements. Within any research area, different participants can have diverse opinions. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) qualitative samples have been large enough to assure that all of the important perceptions were covered. The concept of saturation was respected in this study. The sequence of questions was consistent in each of the interviews and each interview lasted an average duration of two hours. The transcription of the interviews was direct without the use of recording devices. Interview trials have shown that recording devices inhibit individuals who are already embarrassed to treat certain topics.

2. Results: Prayer as a Form of Relationship

The first and most important concept that emerged was that prayer is a form of relationship with God. The subjects presented a description of a relationship with God in which they were capable of getting in touch with a good and omnipotent Father thus obtaining in this way the possibility of access to his high energy.
All spiritual leaders derive their power from a direct and personal communion with the divine. The divine is an element which was known to the psychological and anthropological literature of the early twentieth century. The Group leaders have shown some formidable analogies with the writings of authors such as James Frazer or Tylor. In the experience of the Group leaders prayer is not just a simple form of communication.

Brümmer (1988, 97) suggests that all forms of prayer affect the relationship between God and human persons and therefore have a real effect on both. The kind of relationship presupposed in the prayer is a personal one. In fact, only in Christian traditions has the relationship between God and those who pray been conceived in personal terms. For example a leader says: «Prayer is a conversation with God. I start listening to God, I trust in God and I put myself at the disposal of the Lord» (F., Genoa, 75).

Prayer is the most important thing in my life [...] That’s life! I am in a constant state of prayer. Right now I’m fingering the Rosary, I’m saying it by myself [...] but I’m bound to Jesus so I concentrate. I close my eyes and I feel an inner thing that helps me, gives me peace. I feel that God is near me, within me. You feel it, I feel it physically! (F., Western Liguria, 73)

The relationship with the divine is the very meaning of prayer. It is the group leaders deep belief or rather «their experienced reality», something real, tangible, psychologically and emotionally perceptible. The perception is that of a living presence, of a personal God who grants the personal bond, which takes place in the sacred space of the prayer. The leaders of the groups are waiting for this moment as a chance to open up to dialogue with God. To babble empty formulas are considered a waste of time, what matters is to find the deeper meaning of prayer, which is realized in contact with the Transcendent. The term Eucharist itself or the Holy Communion indicates precisely a form of relationship and a unity between human and divine.

The group leaders approach is not just a ritual but it produces consequences. These consequences include a feeling of spiritual unity, which radiates outside and improves the ability to create unity between individuals. As a result individuals are more inclined to attend Mass. Prayer is generally perceived to be an individual and intimate act, but when it is realized in the bonds of community it becomes a social institution.

It is from these assumptions that a bi-dimensional system can be outlined: the first dimension can be traced horizontally among the group members; the second vertically, towards Transcendence. Prayer is thought capable of producing the community and represents its connecting element, its binding energy: «Prayer cre-
ates, but only if you have someone that helps and works with you. I always come to pray to foster unity: we all pray together as a good deed [...] Prayer can change the course of history» (M., Western Liguria, 60). «The Eucharist is the true living prayer! Communion, not only the consecrated host, but also the unity between people» (F., Eastern Liguria, 67).

Weber states that the validity of charisma is given only by proof: it is in fact a role that has no official investiture or certificates, but gains validation through the works and signs that make it true. The personal charisma is under a test not by words but by facts and it is recognized by men of faith, the disciples or the followers (Weber 1922). The leadership of the Group leaders is no exception and it is based on three fundamental elements: the relational capacity of the leaders, the gift of prayer (that for Mauss means the «charisma») and finally, the ability to set a model for the other members. The awareness of the divine in their history allows Group leaders more freedom against the internal dynamics, thus being released from many tensions.

The Group leaders set the example by choosing to focus on the needs of the individual members, rather than their own needs for worldly success. It does not matter if the Group consists of two members or two hundred, the number one priority is the need of the Group. The leadership that emerges is clearly collaborative (Wallace 1992) and the leaders often become the main confidantes of the members. As a leader states: «I don’t call anyone, I commend to Padre Pio, because the group is his group, not mine… » (F., Eastern Liguria, 58).

Another feature of their prayer is the ability to hear God’s response, which confirms the dialogical dimension mentioned above, eliminating the doubt of prayer as a request or a monologue. Many pose this as a benchmark:

Prayer is an intimate and personal encounter with the Lord. For me prayer becomes a search for his presence in my life. This is prayer: seeking Him right now. Once you know that, you can see with the eyes of faith what the Lord does for you, with you. The formulas are useless if you do not have your heart turned to God. (F., Western Liguria, 62)

If it is true that prayer is regarded as the possibility of a relationship with God, this relationship does not run through the usual channels:

Prayer is not a rational thought, mental and cold: this doesn’t work and no matter how beautiful and polished the language is, [God] does not listen. That’s why my prayer must be purged of everything human: I send it to the Saints, the Virgin, the Angels, so that it arrives «clean» to God. (F., Genoa, 75)

This passage makes clear the perception of prayer as a concrete reality, an energy that must be «purified» before being presented to God. This type of response
allows a better understanding of the mediating function attributed to the Catholic Church, including its transcendent dimension. But if it is not verbal words or thoughts, what is it that God hears? In the passage above we can understand how the concept of prayer goes beyond verbal formulas. It includes a surprising complexity, an attempt at finding different ways: it is the «language of the heart», a form of communication not directly verbalized, a language of meaning that goes beyond the psychological dimension.

In this case, the prayer is described as an intimate part of a movement from within, which provokes an emotional response. Therefore, the subjects always spoke about prayer in terms of the «heart» and not the «mind». The ability to access this form of dialogue involves a specific procedure, an experiential know-how that starts from a counter-intuitive assumption: one understands by believing.

Deep prayer takes time, attention and availability and represents a choice that has a direct impact on one’s personal economy. The human costs that the prayers will inevitably face in terms of dedication, perseverance and attention are fully justified in view of the relationship to which they must prepare:

I feel the prayer a lot, because I feel the intimacy of God. When I’m in prayer I am fully focused, I detach myself and I isolate myself from everything […]. I almost feel the desire to be already in front of the Lord. In this sense death does not frighten me: I am almost eager for this meeting […] it’s like honey […] it’s my spice. I could not live without prayer […] [she’s moved]. For me prayer is to contemplate and listen. I would do an hour of silence in front of the Blessed. (F., Eastern Liguria, 64)

The people that I interviewed used monastic categories such as prayer, contemplation and listening, but these are accounts of ordinary people engaged in everyday life who had a great desire to seek out silence and take a long, long break from daily activities. At the same time, they are capable of great social works and to become the fulcrum of entire communities. Yet their priorities seem to be reversed compared to those inspired by common sense: they believe these operational areas of inertia are the most fruitful and important. Many of them claim they could give up everything, but not prayer: «Prayer is everything for me, it is like breathing: I would die without prayer» (F., Western Liguria, 75). It is during prayer that they meet God.

An example of the shift experienced by team leaders on this issue is that of Diane, an ex-follower of eastern spirituality. She is a Californian woman who converted to Catholicism after meeting Padre Pio under extraordinary circumstances. She is now the leader of a very important Padre Pio Prayer Group in the United States and this is how she explains the differences between her current prayers and her former eastern spiritual meditation techniques:
If I have to remain silent, I want my mind to be completely focused on God in prayer and thinking only about Christ. If I practice the Eastern rites, then I empty my mind of all thoughts, but I also lose contact with God. I can say this type of meditation is not beneficial to me. Staying close to Christ I feel joy and serenity and that’s what brought me into the Prayer Group. Today I am the leader and I work with my husband Ron to develop the Padre Pio Prayer Group in different ways. I want this opportunity to connect with God to be available for future generations. (F., Southern California, 50)

Since she «could not help but convert to Catholicism due to the appearance of Padre Pio», Diane has built a Prayer Group (from 10 to 400 members), which also includes a two million viewers website and a Facebook page followed by over 500,000 people. She has published several books, including *Pray, Hope and Don’t Worry*, the world’s best selling book on Padre Pio and his prayer. Reading these statements, one could conclude that having contact with the Sacred causes convictions, which create actions that are persistent and effective.

In other words, prayer is recognized as the means of realization of the relationship with the transcendence. It is never an end in itself but it is used as a lever to ascend to God in a way which differs completely with the techniques of eastern spirituality that tend instead to flee this relationship and take refuge in the vacuum of nirvana.

The leaders of Prayer Groups do not want to escape the world or the suffering that, indeed, can become more than the limit. Instead they strive to implement a very effective counter-intuitive understanding: following the example of Padre Pio, and looking up to Christ can bring a look of compassionate towards those who suffer. The bond thus assumes the characteristics of a complex relationship that, besides joy, does not ignore the pain symbolized by the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Prayers become something profoundly human, not formulas, but emotions, a feeling that wells up from the depths of one’s being and gradually leads to joy and fear.

Never say «yes» blindly, at least in my case. I’ll give you a concrete example: to my questions about my abilities after the death of my Pastor and spiritual director I received this reply: «Nothing is impossible with God». I went to the Holy Land, where I remained to understand and reflect for three months, 34 days of which in Nazareth, and there I heard: «Nothing is impossible with God». I mean, I felt it inside, in my heart! (F., Eastern Liguria, 67)

«Nothing is impossible with God!». Gina often repeats this as a mantra that overflows from her soul. It is her truth, the rock of her salvation and the certainty of her action. Her history is significant: leader of the Prayer Group of Rapallo, founder of three other Groups in the Portofino area, two of which she delegates, overall she coordinates the prayer and charitable works of about two hundred people. She is deeply humble and fervent in her activity: she has written a couple of
books, organizes monthly pilgrimages (which actually become spiritual exercises) and participates in a local TV broadcast on religious and spiritual topics.

She has become a landmark in the Diocese, and says:

Prayer can move mountains and as the Virgin and the Saints say: «With the Rosary you will see miracles» and I can say that I have seen many miracles with the Rosary! [then quotes Psalm 126, 1] «Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build». (F., Eastern Liguria, 67)

Group leaders are people from average socio-economic profiles, fully integrated in society, as well as being a reference point for entire communities, yet they pray a lot. The study on the topic outlined proactive and constructive attitudes that go beyond the traditional assumption of prayer in a state of necessity. Although the classical category of coping is not contradicted by these statements, the idea with which the leaders approach prayer is that of a relationship. Durkheim himself did not fail to recognize that: «The believer who has communicated with his God [...] is a stronger man» (1960, 456). Here is the difference between considering it a psychological ploy to overcome moments of difficulty and a mode of relationship:

One’s work is a result of prayer. That is, the work is the fruit of prayer. If a person prays, he works better [...] I always prayed before going to work in the hospital, I put myself in the hands of God, asking Him to practice my profession according to His will. In this sense, I saw the Lord when I saw every patient. One’s job is enriched: putting God into one’s work makes everything more beautiful. The work is inflamed by prayer. At the bottom of the job itself there is prayer, so I asked the Lord to help me to act according to His will. (F., Genoa, 7)

The emphasis is not placed on the power of prayer, or on the effort to get the benefits, but on doing the «will of God». At that point, the obstacles do not stop the actions of the Group leaders, because it is «God that works».

Every aspect of life is informed and transformed by God through daily prayer, as in the case of one’s work, which seems to be informed by this spiritual tension. The act of doing one’s job causes a transformation and it associated with prayer, becoming one in the same thing. Unconsciously, these people implement in a new way the St. Benedict rule of *Ora et Labora*, in a surprising synthesis that reconciles the different spheres of existence in a coherent and meaningful continuum.

It is a process of meaning that is better understood when the prayer is seen as constant and instead of reflecting negatively on business practices, it inflames them. It is a quiet form of prayer, without major external signs, almost a litany, which shifts the attention from the outside of the subject to the intimate Self, in a search for the «contact point». Sometimes, the path chosen could be contemplation, a
practice that requires peace, silence and harmony. This knowledge is borrowed from the meetings of the Group and transposed into daily practice. The effects are significant and result in benefits that allow a different and more positive interior approach to life:

That prayer should bring serenity. It is the most important thing, because only in peace can we meet God. Praying allows me to cultivate serenity. I always say to the members: «you must cultivate serenity and you could do it through prayer». This destroys the negative emotions and allows a healthy soul searching. Prayer thus affects one’s way of thinking: it gives you peace, thoughts become more constructive and you learn not to lose time in trivial things. (F., P. Monaco, 58)

The concept of a «relationship with God» reveals practical effects as a powerful cathartic mechanism. Prayer cleanses the mind and allows an interaction with reality both more delicate and incisive. During the prayer emotional tension is loosened and over time the action becomes more polished and effective. The context, no matter what, becomes a field of constant spiritual research. Whether we are talking about businessmen, professional men, nurses or bricklayers, the result is always the same: «Whatever I am doing, I’m doing it as unto the Lord [...]. I am convinced that whatever I do is a prayer to God because He is actually working through me. Prayer is work and work is prayer for me» (F., Eastern Liguria, 75). The activities of the Group leaders come from an attitude of doing for others, but none of them are presented as the champions of something or the bearer of some special charisma. Any effect or any result these leaders create is attributed to God, who is considered the true author of everything that is good. Despite being often asked to face difficult situations, in their stories there is not a trace of sadness or heaviness but rather of emotion and wonder. Their strength is attributed to the divine and which results in a feeling of gratitude and joy that allows them to face each situation with enthusiasm and a certain serenity:

Prayer is strength. It can do miraculous things. Having the gift of faith is a precious gift of great joy and knowing that some people don’t know God brings pain to us, because they cannot taste this joy. Prayer has always been constant for me and has always brought me joy [...] I cannot do anything well without the Lord’s help. I need Him, because if He does not give me the strength, I cannot do anything. He is the power. (F., Genoa, 70)

The link between traumatic events and religiosity has been identified by a large part of the socio-anthropological and psychological literature. But the meaning of what a «traumatic event» is becomes more complex. Much of the sociological literature and even pre-sociological says that the religious instinct in human beings
is developed in particular moments of their existence. The more interesting formulation is perhaps that of Feuerbach (1841), who sees religion as a consequence of the dramatic realization of man’s weakness. It is at that point that humans seek salvation in an infinite, immortal and blessed personal being that they call God. This assumption has been taken up and developed by classical sociological analysis (O’Dea 1966). Particularly, Max Weber (1922) asserts that the existence of special events in the course of a biography are capable of challenging everyday life: these are the «breaking points» where the process of meaning is born. Functionalism, systematizing this concept, considers religion as the response to radical questions that emerge in conditions of poverty, failure and impotence.

The connection between pain and prayer is substantially confirmed by the experiences of the Group leaders. The pain united to prayer generates the deep conversion or abandonment to God, in the consciousness of one’s own impotence:

There is a relationship between pain and the decision to pray and work for a Prayer Group. The prayer is a blessing in suffering. Sometimes I say: «Apart from my health, I’m fine». Prayer gives me the ability to face life’s challenges. When I go to the Group I can overcome physical pain and go to pray. (F., Genoa, 75)

Through prayer suffering is transformed by a powerful force. The National Enquiry on Religion in Italy states that: «Faith is a very important resource in people’s private lives and it allows them to face the fundamental problems of existence» (Garelli 1995, 29). Group leaders consider suffering as a test to pass and that it is a message from God who never breaks his relationship with the believer. In their experiences it seems that God is trying to «test their character». On the other hand, suffering has ambivalent categories and, if it is not inserted into the prayer, one’s faith is challenged: «Suffering brings you to despair. Only with the help of prayer does a person come to conversion, that is to believe that God exists, and that only He can help you» (M., Eastern Liguria, 65).

This interpretation is linked with Padre Pio’s ascetic way of life. Everything is strongly rooted in a perspective that does not remove the drama of the suffering. There are other types of events that lead to the category of wonder which for Plato (2003) are responsible for the birth of philosophy. Otto (1917, Italian ed. p. 41) described them as misterium tremendum et fascinans, a surprising opening that refers to the possibility of a multi-layered reality (Berger 1994). These events manifest themselves as an exceptional meeting or as a direct call from God to do something. Most all of the Prayer Group leaders state the decision to lead a group was a «calling» for them. Groups are the fruit of this «calling». Max Weber indicates with Beruf this concept of «calling» which is clearly derived from Christian theology. Weber claims that for Catholics «the providence of God has prepared
for each a call that he must recognize and to which he must work […]. The calling is as a command of God to work for his glory» (1922; Italian ed. 1961, 260). The concepts of «call», «work» and «grace» emerge with evidence from the interviews:

I did not want to create the group, but I felt forced to do this. It was a joke of the Lord that I went to San Giovanni Rotondo, even if I did not know where it was! I hated every form of association, including Prayer Groups. I considered them exalted […] Padre Pio chose me. I was not a believer, I went to Mass twice a year […] What shocked me about these people was their faith and their ability to love and have mercy towards anyone […] the figure of Padre Pio led me to Christ. (F., Western Liguria, 65)

All the testimonies converge on the fact that the genesis of a Prayer Group is due to God’s will, mediated by a charismatic prophet and directly working in people’s lives. At the center of this movement is the relationship with the sacred: no planning, no work of expansion or enculturation. The Prayer Groups are not a reaction to the state of social or personal insecurity; if anything, they are a thanksgiving and a calling at the same time, an answer to the divine providence. They are as alive ex-votos and they derive from the works of people who have been changed by an encounter. The relational dimension emerges now more clearly. Curiously, although in the liturgical calendar September 23th is the day of St. Pio of Pietrelcina. In the world he is known as «Padre (father) Pio». Father, in fact, that is a relational feature that seems to respond to the decay of the meaning of fatherhood in our culture.

Conclusion

Analyzing what it means to lead a Prayer Group, the factors that emerged are all uneconomic, confirming the thesis of Weber on charisma. A Prayer Group commits resources, time, energy, moral responsibility and the willingness to take-on the suffering of the others by praying or by organizing charitable activities. Leading a Prayer Group does not produce a particular social prestige, if anything team leaders are blamed for their beliefs and their actions, even by the priests. The experiences of the Group leaders clearly refers to a particular event that has produced an opening to that reality, which Berger (1992) defines «transcendence». The reasons for why leaders choose to lead a Prayer Group are unusual. They state the following examples of calling: «for a grace received» or «because Padre Pio asked me», «the Group is an heirloom from a spiritual son of Padre Pio».

In this case, prayer cannot be defined just as a coping mechanism but it leads to more complex categories. In effect, what defines the structure and the heart of Groups is a relationship which is defined by three elements: God, the presence
of an exemplary prophet and a large group of followers. The relational sociology focuses on the relationship, which is understood as a structural constraint, objective and external (named by the Latin "religio"), both as a link of sense (that in Latin is called "refero") (Donati 1991, 2010). In fact, this study shows that relationship cannot be read only by optical formal logic, but requires the development of a new sociological hermeneutic open to transcendence (Archer et al. 2004; Stark 2007). The religious experience cannot be confined to the symbolic register but can be thought of as a relationship between immanence and transcendence. In that sense, transcendence could be considered as an active element in social processes.

Furthermore, through the relationship with God the believer can be transformed. As Brümmer suggests: «In that case, the believer's wishes and will are not renounced; they are transformed to be in perfect accord with the Will of God. When that happens, believers should do whatever they wish, for they will wish nothing else but to do the Will of God» (1988, 96).

In the end, the experience of the Prayer Group leaders is that of a calling which triggers a relationship where the other is God himself. This point becomes crucial to go beyond the traditional concept of prayer as a personal coping mechanism. The coping mechanism fails to exhaust the meaning of prayer, because prayer is rooted in a relational system that does not exclude the relationship with God. It is from that relationship that leaders draw their strength. While praying, Group leaders seek a deep manner of relationship: with peers, with God and with the prophet (in this case Padre Pio). Prayer is a relationship and they believe that from this relationship actions are created which impact and change reality. By praying they make the reality, creatio ex nihilo.

References

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