



## ***Padre Pio sculpture calls us to Confession***

**On a trip to Italy 11 months ago Catholic artist Timothy Schmalz discovered the nation's love for St. Padre Pio. Creator of the acclaimed Jesus the Homeless sculpture, Schmalz was soon inspired to create a work of art to honour the Italian saint.**

He is now nearing completion of two identical four-metre statues cast in bronze and copper that show Padre Pio sitting at the foot of the cross. The statues, expected to weigh 900 kg each, were commissioned by a private patron with a strong devotion to Padre Pio, said Schmalz. They should arrive at their new homes in time for Christmas. One will go to a shrine run by the Sisters of St. Benedict in Greensburg, Penn. The other will go to a shrine in San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, the town where Padre Pio lived and is buried. Schmalz says seven million people visit the shrine every year. To sculpt the saint, Schmalz referred to pictures of Padre Pio, who died in 1968, and then presented the stigmatic priest in a pose representative of Pio's life. For most of his adult life, Padre Pio exhibited bleeding wounds on his hands, stigmata, that corresponded to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus. So Schmalz decided to show Padre Pio at the foot of the cross. But the bottom of this cross expands to resemble a confessional. Padre Pio is leaning towards the confessor, reaching up to the confessional window as he hears the Sacrament of Reconciliation. On the other side of the cross is a bench, large enough to support an adult, that invites passersby to sit. Those who sit and peer into the confessional, expecting to see the likeness of Padre Pio, will instead see an image of Jesus Christ, stigmata visible on one palm.

"One can merge with the sculpture and pray and sit there and ask Padre Pio, and consequently Jesus, for our sins to be forgiven," said Schmalz. "Apparently, Pio would do eight-hour bouts of listening to confessions, one after the other. It was a mystical experience to experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation with Padre Pio."

The sculpture is intended to show the "power of what happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation," said Schmalz. "Only in sculpture can you do it... with three dimensions there is that eureka moment where one would sit down on the piece, one merges within the sculpture in a sense and one gets a very powerful experience."

While sculpting day in and day out, Schmalz found himself meditating on his own sins and on the sins of humanity.

"The only way out of this is to pray forgiveness as I was sculpting," he said. "The spirit of Padre Pio was alive here. This was an opportunity for me to confess in prayer to Padre Pio, to Jesus via Padre Pio, as I was working on this piece."

He hopes others will use his sculpture as a tool for prayer.

"So I thought about the stigmata and all the controversy around the stigmata and I thought, I want to get to the source of that. And the source of it, the essence of it, was that Padre Pio was an imitator of Jesus.

"That's what those wounds actually meant, that he was an imitator of Jesus and what I wanted to do was also visually translate in a sense what actually one experienced with the confession," said Schmalz.

On Schmalz's trip to Italy last November, Pope Francis blessed a version of the provocative Jesus the Homeless. It depicts Jesus Christ as a homeless man lying on a park bench and calls passersby to sit on the bench and see Jesus in the marginalized and the homeless.

Jesus the Homeless first found a home in Toronto and has since been commissioned by churches and Christian communities in the U.S. and Australia. Schmalz says his goal is to get the sculpture on all continents and one of his patrons is financing 12 to go to the 12 largest cities around the world.

"I really believe that artwork has a way of celebrating Christianity and really moving people," he said.

"And so my hope with the sculptures that I'm creating is that people see the awesomeness of Christianity, they see the awesomeness of their faith. (This is) not only to the people that are devoted Catholics or deep Christians, but also to the people that are not."