

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

The month of February is dedicated to the Hidden Life of Jesus and offers us a more meaningful reflection of what the 'Hidden Life' means for us when Lent begins in March as it does this year, and we have the whole month of February to focus on the 'ordinariness' and 'no frills' life of Jesus. The whole month reflects His life lived in the daily routine of a human being; His life as infant, child, youngster, teenager and young adult all speak to us profoundly. The stages of natural growth and change He experienced were noticed by His relatives, neighbors, friends, but no one was aware of anything unusual. The King of kings, Lord of lords, God of creation, was 'hidden' among and within His own creation and no one really knew Him. St. John, in his Gospel account of the life of Jesus, tells us as much: *He was in the world, and the world came to be through Him, but the world did not know Him.* (John 1:10) This 'Hidden Life' of the Divine-Eternal-God-with-us speaks volumes of the love only God can express and we, recipients of this awesome gift, are called to live our 'hidden lives', in response to that love, for all the world to see and give praise to God! Contradiction: hidden to be seen?! Not at all! The more we recede from the cacophony of sounds, confusion of images, and distortion of values that often an ailing world has to offer, the more people notice how much the same, but really how truly different we are. This difference does not judge, condemn or condone; it attempts to condition by presence and personal integrity and commitment a society in dire need of truth, hope, and a profound transforming love. It is with the 'violence' of an open heart, rather than a clenched fist or categorical judgements that this is achieved.

In the Letter to Diognetus, an early writing of the Church, the Christians immersed in the realities of daily life in society today, can see a wonderful affirming image of who our Spiritual Guide Padre Pio wants his Spiritual Children to be. We are like 'Undercover Agents' of the Almighty, who live in anonymity and seek through 'grace-full persuasion' to change the world as they allow God's Spirit to transform them each day. The following passage is taken directly from a translation of the Greek text. The words in parenthesis are my words, but the text itself is a powerful reminder of the awesome dignity to which God has called us, through the 'hiddenness' of our lives.

They (the Christians) cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity or deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. Yet, although they live in (any area of the world), as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own (personal lives). They live in their own countries ... They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their (homeland), and yet for them every (homeland) is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are "in the flesh," but they do not live "according to the flesh". They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They love all (people), and by all (people) are (questioned as to their integrity of life and credibility of words). (Ridiculed or condemned as useless or harmful to society's values) yet they are brought to life. They are poor, and yet they make many rich; (many) are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. (Some) are dishonored, and in their very dishonor are glorified; (some may be) defamed, and are vindicated. They are reviled, and yet they bless; when they are affronted, they still pay due respect. When they do (or seek the) good, they are (criticized and/or) punished as evildoers; undergoing punishment (for the Gospel values they believe and live), they rejoice because they are brought to life...

The situation of the early Christians has been the fate of the Church down through the centuries. The methods and motives for persecuting the Family of Christ change. In fact, they become even more dangerous and deadly than previous ones because of their sophisticated and camouflaged subtleties. They seem to strengthen as times and technology advance. Through all this we, the Church, remain the same, steadfast in our faith in Jesus Christ and His Gospel! We are the same Spiritual Children of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina who see the world as God's Theater of

Redemption. We acknowledge life as a God-given gift that must be loved and defended at every stage of its development from conception to natural death. We believe that our citizenship is in heaven but that a good Catholic Christian is also a good citizen of this world. Our strength is in the Christ we acknowledge as Son of God and Prince of Peace, sent by the Father, in Whose Spirit we call God 'Abba'. It is the 'Good News' of Him, in Whose Most Holy Name we boast, and in Whom we continue undaunted to proclaim with our lives the love, mercy, providence, forgiveness ... majesty of God. If we do not keep on 'top of the situation' and we begin to take our Faith and Baptismal Promises for granted, we risk losing everything.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, who form his 'Militia of Prayer' in a secularized world, your lives are unique - ordinary lives lived in an extraordinary way - 'hidden for all to see' - remember the Letter to Diognetus above. Taking your place where God has allowed you to be born and develop, and through the various decisions you have made leading you through the stages of your own personal lives, you have received and are offered as a gift to each other. You find strength in the bond of the Spirit's Love and your commitment to prayer and service. The 'official' monthly gathering, in which every Prayer Group is expected to participate, is a celebration of unity in charity. You carry its graces in your lives until you gather again to share and be strengthened by one another at your next monthly encounter. Praying, reflecting, sharing, ministering to each other and even to others outside the Group, the image of Christ and the spirit and encouragement of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina is more deeply manifest to all.

Each month, our Padre Pio Prayer Group Association in the USA, via our website (pppgusa.org), is offered a Calendar with thoughtful sayings for each day from letters of Padre Pio to his spiritual daughters, Scriptural citations, and a Circular Letter for reflection. I believe firmly in the written word and the power of the media. This is my way, as your National Coordinator, to offer some material that might help those who make use of these 'tools', to experience a deeper sense of unity with their 'sisters and brothers in Jesus, Mary and Padre Pio' around the nation who are, hopefully, reflecting on exactly the same material offered, regardless of their personal spiritual practices which most probably are as diverse as are our national membership. The monthly Calendar and Letter is an attempt to offer us a common thread each day in Padre Pio. We are encouraged to reflect upon our Catholic Faith and the values that make us who we are in Christ Jesus. As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio we are committed to live our Catholic Christian Faith more deeply by our participation in the Prayer Groups. We allow the words of Padre Pio we read each day to encourage us to keep the charism of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina alive in our hearts, to let his words guide us closer to Jesus, to strengthen our trust in Jesus' Love, and make us more aware of and need to grow in love for all God's children. As Diognetes reminded us above, though we look like all others, it is in the spirit we allow to take over our hearts and souls - our lives - that we become who we were created to be. Padre Pio's words offer us the encouragement and reminders to 'keep on course'.

As Catholics, we promise to 'Live Jesus', to live the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to let Him be our Guide. Do we make a personal daily effort to read God's Word and reflect on it? Sacred Scripture - God's Word - should be a daily practice for us all. It allows the soul to be still and God's Word to speak to a waiting heart. The words and stories contained in the two Testaments remind us of the constant presence, power, and providence of God in our daily lives, of God's deep love even for His severely challenged children who have distanced themselves from God by their sins (though God is always closer to them than they know and/or believe), and of the union of hearts among those who are spiritually united as they surrender to the Word that He may take hold of them and guide them.

People, whether seriously or jokingly, have asked me at times, *What's the good word for today?* My response is usually *Jesus*, or *God*, or *Love*, or *Mary*. There is always a 'good word' that we can keep in our heart and mind each day; a 'word' we can reflect on in the course of the day; a 'word' that 'keeps me focused' on what really matters. A practice of mine for years has been to keep small index cards or slips of paper; each one has a quick one-liner written on it taken from something I may have read or heard. A card or slip taken at random in the morning is my particular thought for the day. In common prayer and reflection on God's Word each day, and the spirit of Padre Pio we read each day in his words to his spiritual daughters that calls us together in reflection, we form a 'miniature' Mystical Body of Christ. We are a 'body' of prayer-ers, though diverse in personalities, responsibilities, activities, and so forth, we are one in Faith (*Pray*), Trust (*Hope*) and Universal Love (*Don't Worry*). *Cor unum et anima una.*

To his Spiritual Daughter, Raffaolina Cerase, Padre Pio writes: *I point out to you the power of holy reading to lead even worldly persons to change their course and enter onto the path of perfection. For this purpose it suffices for you to consider the conversion of St. Augustine. Who is it that won this great man over to God? His ultimate conqueror was neither his mother by her tears nor the great St. Ambrose by his divine eloquence, but the reading of a book ... While the saint battled with such tumultuous feelings he heard a voice which said to him: 'take up and read'. He at once obeyed this voice and as he read a chapter of St. Paul the thick darkness in his mind was dispelled and he became perfectly calm and serene. From that moment he made a clean break with the world, the devil and the flesh, devoted himself completely to the service of God and became the great saint who is honored today on our altars.* (28 July 1914) His reading led to knowledge, his knowledge to insight, his insight to truth, the truth to challenge, the challenge to acceptance, acceptance to commitment, commitment to renewal, renewal to transformation into that new person in Christ.

One of the beautiful aspects of our Association can be noted in the uniqueness of each individual who helps form the

magnificent mosaic of the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio. Each person brings their distinctive personality to the Group and asks that the Spirit of God lead them to deepen their relationship with God and others. There are times when this uniqueness might develop into a personal elitism that seeks to dominate rather than participate and share. As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us be open, as he says to Raffaelina, to the Word and listen to what God is saying to us; let us bring what we become in the Spirit to the world in which we live, not shouting or judging or anything of that sort but living 'hidden' where we are so that others may not be intimidated by our enthusiasm but be encouraged and supported in seeking the same simple yet effective road to holiness. Padre Pio said about his Groups of Prayers: *I neither call them to me nor do I send them away*; and to those who wished to be numbered among his Spiritual Children he would say: *I accept you willingly as my spiritual children, on the condition that you always be good and not give bad example before God and man, that you be examples of a good Christian life. Otherwise I also know how to use the whip.*

Let us strive to be good before God and man and examples of a good Christian life, lived in the 'hiddenness' of the daily routine of our lives that shines forth with the brilliance of the sun, or better the Son of God, for all to be enlightened and warmed by God's grace through us. May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you, and Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, our Spiritual Father and Guide, watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings
Fr. Francis A. Sariego, O.F.M. Cap.
National Coordinator