

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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May 2012

Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Risen Christ bless you with His peace!

It is very easy for us to imagine our Blessed Mother quietly singing psalms and meditating on the Word of God. Without underestimating the desire to remain always united with God and her Jesus, Mary was quite involved living her normal daily life as wife and mother in Israel. She no doubt went to gather fire kindling to prepare the meals for Joseph and Jesus. If she did not have the wood, she would not have the fire to bake the bread for her family when they came to eat after work. She most surely was concerned when there may not have been enough work for Joseph and, later on, for Jesus. As a loving mother, she no doubt was involved in finding jobs for the young Jesus. She, as spouse of Joseph, may even have had to bear the silent moments of a pensive husband concerned about all he was called to be and do for these two unique persons God had entrusted to his loving care.

We know nothing of the life of Jesus during the thirty years that the Holy Family lived in Nazareth. It is Saint Luke who tells us that: *Jesus grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and men.* (Luke 2: 52) Prayer, love, care, work, and sacrifice were the daily concerns lived by Mary and Joseph and their fruits were good and quite apparent: Jesus was *obedient to them.* (Luke 2: 51)

Padre Pio was also born into a simple family of working people who eked out a living by daily demanding labor. They were honest people and good Catholic Christian parents. Their home was poor but rich in all the essentials for a family centered on God: order, cleanliness, honesty, prayer, love. The day the infant was born, 25 May 1887, his father, Zi'Orazio, brought the infant to be baptized; and his mother brought him before the altar of La Madonna Della Libera to offer him and consecrate him to the loving care and protection of his heavenly Mother Mary. It is in this simple family that Padre Pio's deep love for the Lord began to grow and blossom. It is in this environment, full of faith, that at five years of age little Francesco Forgione consecrated himself to the Lord. The personal commitment and effects of his consecration could be noted in the interaction with his young friends. He showed a deep understanding of the Faith. Even during the games the children played he would not tolerate any offensive speech against God, Our Lady and the saints, or any indecent and abusive language towards anyone. The desire to live for God through Mary was most certainly apparent in this little young man.

His life was simple and filled with the gifts of the Spirit. He was a true son of the great Patriarch of Assisi, St. Francis. But, what a difference between the two families! The Bernardone Family of St. Francis of Assisi was well-to-do through the merchant trade of the father and a flourishing business in Assisi; the Forgione family was simple, hard-working, economically challenged, a family like many of the others in Pietrelcina who struggled to make ends meet. Both Francis's, Bernardone and Forgione, were the apple of their parents' eyes. However the opulence of the Bernardones afforded Francis of Assisi the comfort to 'take life easy' and 'live off the fat of the land' with 'dad's consent and pleasure, and available wallet; while the simple, low income family of the Forgiones, rich in love and caring for each other, struggled with dignity, respect, and great trust in divine providence to meet the various daily needs of the family. Padre Pio remembered with gratitude and affection how his father, Zi' Orazio, emigrated from Italy twice to America to earn enough for the family to live on and for young Francis to go to study for the priesthood.

At a very early age, Francis Forgione learned to trust and rely on God and His divine providence when human means were failing. The consecration his mother made of him to Our Lady of the Libera encouraged him to live in the arms and heart of his Heavenly Mother with a trust in her almighty intercession. His love knew no bounds for her, the Mother to whom he was entrusted by Her Son at the foot of His Cross on the day of Redemption when He made us adopted children of God. In his early years as a Capuchin friar, the demands of fraternal responsibilities and ministry took up so many hours of his time, nevertheless they never caused Padre Pio to lessen his love for God and his deep affection for Our Blessed Mother. His childlike love for Mary was not limited solely to prayers of petition and

thanksgiving. His profound tenderness for our Blessed Mother was expressed by his love for the Cross and faithfulness to the Gospel, as can be noted in his letter to Padre Agostino of 1 July 1915: *May the most holy Virgin obtain for us love of the Cross ... and may she who was first to practice the Gospel in all perfection before it was written, enable us and encourage us to follow her example. We must make every effort, like many elect souls, to follow invariably this Blessed Mother, to walk close to her, since there is no other path leading to life except the path followed by our Mother. Let us not refuse to take this path, we who want to reach our journey's end.*

Several years before this letter quoted above was written, Padre Pio opened his heart and soul to Padre Agostino in a correspondence dated 20 May 1912: *Jesus and Mary continue to act as parents to me. Oh, my dear Father, who could put in writing the consolations which this heavenly Mother makes me feel during this month - the month of May, dedicated to our Blessed Mother. Jesus was his Lord and God, and Mary was the privileged vessel whose eminent place in the Mystical Body offers her to us as Mediatrix of all Graces, loving Mother of all the children of God. From a very early age Jesus and Mary showed their fondness for Francis Forgione and prepared him thus for the special ministry he would fulfill for more than half a century as the 'Crucified of the Gargano'.*

Francis Forgione was only five years old when he began to see and speak with Jesus and Mary. Later, when as a friar he was asked by his spiritual director Padre Agostino why he never spoke about his encounters and conversations with Jesus, Mary and the angels and saints, Padre Pio candidly responded that he believed his experiences were normal and that many others had them as well. One day Padre Pio even asked Padre Agostino: *Don't you see the Madonna?* Padre Agostino, recounting this episode between himself and Padre Pio, told him that he did not see them or had ever seen or conversed with them. Padre Pio replied: *You are saying that for holy humility.* It took some convincing for Pio to realize how unique his experiences were and thus, no doubt, he realized also that God must have had particular plans for him in life. *Man proposes; God disposes.*

Although Padre Pio was privileged to have so many mystical encounters with Jesus and Mary, not for this was he free from dealing with obstacles on his spiritual journey. *I felt two forces within me, fighting one another, that were tearing my heart apart. The world wanted me for itself and God was calling me to a new life. My God! Who can ever explain that martyrdom that was going on within me? Just remembering that battle inside me, makes my blood run cold, even though more than twenty years have passed since then. I kept hearing an inner voice calling me to obey You, my true and good God; but your enemies and mine kept attempting to possess me.* The sobering truth of these words should sink into all our hearts. No matter how good we may think we are - or may in fact be before God - no one is free from the spiritual warfare that is waged within us and around us. As one of our Capuchin saints said: *No one goes to heaven in a taxi ... not even the saints!* All we need do is to remember the words of Jesus after the Resurrection: *It is I. Do not be afraid!* ... and believe them and Him! ... then keep moving forward.

Before beginning his itinerant life through the roads of Palestine, Jesus most certainly felt the turmoil of having to make a decision to leave everything and everyone He knew for thirty years, especially when taking leave of His loving Mother and relatives. The thought of having to be confronted by those who should have understood and accepted His message, the experiences of undergoing seemingly overwhelming challenges to alter His course by Satan himself as well as by adulating people who sought from Him the comfort of power and pleasure rather than a life transformed from within, the solitude of living among many but understood by none, ... all this did not leave Him indifferent. He was also human as well as divine. He felt the demands and difficulties as well as the deliberations and determination of one in harmony with God and the divine will. Jesus had to make these decisions as He entered more deeply His response to fulfill the Father's Will. From the prayer in the Garden of Gethsamene we know how His proximate Passion and Death weighed upon His heart and soul. *His sweat fell to the ground as drops of blood ... yet He prayed, Father, Your will not mine be done.* Such simple words that led to our redemption! So it is with each one of us. Regardless of the consequences, responding to the Father's will may lead us through many and even difficult and painful challenges, but ultimately there is a 'resurrection' to new life that makes it all worthwhile. How Mary must have suffered for Her Son in the silence of Her heart, feeling, as only a Mother can, the anguish and inner turmoil of Her Son. Nevertheless, Mary, His Mother and ours, also said 'Yes' making the most difficult decision a mother can make... She let go of Her Son to God's will, but accompanied Him to the end. She accompanies all Her children as they journey to fulfill God's will. Her presence intercedes, encourages, accompanies, and joyfully presents us to Jesus at every point of the journey.

As the day drew near for Francis Forgione to leave his parents, his relatives, the archpriest don Salvatore, and his town, Padre Pio wrote: *I felt this pain so intensely that I was on the verge of fainting.* Jesus and Mary were his support and encouragement to keep the course. Padre Pio, writing of that departure, speaks of himself in the third person: *The last night he spent with his family, the Lord came to comfort his soul with another vision. He saw Jesus and His Mother who, in all their majesty, came to encourage him and assure him of their protection.*

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us follow the example of our spiritual guide and father, and listen to him who encourages us to confide in the graces of God and the almighty intercession of Mary, our Heavenly Mother. *May the*

most holy Virgin be born in our hearts to bring us her blessing. Don't be upset at your being unable to serve God as you wish, because when you adapt to his wishes you serve Him according to His will, which is a great deal better than yours. And we must not worry and upset ourselves, because we belong to God in one way rather than another. In truth, given that we seek nobody but Him, and we do not find Him any the less whether walking on arid ground in the desert, or on the waters of sensitive consolation, we must be happy... Live tranquilly ... elevate yourself above yourself with frequent aspirations of the heart which are truly continual prayers. (To Maria Fiorentino, 11 January 1917) he could write this with all sincerity and serenity because he knew, not just felt, that Jesus and Mary were with him always.

The childhood and early religious life years of Padre Pio were filled with many difficulties and also many spiritual consolations. What he thought 'normal' were the extraordinary experiences that helped mold him for the future. One thing however is as common to us, as they were to him: the love and protection of Jesus and Mary for him ... and for us. In this month of Our Lady, let us reconsecrate ourselves to our Mother's love. At the foot of the Cross of Her Son, Mary and we were entrusted to each other, as a mother to her children. She accompanies us on life's journey. She intercedes for us at all times. She protects us with Her motherly embrace and holds us close to Her Immaculate Heart that we may feel the love of one who shows us the way to Her Son and thus leads us to God. Love Her and make Her loved by others. We know our Mother in heaven is not God, however, infinitely less than God but eminently greater than all creation, She stands as Mother and Mediatrix of Graces through Whom the loving gifts of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit flow to us. How strange, and sad, that many Catholics think they do a disservice to Jesus by loving her Love. Can a Son dislike anyone who loves and honors the mother he loves and honors?! How often did Padre Pio reprimand and even scold firmly those, even among friars, who showed a lukewarm awareness/devotion for Our Lady. Love Her and make Her loved by others!

With every best wish for you during this season of new birth and new life, I pray we all live as the 'People of the Resurrection'. May our lives be a song of praise to the God Who creates, redeems and sanctifies us. He gave us Mary, His daughter, His mother, and His spouse as our intimate companion to help us come closer to one another as Her children, as She leads us ever closer to Jesus Her Son. May we confidently respond, as our Blessed Mother Mary and Padre Pio, with a determined 'Yes' to all the Father asks of us, and thus become more like Jesus in Whose image Scripture tells us we are created.

May God bless you and fill you with the gifts of His Holy Spirit; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and may Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

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