

# Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

We are a nation and a people blessed by God. This land and nation, with all its negatives and positives, vices and virtues, failures and successes, and so on, has been the destination of millions down through the years who dreamed of living in a land of freedom, justice and peace; a land where everyone has the right to *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. Many of these wonderful attributes of our nation have been severely affected because many have forgotten that first of all we are a nation *under God*. When we forget, dismiss, or otherwise *shelve* this fundamental element of our national heritage, it is understandable why our wants can turn into our needs, and our hearts can become indifferent to the lives and needs of the sisters and brothers, all children of God, around us.

While we may not be indifferent to God, or squanderers of God's gifts, or indifferent to the needy around us, we still have a responsibility to God, ourselves, and each other to always be a grateful people whose lives give God the first place in our hearts and lives. We must know the times in which we live and respond in God-centered-selfless faith, hope, and love. Quite often people will seek the easy options available rather than the best way to live as a child of God. Just think of how advertising entices people to take now, enjoy now ... and pay later. The message is an enticing and seemingly good one, but it is also an insidious one. When such an attitude gradually enters the fibre of our life and society, the consequences can be disastrous. Putting responsibility off until later for the sake of the 'here-and-now' enjoyment or 'quick fix' can ultimately keep some in the illusion that they need not be accountable for anything. What is 'put off until tomorrow' rarely gets taken care of ... 'Tomorrow' never comes! To follow such a foolish philosophy of life is to live a lie. Living a lie is destructive. We lose sight of the growth process to which all creation is bound naturally, and for humans also spiritually. The better choice is to let go of false securities-immobilizing comforts-hypocritical compromises and let God 'call the shots', to strive to go from bad to good and from good to better, to turn our mediocrity into excellence, and thus to be transformed into that 'new person come to full stature in Christ'. The Lenten pilgrimage from Ashes to the Empty Tomb helps us achieve this vital goal.

Lent is the annual opportunity the Church offers all Her children to rekindle the flame of faith, and move forward in hope toward God Who awaits to embrace us with His forgiving and transforming Love. Lent is the time for us to tone up for the struggle between settling for comfort-convenience-compromise and the transforming strength of Jesus that can make us truly children of God redeemed in His Blood. Following Jesus brings us a peace open to all who walk with him through the self-denial and trusting generosity of Lent to the fullness of the Easter Message of new life.

As an inducement to buy, product advertising often promises huge discounts over the list price. Rather than vouching for the product's quality, this approach shows that the original price was exorbitant and that earlier buyers did not get value for their money. But the intended message is that only the foolish would let this new offer pass. Advertising is rarely what it seems to be at first sight. There is usually a hidden agenda, something more than meets the eye.

This is true also in the presentation of Lent, but in a positive way, and, more especially, of Ash Wednesday. The one-liner that may accompany the ashes placed on our foreheads is *Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return*. It is a reality check and stern warning. Beyond the obvious reminder of these words, there is a 'hidden agenda'. There is more to Lent than heroics and self-denial, important though these are. Lent is an emphatic invitation in the midst of the whirlwind of our daily lives. Lent invites us to re-live the mystery of the Cross of Calvary more intensely. It is the 'advertisement' of God's love for us. Calvary and the Cross confirms the fact that 'life is worth living'. Nevertheless, there are no discounts. The gift is eternal and the price is total...total giving of one's self, just as Jesus gave Himself totally for us.

We are also reminded as Lent begins to *Repent, and believe the Gospel* ... 'believe' meaning to live, and 'live' meaning

to 'be Christ', thus to be transformed into the image of Christ we were created to be. There are no shortcuts, or 'reasonable facsimiles' accepted. It is a total giving of ourselves and being given Christ, that we may be one with Him as He is with the Father, that we may be one in them. What a mystery! What a gift! What LOVE! God's gift of love is total, unconditional and forever. Lent is an ongoing reminder of God's offer of himself. We are invited to receive and accept this love and to make it present daily in our world through justice, truth, generosity and forgiveness. Only the foolish or the unbeliever could pass up such an opportunity.

Lent is a time for us to re-evaluate and renew our lives: in relationship to God, to ourselves, and to each other - even the stranger who, created by God just as we are, is our sister and brother. We can never accomplish this if our lives are rooted in the idolatry of senseless materialism that enslaves us spiritually, and then affects our lives and relationships. Lent is a time for us to rise from our spiritual lethargy. We are called to honestly review our lives in the light of God's word and our Christian calling. We are expected to open our hearts to God's transforming grace through an active acceptance of the challenges His word and the Church offer. We must be consciously and actively aware and responsive to those around us, especially those whose lives may be burdened in any way - spiritually or materially. We should never forget that often, through our own participation in an exaggerated self-centered and self-gratifying materialism, we can forget and/or be indifferent to those with whom we share life's journey, whether we know them in this life or will never meet them until the next.

Jesus' response to Satan's seductions in the desert are a powerful reminder of the essential elements needed for a fruitful Lenten Season:

- *Not on bread alone does one live ...* (but on every word that comes from the mouth of God).
- *You shall worship the Lord, your God, and Him alone shall you serve.*
- *You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*

Jesus responds simply and succinctly to our false 'need' for unbridled pleasure, limitless power, and 'suffocating' possessions. The desert 'challenges' Jesus confronted under Satan's instigation offer us the certitude of conquering our own if we, as He, serve the Lord, our God, and Him alone.

Ash Wednesday offers us the opportunity to confront our challenges and conquer them in Christ. We begin the season of Lent receiving the ashes with humble acknowledgment of our human frailty; Palm Sunday introduces us to the Great Holy Week that shows how fickle our relationship with Jesus can be (Hosanna!/Crucify Him!); Good Friday places us before the *Cross-road* when we, as Jesus, are asked to die, He for us, we to our *egos*, and leads us to Easter Sunday when the transforming eruption of the Father's love through His Spirit breaks the shackles of our human nature affected by sin, rolls back the barriers, lifts us up, and renews us into a new way of living the Baptismal gift of our adoption as children of God.

During Lent we may recite extra prayers, drop extra money into the Sunday collection, or maybe give up (*sacrifice?*) something we are in the habit of doing or eating. These are all commendable actions/practices and wonderful opportunities we offer ourselves to celebrate this holy season. But... How often are the extra prayers just words we say rather than heartfelt expressions we pray and reflect on to strengthen our relationship with God? How often is the extra we may place either in the Sunday collection or give as a handout to the needy, no more than fulfilling what we should do to support the Church, or our way of *buying the trouble away* of saying a kind word to someone truly in need or suffering? How often are our physical sacrifices (no meat, no ice cream, no candy, no smoking, and the like) either acts we should do for our own health's sake, thus are expected always, not just at Lent, or an easy way not to focus on the purpose of Lenten sacrifices - to rid ourselves of what distances us from God?

In several letters addressed to his spiritual daughter, Anna Rodote, Padre Pio writes: *Let our entire lives, our every action and all our aspirations be completely directed towards making reparation for the offences which (we and) our ungrateful brothers and sisters continually commit against Him.* (8 March 1915) *In the course of life, mortifications will not be lacking for us. Let us love them; let us embrace them with a cheerful soul, and let us always bless the good God in everything.* (15 March 1915) *It is true that the spirit is ready to do the will of God whereas the flesh is weak ... In His fully accepted agony in the Garden, ... if this repugnance was overcome, it was due to His prayer ... The humanity of Jesus also felt human nature's repugnance for suffering* (10 June 1915)

In Lent we strengthen our relationship with God through a deeper spirit of prayer that goes beyond just the words we multiply. We are offered the opportunity to work at ridding ourselves of whatever may lead us away from God's will. This type of sacrifice is meaningful before God and more beneficial to the person who accepts it. Lent is an everyday experience through God's word and our personal reflection of it. We are called to be actively and prayerfully concerned about our lives lived in the grace of God and also the spiritual and material good of those around us. Lent will be nothing more than an external show of traditional prayers or practices, unless we have the correct spirit underlying each one. Unless we seriously enter this holy season and allow our Lenten practices to affect our lives and effect a transformation in our life, they can be an *easy cop out* for not doing what really matters and could truly transform the

inner person, our hearts and souls.

In his many letters to his spiritual children Padre Pio often indicates the way we are called to live our relationship with God as His children in Jesus. Speaking to Anna Rodote in the letters we quoted above, as well as in the many letters to his other spiritual children, our Padre Pio also speaks to us at the beginning of our Lenten 'Spiritual Exercises'. Our Father and Founder speaks of:

- *Reparation* that recognizes evil committed against the love of God and the need to compensate (with, in, and through the spirit of Jesus) in ourselves what is lacking still in the sufferings of Christ. This by no means indicates that the sacrifice of Jesus was deficient. What it means is that we must continue to be the Mystical Body of Christ as His Church in the world and continue to expiate in Him and through His grace working within us, by the offering we make of ourselves for our own spiritual good and that of others.

- *Mortification* by 'dying' to the self-centeredness of our lives and also to the legitimate moments and elements of our lives. We strive to willingly keep the things we possess from possessing us, or the legitimate experiences of life from controlling us, or the unlawful desires from overcoming us, and so on. 'Giving up' something has little or no value in itself. The value of the act is determined by the reason for which we do or not do it. Even insignificant matters can have eternal value.

- *Resignation* to God's will in all things. Resignation is not a stoic acceptance of what we cannot do anything about. Fruitful spiritual resignation consists in seeing all things from the perspective of grace and God's will. We accept with unconditional trust all that God, indirectly through the circumstances of our lives or directly as an act of His will, asks us to experience. We accept as He wills, when He wills, how He wills, because He wills it.

On Ash Wednesday we will receive the ashes that signal the beginning of our forty-day journey to Easter. Many opportunities will be offered us to re-evaluate, renew, and rekindle that *Spirit of the Lord who has anointed* us in Baptism to be a living image of Christ to each other and an Apostle of the Resurrection. As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio let us enter this grace-filled Lenten season with joyful anticipation. May it be a Season of Joy that helps us come closer to God and each other.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio look over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

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