

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you his peace!
and lead you through the mystery of His Passion and Death
to the joy of His Resurrection and our Renewed Life in Jesus!

A strange feeling took the whole Church by surprise this past February. Our Holy Father Benedict XVI announced he was renouncing the Petrine Office. The Chair of Peter would be vacant as of 8pm on February 28th, 2013 and Pope Benedict XVI would be the 'retired' Bishop of Rome. The move was unprecedented in modern times. It had occurred only several times over the millennial history of the Roman Catholic Church. The serenity of His Holiness regarding the matter instilled a sense of confused calm and wonder in most of the faithful. As days moved on, cardinals arrived, preparations were made, and eventually the Conclave to elect a Successor to Peter began. As usual, the news media had their opinions, 'inside information', conjectures, and there was always a bit of sensationalism to urge their subscribers to keep tuned-in daily for 'more breaking news as it happens' - the usual stories that reveal nothing or useless trivia and speculation. People just had to wait for the white smoke and peeling of the bells.

His Holiness emeritus Benedict XVI went to Castelgandolfo for solitude and prayer, no doubt invoking the Holy Spirit on those electing his immediate successor. People began gathering again in St. Peter's Square, as they had when they gathered to thank Pope Benedict for his years of service. They had applauded Benedict XVI for his gentleness and guidance, and now they wondered what direction the cardinals would take in the Conclave. The College of Cardinals had changed in its consistency. The times were getting rather challenging for anyone in the leadership of a vast number of people such as the Roman Catholic Church. What were the traits being sought in the Successor to Peter at this stage in human history?

Initial confusion at the renunciation, prayerful interest for the future of the Church, faith-filled anticipation for the will of God once again to be manifest in the Church in the election of the Bishop of Rome were ways people responded to the renunciation of Pope Benedict XVI. Those of us far removed from the happenings in the Eternal City could only imagine possible scenarios taking place within the walls of Vatican City, among the electors themselves, and within the Sistine Chapel. These were exciting times for news hounds who are always looking for 'happenings' to talk about, but above all very awesome days for the Church. The People of God were awaiting him whose presence among us speaks of teacher, guide, and servant. The teacher speaks the Truth; the guide leads on the Way; and the servant surrenders in loving obedience to God and service so that others may have a fuller Life. Jesus called Himself *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. Every successor to Peter, Vicar of Jesus the Christ on earth, must also, in himself, accept the responsibility to follow the Way, teach the Truth and live the Life of grace with those entrusted to his pastoral care. The Lord of New Life continues His presence in Word, Sacrament, the Church, and particularly in the spirit-blessed man elected as successor to Peter, entrusted by Jesus Himself to watch over and feed His Church on earth.

The election of Pope Francis is another reminder of new life and vigor that flow from those who hope in the Lord and seek His Holy Will. What joy we all experienced when the Cardinals elected the Holy Father on the second day of balloting. What a wonderful shock for all Franciscans! What a surprise to all the Church! What a joy when the newly-elected Holy Father stated his name would be Francis! The name of the Seraphic Father of Assisi, the 'Little Poor Man', St. Francis Bernardone, was going to be the particular patron of the Chief Shepherd of the Roman Catholic Church. He would begin his pontificate as a messenger of *Pax et Bonum (Peace and Good)*, the motto and greeting of all Franciscans.

Surprises were still not ended. A Lent full of surprises led to an Easter of renewed enthusiasm, excitement, energy. Pope Francis began simply. Simple words and expressions, as St. Francis of Assisi would say *without gloss*. Gestures that caught some off guard as the Holy Father greeted people with a wave, a kind word, even embraces and kisses. Known for his simple and poor manner of life, our Holy Father has begun to express quite strongly that he intends this to be his manner of relating to the people. Is it any wonder that in his inaugural homily he would say *Do not be afraid of goodness or of tenderness*. His Faith will not compromise the Gospel values and principles that are the hallmark of our Roman Catholic expression of Christianity. His Office as Vicar of Christ, Chief Shepherd who knows his sheep, also knows that gray areas in life do exist and thus require an open heart that neither judges nor condemns the person, nor does it condone evil in any way. He, as all of us who call Jesus Lord and Savior, is called to have a heart that is open to listen, to understand, and to respond with the love of Christ to all. We are being challenged once again *to be or not to be - to be* the Christians we were baptized to be, or to let the allurements of the material and hedonistic world around

us seduce us *not to be* the image of the One in Whom we were reborn through the life-giving waters of Baptism. When we think that the world is deaf, mute and blind to the reality of God's Love, the following paragraph, taken from an international news clipping, should be encouraging and even inspiring: *Jesus bore the sins of all; this man who could not die, died for love of all. He invented selfless love... You will tell me that love already existed. It's true! Radio waves and electricity also always existed, but if there had not been someone to discover them, we would not have known them ... May your steps move at the pace of (Jesus') steps. Fix your gaze in his direction.*

We have sought to move at the pace of Christ, and have fixed our gaze in His direction during Lent and particularly in Holy Week. We participated in the Drama of Calvary. The greatest of all weeks in the Christian Calendar began with the "Hosannas" of the populace, and in a brief time, "Hosannas" were followed by the intrigue and betrayal of Jesus by his nearest and dearest friends "hand-picked" by Himself. What then followed was choreographed by the religious leaders of Jesus' own nation and the foreign occupational forces. The "Hosannas" turned to "Crucify Him". Cheering in applause turned to jeering and ridiculing an innocent dying man suffering capital punishment for a crime He did not commit. His death made those witnessing the tragedy return to their homes beating their breasts, and compelled a Roman centurion to say *Truly this was the Son of God*. But, this drama still had to peak in a tragic-bloody-humiliating manner when Jesus nailed to a criminal's cross, was mockingly hailed as *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, and led to a moment of desolation when the Lord exclaimed *My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?!* Everything progressed to its climax with the death of Jesus entrusting Himself to the Father - *Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit* - a death that continues to proclaim love, compassion and forgiveness for all.

If everything ended there, what a tragedy it would be for us all! The story does not finish there! It cannot! Our story does not end on the Cross; our story finds its true beginning there. When Jesus cries: *Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit*, our life-blood is renewed and we again are offered the opportunity to be *at-one* with the God who became one with us. We are a people who profess and proclaim not death but life! Saint Paul tells the community of Corinth: *If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty too is our preaching; empty, too, your faith...and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain...But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep...for in Christ, all shall be brought to life...so that God may be all in all.* (1 Corinthians 15: 13-28)

We are children of the Resurrection. Our song is "Alleluia". The theater of Redemption is the world in which we live - God's gift of Creation - and Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer, is the Victim of humanity's ingratitude to Love Incarnate. Our hope, founded on faith in an impossible event, proclaims that the finality of death was conquered by the reality of the Resurrection of Jesus. He is alive and well! Life is worth living! Death has lost its sting! Death is no longer the "grim reaper" that destroys and reduces us to nothingness. In the Resurrection of Jesus, Death is the point of convergence of one's life, and the threshold of eternity. *Life is changed, not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them (us) in heaven* (Preface I for Masses for the Deceased). Why do we Catholics, like the Corinthians who were reprimanded by St. Paul, fail so often to live as the redeemed people we are? Why do we live at times as though the stone were never rolled away from the entrance of the tomb? Pope John Paul II instilled *Hope* in us for the future millennium and God's love for His children; Pope Benedict XVI sought to strengthen our *Faith* in Christ Jesus as we journey into the future; and now Pope Francis is calling us to believe in God and one another enough to hope in the goodness of people that we might *Love* unconditionally and selflessly, thus offering a sign to all the world that Jesus lives in our world through those who spiritually rose with Him that first Easter Sunday, and continue to do so every day of their lives

Often, unfortunately, we are like the Israelites who kept the wounds of their years of slavery in Egypt open, even though their Passage through the Red Sea was an undeniable proof of the power and the credibility of their God. They continued to complain and expect God to do for them what they had the ability, in God's grace, to do for themselves. We have not let the wonderful effects of Jesus' Resurrection - our Passage from Death to Life - on that first Easter Sunday penetrate to the very depths of our hearts. We still have not lived our Exodus experience as profoundly as we ought. God leads and strengthens those who recognize and acknowledge their vulnerability, and who admit to their needy state without Him. God accompanies us from the mentality of self-centered individualism, to an open-hearted availability and acceptance of others. Like the Israelites of old, we would rather have the onions and garlic of bondage without challenge, rather than the challenge to be free and go beyond the barriers we set in our lives. The Resurrection of Jesus encourages us to look beyond our failures, to move courageously forward beyond our fears, to trust confidently and use well our God-given gifts, to believe in the Life Jesus came to give us, and walk out of the darkness.

To go beyond is eventually to enter the Land of Promise. We cannot continue to mix the straw of complacency and indifference with the mud of confusion and earthliness. This only fabricates bricks of slavery that erect walls that hinder our journey to God. We complacently build the cities of man, rather than struggle to build the City of God. A culture of death still pervades our society. Children of the Resurrection, freed in the Blood of Jesus, imbued with the gift of the Holy Spirit, Loved by the Father, we are called to freedom - a freedom the world does not understand and yet still attempts to create through power, prestige, possessions, and the like. We who are being *loved into goodness* should *not be afraid of goodness and tenderness* and expressing these with others. *No risk, no gain!* (Mother Francis Bachmann). In Jesus there is no risk of loss, only gain; yet, often we opt for the slavery that stunts our spiritual growth and blinds us to the wonder and glory of the Resurrection that speaks to us of our dignity and freedom as redeemed children of God in Jesus through the Spirit.

Like the first followers who experienced the Savior's Passion and Death, we can allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the difficulties and delusions of life. Or, we can fix our gaze on the Risen Lord. Like the women who went to the

tomb, we may love Jesus deeply, but feel and act as though He is still in the tomb. Their love could not separate them from Him, even in death. It was that loyalty, that fidelity, that offered them the gift of being the first to see the Resurrected Lord... *and they kissed His feet and ran to tell the others*. Eventually His love wins the hearts of those who sincerely seek Him, even through difficulty and failure. He continues to seek to *love us into goodness*.

The Cross was a fixed moment in time, whose effects would last eternally. There is a powerful phrase in the Passion account that many read and pass over: *from noon until three in the afternoon, there was darkness over all the earth*. The evangelist reduces this horrific moment of humanity's ingratitude to its Creator to a determined amount of time. Thus, we are reminded that the powers of darkness can rule only for a time, but will never prevail forever. His Life and His Light will always have the advantage over death and darkness. *He is risen, go tell His brethren that He precedes them! Fear not!*, He has conquered death ... *Have courage!* His Spirit within you can withstand all that surrounds you ... *He is Risen!* We never stand alone before the world because we are victors in the Victim, in Whose death we come alive. Easter proclaims a message of liberation and long-lasting-Life. Easter is the day and the season that continually reminds us that the Son will always cast His Light on us. The darkness of sin, cynicism, skepticism cannot keep the light of the Son of God from enlightening our lives and our world. The question is whether we will accept to bask in the Light of the Son, or remain in darkness. When we create room in our hearts for the Lord to enter, then the power of Easter can take us to heights never imagined.

In a letter to his Spiritual Daughter, Raffaolina Cerase, Padre Pio writes in greeting: *May the Holy Spirit fill your soul with His most holy gifts and make you holy. May the risen Jesus make you, too, feel a spark of His holy love and reveal more and more to you the mysteries of the Cross. May the sorrowful Virgin obtain for you from her most holy Son true and sincere love of the cross and may your soul be inebriated with it. Amen* (April 10, 1915).

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, we too are reminded that only through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives can we fathom something of the mystery of Christ's love for us. It is the Risen Jesus who teaches us the value of the Cross - you cannot separate the Victor from the Victim. *The Cross without Christ is tyranny; Christ without the Cross is a lie* (Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen). In the midst of all this is the silent, dignified, and loving figure of Mary; she is always with us on our journey, leading us, who love her as our Heavenly Mother, closer to one another and to Jesus her Son. May our Easter Season help us to value all that God asks of us, so that through Mary to Jesus, in Whose Passion-Death-Glorious Resurrection we enter the Father's loving embrace, we may live virtuously, die piously, and achieve the fullness of the rewards of Eternal Life.

The faithfulness to the Church and the Holy Father of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina urges us, his spiritual children, to humbly reconfirm our obedience to the Lord Who speaks to us also through our Holy Father Francis. We recommit ourselves to live the Gospel as the Lord has called us to do so in our respective vocations. And we pray that God may assist our Holy Father and protect him from all harm, that he may be a source of strength and a guiding force through these both exciting and troubling times for the Church and the world. May the Lord of New Life help you to live as His Alleluia People; may Our Lady guide, guard and protect you; and may our Father, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, look over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. May the Risen Lord inflame your hearts with love, and bless you and your loved ones with the gift of His Easter Peace and Joy.

Peace and Blessings in the Risen Lord,
Fr. Francis A. Sario, OFM Cap
National Coordinator

PS Please read the letter regarding the ***International Directory of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups***. It can be found on the website under the heading *Current Information* in the section *From the Desk of the Coordinator*.
The request came directly from General Headquarters at San Giovanni Rotondo.