

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

Accompanying the civil authorities of the city of Bologna to Assisi to make their traditional offering of oil for the lamp that burns before the tomb of Saint Francis, Cardinal Biffi, then cardinal of Bologna, reminded all present of a phrase of the Seraphic Father: *If the men involved in government are not just they will go to hell*. Obviously, this touched a cord in the minds and hearts of the government officials who had come to Assisi with His Eminence Cardinal Biffi. After the ceremonies had concluded, the Mayor and his councillors expressed their sadness that the cardinal had made such a pointed and unnecessary political comment and in public. The cardinal defended himself by saying that the words were the words of Saint Francis and that they referred to all people who were not just, both politicians as well as others. One of those among the group of politicians present replied: *The words were those of Saint Francis, but the finger that pointed them out to us was the finger of Your Eminence!* It is not easy to be a prophet, to be one who fearlessly reminds others of their responsibilities before God and the consequences for knowingly neglecting them. The prophet points the way to God, speaks in the name of God, acts in God's name. Sometime, the prophet is misunderstood and may be targeted by those who dislike what they hear. Most times, the prophet is understood quite well and is persecuted because of the message and challenge he offers others in the name of God. We are called to be prophets or, to use an expression of St. Francis, 'Heralds of the Great King'.

Our Holy Father Pope Francis was chosen by the Holy Spirit through the College of Cardinals to be a prophet for our time. As leader of the Roman Catholic Church his pastoral ministry is to keep the face of Jesus before us always and, in His Name, to help us remember the words of the Father at the Baptism and on the Mount of the Transfiguration: *This is my beloved Son, listen to Him*. He, as the great leaders of God's People of old, must listen himself to the Word and then help us to listen and live the Word we have come to know.

We pray for our Holy Father as we say: *God our Father, ... you extend the kingdom of Christ to embrace the world ... look with love on Francis our Pope, your appointed successor to St. Peter ... may he be a visible center and foundation of our unity in faith and love ...* (Opening Prayers of Votive Masses for the Universal Church). We recognize ourselves in the Church's prayers for God's People who journey in time towards eternal life. We pray for ourselves and especially for the one whom the Eternal Father has appointed Father and Shepherd of Christ's Family, Vicar of Christ Jesus, and voice of the Spirit's prompting for God's People. Many, down through the ages, like our Holy Father today, stand in the waters of life's calm as well as turbulent currents and actively participate in all our experiences encouraging, supporting, interceding for us. They share in the ministry of Jesus - Jeshua of Nazareth, God's Son and our Savior. As Jesus, Whose Vicar we believe them to be, they speak out with conviction, commitment, and confiding in the constant presence and assistance of the Spirit, they guide, guard, and protect the Catholic Faith they have accepted to proclaim and defend.

Moses, the great leader of Israel, a pilgrim nation in formation, was called to eternity before Israel's entrance into the Promised Land. He saw the Land from a distance, but was not the one to lead the Hebrew people into the land of Promise. He appointed Joshua, his faithful assistant, as his successor and leader of the People of God. Joshua's name means *the Lord is salvation*, and he truly was a saving presence that directed the people both by his example as well as by his words. God worked wonders through Joshua, and the People were reaffirmed in their faith and encouraged in confronting the continued challenges they had to face to achieve the ultimate goal set for them by God. In the Church, we too have "Joshuas" whom the Lord calls to continue a work of re-affirmation and encouragement for all God's People in the universal call and mission to holiness, proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ with our lives.

Padre Pio was a living example of the mission and ministry of Jesus. Like Joshua, he accepted the awesome privilege and responsibility of entering the calm and particularly the turbulent waters of the Church and society of his century.

He stood, priestly bearer of the Ark of the New Covenant - the Eucharist he celebrated and became each day - in the overwhelming waters of today's religious and philosophical ideologies, seductive allurements of a hedonistic society, basic agnosticism or total disregard for God and Jesus' Gospel to humanity, moral relativism lacking basic values or principles that flow from God's law, and so forth. His presence, prayer, and the power of God working through him, stemmed the tide that would have otherwise overwhelmed and destroyed so many souls.

The first obstacle the freed slaves of Egypt had to face was the Red Sea. Moses split the Sea and the Israelites passed on dry land. Having passed through the Red Sea, the People wandered in the desert for forty years. They learned the hard way for not trusting in the God Who expected them to listen, trust, obey, and thus see the fulfillment promised. Finally, as they approached the Promised Land, another barrier lay before them. It had to be overcome before they could enter their new and definitive home as free children of the One Great God. The success of their endeavor depended on overcoming this obstacle. The peoples of the land recognized the great wonders God worked for His People. All had come to know that Israel was 'back home' after more than four centuries of exile and slavery; they were there to stay in fulfillment of God's Promise. God keeps His Covenant forever! Nevertheless, the 'obstacle' had to be overcome first.

The second obstacle was the Jordan River. Like the Red Sea of forty years before, the River was the line of demarcation between hopeful dreams and fulfillment. They had to face the present challenge and meet it head on. Following the command of the Lord God of Israel, *Joshua commanded the priests of the People who were walking before Israel to come to a halt at the edge of the Jordan River. Then, he said: The ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will precede you into the Jordan. When the soles of the feet of the priests carrying the ark of the Lord...touch the water of the Jordan, it will cease to flow... No sooner had the priestly bearers of the ark waded into the waters,...than the waters flowing from upstream halted...while those flowing downstream...disappeared entirely. Thus the people crossed ... the priests carrying the ark remained motionless on dry ground in the bed of the Jordan ...(and) remained in the bed of the Jordan until everything had been done that the Lord had commanded Joshua to tell the People.* (cfr. Joshua 3; 4: 1-10). Their mission was to stand firm until all the people had crossed over. The priests went first and made the way accessible and safe; when all were safely across, they followed. God never leaves His People - even when, at times, they seem to leave Him!

God took the initiative to save His People and it was God Who promised to get them to its fulfillment. God keeps His word, but, since *God gives us life without our help but expects our cooperation for us to be saved*, we must do our part as well. The People were assembled with the Promised Land just within their reach, across the Jordan. Thousands of people ready, after forty years of hope-filled wandering through the desert, to settle down. Many experienced and hardened warriors, defenders of Israel from the enemy nations that assailed them during their desert trek, dreamt of enjoying a quiet and productive home and family life without having to put their lives on the line every day to protect Israel from inimical peoples seeking their destruction. There were the families dreaming of stability for their children and for a plot of land they could cultivate to make the desert flourish. Then there were the youth - young men and women - who had known only a nomadic life of uncertainty and looked forward to all the opportunities that the young hope for in a more structured life: security, family, friendship, love, all those elements that constitute the 'joy of living'. Nothing happened! There was one thing that had to be done! They had to cross the Jordan! How often in life do we stand and look ahead of us desiring what is within our reach, but hesitate or fear to take the step and pass over the obstacle that prevents our accessible success on the other side.

It was not until the priests carrying the Ark got their feet wet that the Jordan stopped in its course. Until those who were the shepherds and leaders of Israel, carrying the sign of the very presence of God with them, entered the waters first, nothing happened. They had to get their feet wet! This act showed Israel that they believed with their lives that God was with them, and their faith in His Promise would make the miracle happen. And it did! Our lives have so many Jordan Rivers that we have to wade through at low tide with difficulty, or maybe, because we cannot fight the strong currents of a raging river, need someone who can help us cross over on dry ground in the more demanding and challenging times. Each experience requires an act of faith and trust that God will again work His miracle for us. All we have to do is trust and "get our feet wet". Do not fear to move forward, there is always a 'Joshua' present to indicate the way. Jesus in His Word indicates the way, through the Sacraments He strengthens us, through His Church He guides us, and in certain individuals who have opened their hearts and lives to the will of God Jesus working through them assures us of His presence to safeguard our journey. Our Holy Father Pope Francis stands with us at the banks of the River and wades with us into the waters of the world's many experiences and challenges. His simplicity and strength of conviction, are signs of a faith that overcomes obstacles. Like the Levites carrying the Ark into the waters, he precedes us and encourages us to follow. His speech is simple, compassionate, understanding, open, and at the same time uncompromising with all that we profess as Roman Catholic Christians - essentials are firm, accidentals are negotiable.

Human beings have conquered the sky and probed the depths of space. Nevertheless, there are many problems which endanger our existence: pollution, natural disasters, tragedies caused by human error, attempts on human life and

freedom, attacks against the family, social injustice, intolerance due to prejudice of any kind (race, color, religious belief, culture, ideology, and the like). Like the waters of the Red Sea or the Jordan River, they threaten to overwhelm us and even destroy us, unless someone continues to hold back the waters. Jesus came to give meaning to life and strength to all who would accept to “Live Jesus” and be a counter-cultural prophetic presence in the world of today. Like the great leaders of old, they stand in the river bed for us all to pass safely. Jesus, unlike the patriarchs and prophets, is the enfleshment of all they hoped. They sought in mystery what we have come to know in truth. Jesus is the Way we follow, the Truth we believe, and the Life we seek with all our heart. His Spirit fills us with the courage to forge ahead in the midst of all we encounter with the light of a faith that indicates the road, brightens our way, and clarifies our ultimate destination: Heaven, Life, GOD!

Padre Pio was a living image of the Gospel of love. Like Joshua who continued the mission of Moses as leader and protector of Israel, Padre Pio, imprinted with the marks of Jesus was commissioned with His Holy Spirit to stand before the People as their leader and protector in our troubled world. Padre Pio sought every way possible to instill hope in the hearts of all. He encouraged all who sought his counsel to wade into the waters of their everyday demands and to trust in God’s powerful Providence and his loving care and protection: *I ardently love everyone, he said, I cannot be at peace; I am worn out and extremely saddened, in deepest desolation and the greatest of anguish, because of not being able to bring all of my fellow men to God* (To Padre Benedetto, 1919). He was willing to go to any length for those whom he accepted as his Spiritual Children and all those in any way entrusted to his prayers and concern: *Each day I say to the Lord: if, in order to give you a little extra glory on earth, it is necessary for me to suffer in hell, send me as you like!*” (Negrisollo-Castello-Manelli, Padre Pio nella sua interiorita`).

We are the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio. He was a man of action as well as of prayer. His prayer made him aware of the needs of his sisters and brothers in the world, and he brought their needs back to his prayer. He lived a “virtuous circle” that continually went from earth to heaven and back. His prayer was concrete and effective. Whether it transformed interiorly or produced results exteriorly, Padre Pio was a man always “in the thick of it”. We continue the mission and ministry of prayer he entrusted to us, a ministry of prayer and surrender to God in and for the Church and the world. It is our privilege and honor to be so intimately associated with his memory and have been commissioned to become prophetic pray-ers. As was said of St. Francis of Assisi, we are called to ‘become prayer’ to the glory God and the salvation of souls. We speak of Padre Pio. We pray to Padre Pio. We call on the powerful intercession of Padre Pio in our needs. Let us be faithful followers of his example of prayer and service to others.

There is so much that many of the Groups and individual associates do to make the name of Padre Pio known and loved, but do we follow his example? Are we willing to take the step that enters the waters of uncertainty each day and trust in Divine Providence? Are we willing to forget ourselves for the sake of another and give some of our time, talents or even treasure to make someone in need realize that they are not alone? Like the priests in the Jordan River who not only got their feet wet so the waters would separate for Israel to pass through but also stayed in the river bed until everyone had passed over, are we willing to witness our faith and trust in God to encourage others to do the same, especially those whose faith may be shaky? Padre Pio stated he was willing to suffer even hell for the sake of God’s glory and the good of souls, are we willing to accept anything from God for the sake of His glory and the salvation of even one soul? Do we remember that part of the Spirit of the Association of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups is that of sharing in the suffering of Christ in a concrete way when and where necessary, or possible? Let’s remember these words of our Spiritual Father and Founder: *I will ask the Lord to let me remain at the Threshold of Paradise and I will not enter until the last of my spiritual children has entered.* He knew this was not a realistic option but a heartfelt willingness; nonetheless, to express the depth of his love and desire to give of himself entirely, without reserve, he offered this prayer. As Spiritual Children have we permitted such a spirit as his to take over and direct our lives? As we celebrate the Feast of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, our Padre Pio, this month (September 23), let us remember that *a true sign of veneration is imitation.*

May God bless you; may 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. Sariego, O.F.M. Cap.

National Coordinator

