

# Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

Please bear with me as I offer once again a letter that was written a number of years ago. Sometimes we must be reminded of basics that, if accepted, can make our lives more serene in the light of God's love and providence. November, the month of the Holy Souls in Purgatory, offers us the reflection on eternal life, and God's will that we be with Him forever. The difficult y most encounter in reflecting upon this is the way that leads to Life - Death! For the committed Christian who believes all Jesus told us, it should be a peaceful and encouraging daily reflection.

The Cemetery of the Parish of the Immaculate Conception on Via Veneto in the City of Rome is not the only one of its kind in Italy nor in the world. What makes the place rather "unique" is the display made of human bones and the number of full skeletal remains, still clothed, hanging for all to see. Thousands of people down the centuries have passed through this rather strange and macabre reminder of the vulnerability of human nature and the limited time allotted each one of us. What seemed to appeal (!) to the spirituality of a post-renaissance time, has now been, by national legislation, turned into a tourist attraction and curiosity site. At the time it was constructed, this site was considered an effective aid in longing for Eternal Life, in recognizing our call to holiness through personal conversion, and in acknowledging the transitoriness of human nature and worldly things. How times change! During my years in Rome I would go visit the "Church of the Bones", as many called it, just to say a prayer for those once vibrant human beings whose mortal remains were turned into a macabre "side show" for a world always eager to dabble in and play with the exotic, the strange, the weird, and sometimes even the evil.

Death is not an appealing thought for most people. Our materialistic and consumer-driven society conditions our view of this most solemn moment in life: the young discard the thought of death as non-existent in their life, the teenager questions it theoretically but sees it too distant to be relevant; the middle-ager runs away from its reality through "busy-ness"; the elderly nostalgically hold on to the past in the hope that they can prolong life's journey; and those who realize they stand before the reality of having to let go of this world often live in confused apprehension, fear, and even anger. It may not be this way for all, but I believe that a sufficient number of God's children fall into one of these categories. Why? Where am I?

The response lies in what we believe of the Article of Faith in the Apostles Creed regarding "Everlasting Life". We say that we believe in everlasting life, but we want to determine which life is going to be everlasting. What fools we can become when we allow the seductions of the world in which we live to make us their slaves rather than their masters! How foolish we are in trying to make eternally meaningful those things and aspects of this world that change, corrode and corrupt with time! Yet, how difficult it is for us to see beyond this world when our eyes are blinded by the everyday glitter of the creation that we have allowed to distract us from the eternal splendor of its and our Creator.

As strange as it may seem, even these attitudes are signs of our desire to know more about the reason and goal of life. Holding on to all we know is an expression of our yearning to live. The exhilaration and excitement that the young seek - isn't that a desire to fulfill a need to feel alive and be capable of anything?! The ladder-climbing of the corporate world and the go-get-it-ness of those in the middle years - isn't that a need to know one has achieved a successful level in life among and maybe even above his/her peers, thus being *necessary* for life to be meaningful to others as well as one's self?! The constant recounting of personal achievements or offering "solutions", even when not requested, by those in declining years - isn't this the hope of leaving a legacy that will keep one's name alive in the hearts of others long after that person no longer walks this earth?! The memorabilia we keep of loved ones, the monuments we erect in honor of people, and so much more - isn't this a way for us to try to keep alive today, now, those whom we recall and honor?!

It is rather easy to speak about life. People are usually interested in hearing what others have to say. But, when the thought of our passage from time to eternity is concerned, many would rather not be told or reminded. We are Christians! We believe that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life! We believe that Jesus redeemed us from the clutches of Satan and opened the way to the Father's embrace through His total self-emptying death on the Cross. November, the month we dedicate to the remembrance of the Holy Souls in Purgatory, urges us to reconsider this most solemn moment in life. November urges us to see beyond the veil of our physical barrier and with the eyes of faith to see the Life we have been created to share. An entire life - all experiences, successes, failures, and the like - converges at the moment of death into a power-packed point of one's total being. As the Paschal Mystery fulfills itself in the life of the person soon to enter eternity, the soul prepares for that moment, that instant, that "twinkling of eye" when it will explode with gratitude and joy into the loving embrace of the Eternal Father Who waits for one of His children to come home.

Saint Francis of Assisi was God's Troubadour, the *Herald of the Great King*, as he called himself. He sang of God's creation. He saw the majesty and beauty of God in all things and all people. Life was exhilarating and exciting for him. And, when he was informed of his terminal condition and the inevitability of his imminent death, he sang and added a stanza to the *Canticle of the Creatures*, that famous song he composed to praise God in all creation. He joyfully invited *Sister Bodily Death* to come to him. Francis detached himself from society's seductive enticements - whether persons, places, things, honors, and whatever. Though his eyes were physically blinded from his infirmities, his heart saw far beyond the world in which he lived. He saw, unobstructed by worldly debris, the splendor of an Eternal Home that awaited him. And he was overjoyed!

*Padre Pio was a clear and evident sign...of transcendence and of the supernatural....he was...an evident manifestation of God...His presence alone...was a sign...a stimulus to meditation and conversion; a stimulus to sanctity...he knew how to preach a message, undoubtedly with words, but firstly and primarily by his life...A message of love, and this message remains...And perhaps this message is more valid today than it was yesterday, because it is a message which has been liberated; it is a purified message. It is up to us to accept it; it is our job to put it into practice; it is our duty to bring it to others because we have all been called to pursue the same ideal and to conquer the same aims which were the ideals and goals of Padre Pio. The vocation to sanctity is not a privilege of the few. It is a calling for all. (Msgr. Nicodemo, Archbishop of Bari, see La Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, March 16-21, 1969)*

The call to holiness was for Padre Pio the Father's reminder that we do not have a permanent dwelling in this world. Our Universal call to holiness is a call to be, as the word "holy" in its basic meaning denotes, "to be other-worldly". So, to be *holy* means to live in the light of the *other world*. Doesn't this mean to live in expectation of that moment when we will finally enter the fullness of holiness - even if we must pass through a place of God's mercy that purifies us for heaven - Purgatory?

Padre Pio lived his entire life in light of this moment of encounter. It was not a dark or ominous thought for him; it helped him place all things in perspective - the perspective of heaven, the perspective of God. Padre Pio even predicted the moment of his own death a number of times to various people. When he received the visible Stigmata, Padre Pio heard the Lord tell him: *You will bear them for fifty years, and then you will see me*. Towards the end of his life, Padre Pio would encourage people to come soon or, he would say, *they will no longer find me*. On the occasion of an International Congress of the Prayer Groups, a celebration was planned for the fiftieth anniversary of Padre Pio's reception of the visible Stigmata. Because of the thousands of faithful present for the International Congress, the Capuchins of San Giovanni Rotondo decided to set the celebration for September 22 (Sunday), rather than September 20 (Friday), the anniversary date. He was able to celebrate the Solemn Mass he was "ordered" by his superiors to sing. When he finished the celebration, he was applauded and cheered by the numberless Spiritual Children present. Yet he knew this would be his last celebration on earth. He had already told the friars, *It's the end, it's the end*. And now, after climbing Calvary with Jesus in the Eucharist and becoming one with Him once again in mystery, he prepared to enter the light of the Resurrection and Life promised the *good and faithful servant* of God that he was. The friars who attended him say that he seemed to have an appointment, and that he was impatient for the time to come. He died with the names *Jesus...Mary* on his lips. It was Monday, September 23, 1968, 2:30 am.

We are Spiritual Children of Padre Pio. We are also human beings subject to all the fear, confusion, doubt, anger, apprehension, and all the other negative characteristics that are connected to facing an uncertain future. The future is uncertain for those who have no faith. For those who believe, life is accepted and celebrated every day as the gift that it is. We celebrate life with joy and gratitude, and we seek to be a support and encouragement to others as we strive to develop all the gifts and talents the Lord has entrusted to us. As we do this to fulfill our part to *restore all things in Christ*, we long for that day when the Father calls us to His loving embrace. As a great pontiff once said we *do not place limits on Divine Providence*, but we do not fear the return home of a loving child to its Loving Eternal Father.

That Cemetery on Via Veneto is rather macabre, and it may have served its purpose. But, with the spirit of Padre Pio, whose life and words we seek as a guide and encouragement, let us live out our years with Jesus and Mary in our

hearts and on our lips, and look to the heavens each day to remember the heights to which we are called. Let us also remember those who were where we are, and who are where we hope, in God's mercy and providence, one day to be - the Holy Souls in Purgatory: *Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace.*

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 Co-ordinator