

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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March 2014

Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

At the beginning of our Lenten journey Scripture tells us: *At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil* (Matthew 4: 1-11). Jesus responded to each of Satan's challenges with the following powerful reminders: *Not on bread alone shall people live... You shall do homage to the Lord your God; Him alone shall you serve ...* (Matthew 4: 1-11).

Several years ago, a Bishop in the USA wrote to his priests, in particular his pastors. In his pastoral letter, the Bishop offered them some statistics for consideration. Several years have past since the letter was circulated in the diocese. The statistics have undoubtedly changed, but the information is rather revealing. The information that was shared with the pastors is the following:

Americans spend \$17 billion a year on pet food - \$4 billion more than the estimated annual additional total needed to provide basic health and nutrition for everyone in the world.

Europeans spend \$11 billion a year on ice cream - \$2 billion more than the estimated annual total needed to provide clean water and safe sewers for the world's population.

Americans spend \$8 billion a year on cosmetics (a good portion of that spent by men) - \$2 billion more than the estimated annual total needed to provide basic education for everyone in the world.

We are a nation and people blessed by God. Our nation has been the destination of millions 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 country have been severely affected because some 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 - our belief, trust, dependence on God - it is understandable why our wants can turn into our needs, and our hearts can become indifferent to the sisters and brothers around us.

While we personally 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 who give God the first place in our hearts and lives. We were created by God for God, and, as St. Augustine says: *Our hearts will not rest until they rest in You*. This "rest" in which we hope, can be achieved only by listening to God's Word, following God's will, and thus becoming "perfect", that is, fulfilling the purpose for our creation. The purpose? ... to know, love, and serve God in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next! Remember the Catechism?! It is still a valid truth.

Lent is a time for us to re-evaluate and renew the gift of life we have received. We are asked to reflect on our relationship with God, ourselves, and each other - even the stranger in our midst who is our sister and brother in God. We can never accomplish this if our lives are rooted in the idolatry of senseless materialism that enslaves us spiritually. Lent is a time for us to rise from our spiritual lethargy. We must honestly review our lives in the light of God's word and our Christian calling. Lent urges us to open our hearts to God's transforming grace through an active acceptance of the challenges His word and the Church offer. God's Word, read and meditated, makes us consciously and actively aware of and responsive to all that surrounds us. We become keenly sensitive to the lives that may be burdened in any way (spiritually or materially) as a consequence of our own participation in exaggerated materialism, narcissistic hedonism, choices and decisions indifferent to the needs of others, and so much more.

The flesh, the world, and satan all have their role in influencing our lives. Power, pleasure, prestige, possessions, are all among the 'treasures' many seek in life. The first group encourages us to seek the second, and then some. It is so easy to succumb. Like the melting snow when the weather gets warmer by one or two degrees, we rarely realize where we are heading until we are at the threshold. It is then that the return is so labored and difficult. Jesus' response to Satan's seductions is a powerful reminder of what is essential for a fruitful response to all these 'seductions', 'attractions', 'allurements' ... temptations! The journey of Lent offers us an intense opportunity to strengthen what is good and change what is weak, and to eliminate what is detrimental to my spiritual growth and relationship with God.

During Lent we say extra prayers, drop extra money into the Sunday collection, or maybe ‘give up’ (sacrifice?) something we are in the habit of doing. These are all commendable and good opportunities we offer ourselves. But... how often are the extra prayers just words we say rather than heartfelt expressions we offer God and reflect on to strengthen our relationship with the Eternal One? 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 anyway if we are able 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 so on) 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 ... to learn to control what we allow to control us?

In Lent we strengthen our relationship with God through a deeper spirit of prayer, assistance at Eucharist more often, worthy reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, curbing unnecessary activities so that we may have more time to do some spiritual reading, and much more that you already know. Our prayerful attitude must go beyond mere words we multiply or ‘things’ we do that are ‘holy’. In Lent we have the opportunity to work at ridding ourselves of whatever controls our lives and conditions the choices we make that 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 to realize that we are our sisters’ and brothers’ keepers. We are called to be actively concerned about those around us. Lent can be nothing more than an external show of traditional prayers or practices, unless we have the correct spirit underlying each one. Unless we allow them to work a transformation in our life, they can be an easy cop out for not doing what really matters, and that can truly transform the inner person.

The spirit of renewal pervades the season of Lent. We are on a journey to the celebration of New Life ... after Death. Unless and until we learn ‘to die to ourselves’ we can never hope to experience the spiritual effects of the ‘springtime of the spirit’ that Lent is meant to be. Many opportunities are being offered us in our Churches and elsewhere 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 Apostles of the Resurrection. We believe in life as the beginning of an eternal journey with God who calls us to live in the fullness of His Life.

The practices of the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio and those who have accepted the ministry of prayer and service as members of the Prayer Groups offer us opportunities to enrich us as we develop a deeper relationship with God through the Eucharist, His Holy Mother Mary, and each other. It was the Mass of Padre Pio that allowed those who participated in it to enter the mystery of God’s tremendous love and transforming grace. Padre Pio would be so absorbed in the mystery he celebrated that those who prayed with him seemed suspended in time; hours seemed like minutes. The re-presentation of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus the Christ, imaged in the person of Padre Pio as he stood at the altar where he was not only priest but victim, made his Mass an experience that indelibly impressed its image in every heart present. It is this participation in the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus we seek to deepen during this holy season, both in the Eucharist as well as in our daily lives.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio we should understand the Lenten time as a season of pending joy for all who enter the journey to Calvary and the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. We are able to meet the challenges of greater prayer, fasting, and charity, when we acknowledge Lent as the “springtime” of our Faith each year. It is a time for us to seek and discover the diversity and originality of our particular journey to God, through Jesus, in the Holy Spirit. It is not a time solely dedicated to austere religious practices, but of the wonderful transforming effects it can have in our lives, that make us new!

Lent is a ‘time’ offered us to consider its various opportunities to grow. We are offered an intense time to overcome the spiritual and material barriers we create in our lives that hinder our advance in the spirit. We must make good use of this “time” allotted. Briefly considered, we can say:

Lent is a time of Truth (to teach): *Forgive us, Lord, for we have sinned.* These words ring out in various ways during the holy season. We repeat them with humility when we consider the depth of our words. Humility is Truth. We discover our real selves only when we see ourselves in the brightness of the Lord’s presence. Only in Him, confronting ourselves with Him, good, great, merciful, are we able to recognize who we truly are. We see ourselves to be often impatient, crude, foolish, self-centered, unappreciative, unloving, and so forth. There is no need to enumerate “all” we can see; it could be devastating. Nevertheless, Lent is a time to examine our soul, to discover and acknowledge the truth about ourselves, and to accept that truth in humility, and trust in God’s mercy.

Lent is a time of Penance, through Fast and Abstinence (to strengthen): Though we should always have a joyful penitential spirit about Lent, by its very nature and goal, it is a time for “penance”. When we speak about penance, the common understanding is that we are supposed to “give up” something. Even the Church asks us to do this when we are reminded to fast and abstain on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstain on all Fridays of Lent. Since these are only “several officially designated days” out of forty, the weight of fast and abstinence is greatly lightened during Lent from how it had been, and, with all the necessary exceptions for age, health, and so on, there is practically no real burden by law. However, we are reminded that sacrificial practices are still expected during the Lenten Season, and even on Fridays of the year. As we

recognize our faults and sins in truth, we see where we have allowed ourselves to be controlled, even by legitimate things, and thus we practice acts of denial, or extra periods of prayer, whatever is necessary to help ourselves, with God's grace, to overcome the faults and sins we have come to know.

Lent is a time of Temptation (to awaken): Every good intention in the spiritual journey will always encounter some challenge or impediment on the way, especially if we are making progress. It can be our own self-assurance or pride that thinks we are mastering the situation and so we might let down our guard. Or, it can be the seduction of the evil one who attempts to deviate us from the straight path we have chosen. Be aware of the temptation!...of any temptation, no matter how insignificant it seems! But, remember the words of Padre Pio: *Be comforted ... All souls who love Jesus must be tried by the fires of temptations ... Go forward constantly ... Jesus is fighting for you and with you* (P.Pio to A.Rodote, August 6, 1915).

Lent is a time of Discernment (to decide): Lent offers us the opportunity to reflect upon our lives. Through the various lenten activities we are assisted in re-establishing our spiritual life, or strengthening it. We are encouraged to reconsider our lives and to make definite strides in our encounters with good and evil. Lent is a time for us, aided by God's grace, our deep desire, and the three elements mentioned before, to renew and reinvigorate our capacity to judge and discern decisively good from evil.

Lent is a time of Choices (to begin anew): This last word is easy to comprehend, but often very difficult to do. When we have been controlled by the spiritual demons we allowed to enter our lives, it is not always a simple matter. Our love for God and above all God's love for us is the decisive factor. Having begun the journey, we know that choices must be made. Since most things are not just good or evil, we have to make use of our discernment to understand what is necessary and not, what is helpful or can lead me astray, and so on. Then, with trust in grace and God's love for me, I decide to do all I can and must to become the new person in Christ. I take the step beyond the line of comfort, convenience, compromise and say "YES!" to the Spirit calling to holiness.

As we make our Lenten journey in this month dedicated to the Great Patriarch Saint Joseph, let us keep in mind the words Pope Paul VI spoke to all the Youth at the beginning of Lent 1974: *Blessed are those who have understood the Christian life not as one way of life among many possible styles, or as a theory one can take or leave at will, or as a simple speculation that can have beautiful cultural, artistic, or spiritual benefits but that asks for no commitments ... Blessed are you who have understood that the authenticity of the Christian life requires great courage. We cannot be Christians without courage and strength. Ours is not a soft Christianity ... Christianity is strong, demanding of self, must be lived fully, with a possibility for heroism if need be, without placing conditions or limitations on God's call* (Pope Paul VI to Youth at Lent 1974).

Whether we are among the youth or among the "chronologically enhanced", as Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, the words of Pope Paul VI should encourage us on our Lenten journey. The authenticity of our Christianity, Catholicism, and even our commitment to the spiritual objectives Padre Pio envisioned when he established the Prayer Groups, depend greatly on how we take those simple words of Pope Paul VI to heart. Commitment to the truth, trust in God's love and providence regardless of how I see myself at the moment, and totality of surrender to the Lord and His Will, can make this Lent a "heavenly experience", even though we might feel the "warmth of the fires" of hell behind us. This season of Lent, springtime of the Church Year, let us open our hearts and minds to the Spirit and God's transforming grace. We live in times that demand authentic Christians who Live Jesus so that through us He may help bring our frenetic world to accept God once more as the origin and goal of all life. Even Our Heavenly Mother has been relentless in our age for well over a century with her words and warnings, and we seem never to listen or learn. May our Lenten journey open our hearts and lives to the sound of the Voice of the Word. May the desert of violence, war, unrest, spiritual indifference, and so much more we are experiencing in our world blossom into new Life and Love in Peace.

May our Lent continue as the Season of Joy it is intended to be. As we bask in the shadow of the Son's Cross, may the light it casts make clear our path to the Father's loving embrace. And, may the Lord bless you; Our Lady guide, guard and protect you; and may Padre Pio look over each one of you, his spiritual children, with loving care. Happy and Holy Lent everyone!

Peace and Blessings
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National Coordinator