

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

It seems that the better we are within ourselves, the better we are able to deal with what surrounds us. We may not be able to change the situations (physical, moral, spiritual...) that afflict us, but when we are at peace within our hearts and souls, the forces around us cannot overcome us. There is an essential relationship between our minds and souls, and our bodies. Today, and in the recent past, we hear a great deal of the effectiveness for a better life through the practices of yoga, transcendental meditation, oriental aerobic practices, and so on. The search for inner peace, calm, and serenity do not require us to go beyond the treasure of the patrimony of our Faith. We have all been offered effective means to genuinely know and acknowledge ourselves, acquire true peace, and be transformed. Jesus, the Church, the Church's holy men and women down through the centuries have all indicated the way, method, and results that are far more effective and everlasting than the exotic expressions and systems that so many attach themselves to today. There are deeper, more effective, and lasting results when we enter a Spirit-centered experience in Jesus, Who leads us to the Father. *We live and move and have our being* (Acts 17: 28) in God alone. All we are comes from and must be directed to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. We are destined to fail, even if we gain the whole world, when we deviate from this process. Fulfillment is not a feeling but a way of being. Only God and goodness in grace can lead us to this state of perfection.

If the secular practices I mentioned above are intended to "transform" the person, how much more can we truly be changed by the power of God's grace working within those who trustingly and lovingly surrender themselves to the Eternal Source of Life and Love - God! What often obstructs the way is our inability to believe that God can love us beyond our frail and sinful habits. God's sentence over us is His mercy, and God's vengeance is His love. We have heard the saying "When God forgives, God forgets". Our stumbling block to this marvelous reality is that we frequently willingly wallow in our weaknesses, even those forgiven sacramentally. We allow discouragement to enter our souls and to cloud our vision of God's presence that forever welcomes us into His loving embrace. God holds us tightly in His Love. We are the ones who wriggle ourselves out of that eternal grip and lose our way again and again. But God is faithful. The letter to the Hebrews states, *He is the same yesterday, today and always* (Hebrews 13: 8) . God is forever God. We are the ones who are fickle. In this Lenten Season, what are we doing to make this time spiritually fruitful, and our lives once again at one with our Loving God?

The words "at one with God", express the effects of the saving act of Jesus' at-one-ment (atonement) with God. The atonement made for us is one that we must continue in our personal lives, until the end of time, making up in our bodies what is lacking in the passion of Christ. Christ's Passion-Death-Resurrection redeemed all humanity. It is up to each one of us to cooperate with that one great act of love. Live Jesus! This should be our motto and program. To Live Jesus means never to deplete or lose the grace He acquired for us.

All of this necessitates trust and sincerity: we must trust in God's love, mercy and providence; we must be sincere with God and ourselves about all that refers to us and our relationship with God, our sisters and brothers, and ourselves. This entails a deep awareness of the state of our souls, an acknowledgment of personal responsibility for all our faults and sins, a sorrow for anything that keeps us away from a grace-filled life, an accountability for our transgressions of God's love, a desire to be forgiven, and an active commitment to do all, with the help of God, to avoid what leads us into sin.

Nowadays, this procedure may seem difficult because we are affected by a world that has lost the sense of sin. Everything has become relative. Sin is no longer considered a personal disposition and act against the love of God. Sin is now explained as a dysfunction of the psyche, not necessarily the soul. Sin is explained as the result of a psychological imbalance, an uncontrollable habit, a social-religious-economic-and whatever else conditioning, and so on. While these explanations may be a true diagnosis in some circumstances, we still must admit that most times it is plainly and simply SIN. We camouflage the word by calling it "fault", "weakness", "attitude", any 'nice' non offensive word, so that we do not have to accept the brunt of the reality nor our own responsibility and accountability for it. But, sin is sin, as sin is sin!

To cure an illness one has to know and believe he/she is ill, otherwise no help is sought nor is anything done to recover and get better. Unfortunately, all too often, people either become scrupulous with their lives and see sin everywhere, or they become indifferent and accustomed to questionable or sinful practices and justify everything to their benefit. Both attitudes are blasphemous: one makes God a tyrant ready to condemn even the most natural of acts created by God Himself; the other makes God a fool who can be manipulated anytime for any convenient reason!

The Lenten Season offers us opportunities to grow in prayer and reflection, to be of service to one another, and to work at ridding ourselves of what keeps us from growing in grace. There is a practice we Catholics were accustomed to accomplish regularly. Padre Pio administered this practice his whole life and encouraged his Spiritual Children to be committed and faithful to it their entire lives - the **Sacrament of Reconciliation**. We are encouraged and are expected to clarify our vision, set our sites, and strengthen our souls for the Lenten journey of **Repentance, Renewal, and Reconciliation**. A successful accomplishment of this three-step program requires a daily examination of conscience - preferably before retiring at night, and possibly briefly in the course of the day - regarding our faithfulness to all we profess as Catholic Christians, and a regularity in the personal celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, through **Confession and Penance**. The examination of conscience helps us to recognize where and why we are spiritually ill; confession reveals our infirmities to the physician of our soul who is the priest acting in "Persona Christi" (the Person of Christ); penance is the remedy offered to help us to recover; and RECONCILIATION is the effect the whole process has on us and our relationship with God. Each day that God gives us offers us the possibility to strengthen our souls, to re-direct our lives, and to be made whole. Though everyday is an opportunity to grow in grace, in Lent we are lead to a more intense spiritual experience of growth and healing through our immersion into the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus, in Whose wounds and through Whose death we are healed and brought to a wholeness of life. As we journey with our fellow Christians through this holy season, we are encouraged and supported by one another to enter the mystery of the Cross and to die to ourselves. It can be a painful process. No pain, no gain! We have to risk being honest with ourselves so that we can be honest with God. Honesty leads to transparency of soul that ultimately permits God's grace to envelop our lives and transform us.

Moreover, what about those hidden situations and circumstances that control people, often conditioning them to choose the road of least resistance that leads to brokenness and sin? How many people - maybe in our own families, or we ourselves - are there who suffer from hidden weights that overburden them: abuse issues; dependencies such as drugs, alcohol, sex; phobias and manias, just to mention a few? They are hidden to all but to the people who bear them. These persons either allow themselves to be controlled by them, or, more often than not, have no control over them, and often seek no help out of embarrassment or shame. And to conceal their pain, they create facades to mask their true selves. These spiritual and moral marks in a personality and character are reminders of the vulnerability and mortality of human nature. These hidden stigmas cause pain to the one who is overcome by the inability to control what is controlling him/her. They are spiritual victims who cry out for strength, courage and trust to overcome what is overwhelming them. The answer to their plea is found through trust and prayer, and the assistance of qualified persons of faith - both religious and medical. These moments can be converted into occasions of growth in virtue and grace, as they are spiritually strengthened "as are we - for their daily battles with the world, the flesh, and Satan. **No fear when God is near! In Him we are victors!**

Padre Pio dealt with the sins of humanity all his life. His personal field of ministry was the Altar and the Confessional - a virtuous circle of grace. He celebrated the Eucharistic Sacrifice and, in Jesus, became the Victim for the people. He dispensed the fruits of the Sacrifice - God's forgiveness and grace - to all who came to him. Those who opened their hearts to God through him would leave transformed into new persons. Bearing the Stigmata of the Crucified Savior, Padre Pio manifested the reality of sin and accepted the effects of sin in his own body for the sake of others. How many times did he assume the pains meted out to others - spiritually as well as physically - to help his penitents recover and grow! Those who may have feared the embarrassment of their sins and/or the directness of Padre Pio, realized that what they feared had now become a joy and liberating experience when they entered his presence with humility, sincerity and love. How could anyone - unless they were attempting to make light of the Sacrament, and Padre Pio knew who they were - not be transformed by that experience of grace! The Confessional and Sacrament were transformed into a grace-filled courtroom where the guilty were absolved and released, totally free to resume with dignity their place among the children of God and Padre Pio's Spiritual Children. Every sincere celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation introduces us to the Tribunal of Mercy, where the penitent offers the deposition of his/her own miseries and crimes, hears the direct judgment of a compassionate brother, and receives the liberating Sentence of Divine Love.

It baffles the soul why so many Catholics keep away from this wonderful Sacrament, or just "go to it" rarely. Do we, as Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, understand the awesomeness of this Sacrament and appreciate the fact that we can celebrate this act of God's love so frequently? Yes, just like the Loving Father and Prodigal Son, we "celebrate" our return home. It is always a "joyful happening" when we are embraced by the Father and reinstated with dignity (robe), freedom (sandals), and authority (ring) into the Father's Family. This is what every Sacrament of Reconciliation, worthily celebrated, does (cfr. Luke 15: 11-32).

This Lent, let us make every effort to rid ourselves of all that hinders our advancement on our journey to holiness. We

must not let our temptations and even our sins discourage us. Here is what Padre Pio had to say to Erminia Gargani in his letter of July 17, 1912: *Valiantly fight temptations with strong souls, and fight along with the Supreme Chief. When you fall, do not stay there prostrated in body and spirit. Humble yourself greatly, but without being discouraged. Lower yourself without degrading yourself. Wash your imperfections and falls with sincere tears of contrition, without lacking trust in divine Goodness, which will always be greater than your ingratitude. Propose to make amends without being presumptuous, but your strength must be in God alone. Finally, confess sincerely that if God were not your breast-plate and shield, you would be imprudently pierced with every kind of sin. And it is for this reason that you must always keep yourself in the grace of God with perseverance in carrying out your spiritual exercises, and let this be your principal concern...always have courage...run to the foot of the cross...and you will undoubtedly be comforted and invigorated.* It sounds like a perfect, attainable, and effective Lenten program. Let us listen to our Spiritual Father and guide who encourages us to trust in Divine Mercy that redeems us as It washes us from our sins and failings in the Blood of Christ.

May God bless you; Our Heavenly Mother guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio, look on each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. And may the Great Patriarch St. Joseph accompany us on our lenten journey during the month dedicated to him. In all we do this lenten season, let us strive ever more intensely and lovingly to approach Jesus in Whose Passion-Death-Resurrection our life is worth living at every moment and through every experience.

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

Attn: Please see **From the Desk of the Coordinator** link for the letter concerning **‘Spiritual Child’ and Prayer Group Requisites**. It is a reminder and response to questions I have received recently.