

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you his peace!

We enter the heart of summer in the month of August. Spiritually, we are reminded of the Assumption of Our Blessed Mother, body and soul, into heaven - a celebration we Catholics solemnize by participating in the Eucharist. Socially, this is a month when many cram in the last few available weeks or days of summer vacation before getting back to the humdrum of daily life after Labor Day. Isn't it interesting how we regulate our anticipation and joy by the calculation of days and weeks during the summer vacation period? This is a time when many forget that the whole person in the body and the soul - created by our Heavenly Father, redeemed by the Incarnate Son, sanctified by the Holy Spirit - is called to share one day in the fullness of redemption, just as our Heavenly Mother shared in it ahead of time in view of Her Divine Maternity and Co-redeeming presence at the foot of the Savior's Cross.

The body has become for so many solely an object of pleasure. Not just during the summer months, but all year round, we see on TV or at the Cinemas, we hear on the Radio, we have at our availability material - DVD, CD, periodicals - an immense amount of material presented to us that misrepresents and often degrades the human body rendering it an object of hedonistic pleasure rather than offering it the respect it deserves as the Temple of God's Presence, the physical means for the Creator to become intimately one with His creature. We lose sight of the fact that the body and soul can not be separated in this life without destroying the person's ability to continue on life's journey with all the spiritual and material help that God affords us.

Aware of this and with the help of many friends, Padre Pio fulfilled a dream he had always held in his heart. He called his dream the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza - House for the Relief of Suffering. He wanted the Casa to be founded on love lived by all who were part of its life, residents as well as staff. On the first anniversary of the Casa, in May of 1957, Padre Pio delineated its character by saying: *This work, if it were only to relieve physical suffering, would only be a model clinic, realized through the extraordinary and generous means of your charity. But it is to be an effective reminder of God's love through the charity of others...and a place where those who suffer live in the love of God through a wise acceptance of their suffering and a serene meditation on their destiny in Him.*

This dream was also an awareness that went beyond human physical pain, which he personally understood so well. He realized that when the soul is ill, the body suffers as well, and often, because of the spiritual infirmity, the body cannot heal. A faithful son of our Seraphic Father, Padre Pio most assuredly had before his eyes the example of Saint Francis of Assisi who saw bodily infirmities as gifts that God offers for the health of the soul. Chapter 25 of the Little Flowers of Saint Francis relates how souls would return to God when the loving care of St. Francis would cleanse the sores of the lepers; their innermost being - the souls - of the lepers were touched, their bodies were healed, they sought forgiveness for any wrongdoing because of the kindness and selflessness they had received, and so not only their bodies but their souls as well were healed completely. Our modern world has "rediscovered the wheel" in the holistic medicine it has been proposing these past several decades. God's Word spoke about healing the whole person - body and soul - 2000 years ago, and we are still fumbling around trying to achieve that God-given gift of spiritual and physical wholeness.

Pope Pius XII, in a telegram celebrating its inauguration, said that the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza took into consideration the whole human person, body and soul, because bodily pain pervades the entire person, and reaches the remotest areas of the person's moral being. The Holy Father invited the health care givers to be, as Padre Pio envisioned, God's auxiliaries, concerned in preparing a way for the intervention of grace in the life of the sick and infirm.

In a telegram sent to the Minister General of the Capuchin Order in the 1950's, professor Paul White wrote these words regarding Padre Pio and the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza: *This clinic, more than all the others in the world, seems most*

indicated for the study of the relationship there is between the spirit and sickness; here, more than any other place, the study of mind (and I would prefer the expression 'heart and soul') over matter can make great progress.

Padre Pio had a practical approach to a real problem for San Giovanni Rotondo at the time. San Giovanni Rotondo was a remote town, with little and poor health care facilities. He realized that faith without works is just nice talk but with no substance. When we speak about "salvation", we must remember that the whole person must be saved. Each one of us is entirely God's creation, not just a part of us.

Although this letter seems to center on the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, I believe that we can bring the example it offers through Padre Pio's words to any facet of our life. The spiritual realm we like to be absorbed in through our Mass, Rosary and pious discussions are not the end of the journey but the beginning of a road that indicates the direction we should follow. Prayer allows us to enter into an awareness of God's presence so that we can see more clearly where God is directing us in our life. God's Spirit directs us towards those areas of family life, religious life, professional life, manual labor, intellectual endeavors, relaxation, recreation, and so on. We are called to see the body as the soul's intimate companion that offers us opportunities to tangibly experience God in thought, word and deed. When we treat our bodies with respect and love, we begin to notice how things change within us and we begin to see the people, places and things around us in a totally renewed and positive way.

As our Padre Pio Prayer Groups and all Catholics in this month of August honor Mary in her Assumption, we praise and thank God for raising Mary to share beforehand in the gifts of the Resurrection of her Son. Her Assumption is a reminder of the promise God made to all His children in Jesus through the Spirit. As members of the Prayer Groups, we are called to hear that Spirit and live in the Word that challenges us to grow.

Some thoughts to consider might be the following: Do we care properly both physically and spiritually for our bodies as the Temples they are of the Holy Spirit? Do we have a healthy respect for ourselves and who we are and what we are about? Do we respectfully treat one another as members of the one family of God's children, who gather to honor the example and spirit of Padre Pio? Do we regulate our time in such a way that our pious practices do not take us from our God-given family, social, religious, and the like, responsibilities? Do we realize that everything has its place in God's plan? Do we see the world as the theater of salvation? Do we realize that the world, as bad as things can seem, is not evil in itself, because it was created by God, but that the evil we see is the effect of how human beings misuse and abuse the wonderful gift with which they have been entrusted? I have posed these questions because I have noticed that often spiritual zeal can condition people to act in ways that are not in keeping with sound judgment.

Our Holy Father Pope Francis has much to say about these matters in his Encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, On Care for Our Common Home. If you read the encyclical, read it without political prejudice. His words are the words of a Father, a Shepherd, a Religious Leader concerned for the welfare of his family, flock, and Church. Our Rule has always stated, in whichever of the Franciscan Rules we profess, to always be subject to the Holy Father of the Roman Church and his legitimately elected successors. Undoubtedly there will always be some who have opinions; that is good. But, we have an obligation to not only hear the words and look at the situations presented, but also, to listen to the message and see with our bodily eyes and the eyes of our hearts what is being proposed. The integrity of creation and the integrity of creatures' response to what their Creator has entrusted to them is an essential response to God's love and an acceptance of our responsibility and accountability for all creation - world in general, relationships among nations and peoples, and even our own person worlds (our bodies created in the image and likeness of God, endowed with God's love, life, and the awesome gift of free will).

In this month that celebrates the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us remember what this wonderful privilege tells us, among other things. We are all called to share in the gift of the Resurrection of Jesus. Our whole person - body and soul - is destined for eternity. Mary's acceptance of the Father's Will made Her the First Disciple and the Mother of the Christ and thus Mother of the Christian. Her acceptance of the Father's challenge to be Mother of the Messiah introduced Her to all the other privileges we celebrate in Mary and, ultimately, Her Resurrection, ahead of time, as Queen of Heaven and all Creation. The *Word was made Flesh* in Her and through Her. The Eucharist is made 'Flesh' through the words of the priest, as well as in each one who receives Him. In Mary's Assumption let us remember the dignity and glory to which we, Her children, are called. Let the Eucharist be our pledge of future glory, as it was for our Father and Founder Padre Pio. Thus the Mass we celebrate and offer with the priest will be a sun that irradiates blessings and joys on us and on all whom we encounter. It will become for us, as one of our Capuchin Saints, Saint Lawrence of Brindisi, said of it: *The Mass is my heaven on earth*. Oh, that it could be so for us! Oh, that our bodies could become more deeply, as was the body of our Blessed Mother, Tabernacles that "house" the Lord when we receive Him in Holy Communion, and Monstrances that manifest Him to all whom we encounter when the goodness and holiness of Jesus irradiate in our lives to all whom we encounter! Our bodies and lives are the privileged vehicles that Jesus has chosen to touch the lives of others as we allow them, with God's help and in His Will, to achieve the "perfection" to which we are called.

With every best wish for you for the remainder of the summer, I ask a remembrance in your prayers that I may fulfill my

ministry among you as God wills. May God bless you, Our Lady protect you, and Padre Pio watch over all of you, his Spiritual Children with loving care.

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