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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

There are significant events that wield powerful effects in the life of each one of us. It is no different for Padre Pio. He too experienced beautiful, sad, awesome, funny, mystical, and totally transforming incidents in his life. These were moments he would always remember until the day he entered eternal life.

There are three very momentous occasions connected with the month of September and Padre Pio. Two of them we know quite well. One of them, however, may not be so widely known, or at least remembered. These are the dates: September 20, 1918; September (?), 1968; and September 23, 1968.

The Spiritual Children of Padre Pio all remember with humble recognition and gratitude to God that September 20, 1918 was the day on which the Stigmata of the Crucified Savior were visibly impressed on the body of Padre Pio. For several years Padre Pio had already been experiencing strange feelings and seeing inexplicable signs on his hands, feet and side. He was even embarrassed to speak of them, as he himself says to Padre Agostino in a letter dated August 26, 1912: Yesterday evening something happened to me...In the center of the palms of my hands a red patch appeared, about the size of a cent and accompanied by acute pain...I also feel some pain in the soles of my feet...This phenomenon has been repeated several times for almost a year now...I was overcome by abominable shame...when I am close to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament my heart throbs so violently that it seems at times it must burst out of my chest. The words indicate that Padre Pio was being prepared for what, several years later, he would have to bear visibly for fifty years. The experience of the marks, then the invisible wounds with the continued pain, and correspondence concerning these phenomena would continue until 1918.

It was on September 20, 1918, that Padre Pio, while praying in the choir area of the friary, received the visible signs of the Passion of Jesus. This time they were not just blotches, or unnoticeable yet painful reminders of the Passion. Now they were the open wounds of the hands, feet and side that would brand Padre Pio of Pietrelcina for the rest of his life as the living image of the Crucified Jesus. To him, these marks, a sign of privilege and responsibility with an awesome accountability attached, were a constant source of embarrassment, because of the notoriety that came with them. At times, he must have felt like a side show at a circus, though he knew that God had a purpose. Nothing happens by chance! Nor could he ever even think that a gift so awesome should be so personal and not meant for the world.

Padre Pio's ministry with his Capuchin brothers and among the people began many years before, but now it took a turn from which there was no turning back, without offending the Giver of the Gift Himself. The Gift was Padre Pio's call to be a victim with Jesus as a living expression of the Eucharist he celebrated. The Gift of the Stigmata was a call to become an image of the Victim of Calvary for the world to be reminded of the depths of the Giver's Love. The Gift of the brokenness of one body - that of Padre Pio and the constant pain and bleeding - was the sign of the Giver's desire to heal the wounds of those who would look upon the man of sorrows, as Padre Pio had become; the image of the Man of Sorrows, yes, while never losing his affability with all. It was a reminder of Israel's journey in the desert; how the children of Israel were made to look upon the bronze serpent in order to be healed from the serpents' venom. How many souls saw the wounded friar and had their hearts healed of confusion, doubt, skepticism, indifference...sin! How many were reconciled to God!

Yes, September 20, 1918, was very significant. Padre Pio himself would tell a friend that they both would be around for a long time. In fact, he told his friend that he would have to bear the wounds and all that entailed -the faith, fame and often fanaticism of the hordes of people over the years - for fifty years. He knew well that a new chapter had begun in his life that would make the little hilltop town a destination for millions, and a poor friar a spectacle to the world!

September 23, 1968 is also a date we are all familiar with. On this day, early in the morning, saying the names Jesus,

Mary, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina ended his earthly journey. He bore his cross and he was nailed to his cross. From his daily bearing of the signs of the Passion-Death of the Savior, Padre Pio preached, as did Jesus our Savior two thousand years before from the pulpit of His Cross, the love of a God Who knows no limits in making Himself known. Our God is a God Who performs miracles for our eyes that we might enter the mystery of His Love with our heart. Our God calls women and men like Padre Pio, whose hearts are totally surrendered to His Will, to become living prophetic reflections for others to see the magnificence of an awesome and loving God.

Thousands were present on the day Padre Pio died and thousands were present at Padre Pio's funeral. We all have probably read at least one biography of Padre Pio, so there is no need to go into detail about those days. Many of his Spiritual Children were present in San Giovanni Rotondo to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Padre Pio's receiving the Stigmata. His death was a triumph! He knew how to call his own! They were there to encourage him in his illness and they were there to accompany him to his rest. Rest? As he said, he would do a lot more after his death than during his life. How true that is! How many speak of special graces, that border on the miracle! God is so generous with His gifts. If only we would open our eyes and hearts to recognize them!

But what about the date I put as September (?), 1968? That date, most knew nothing about until well after the funeral. As Padre Pio's life ebbed away, so did the Stigmata begin to cease being as bloody and as visible. Almost as though Jesus were offering Padre Pio a little relief from fifty years of faithful service in carrying the burden of his unique cross. By the time Padre Pio rendered his soul to God, the Stigmata were completely gone with no marks or scars indicating there had been any wound at all on the hands, feet or side. His martyrdom was complete. He had consummated to the ultimate the vocation he was called to be: Jesus Crucified for the world to see. Only the Christ bears the signs of our salvation before the Father. Others would bear the signs for life's journey emulating and/or imitating the Lord. Only Jesus brings the trophy of the one and only act of Redemption with Him before the Father. Only Jesus is the source and sign of our salvation. All others, even Padre Pio, are willing but nonetheless human instruments of that Tremendous Lover. Jesus, this Tremendous Lover, speaks in so many emphatic and clear ways. He speaks through his faithful disciples, who continue to listen, learn and live His message of peace and goodness. He calls and sends His faithful apostles to preach his message, as they become and empower others to become the message that He spoke so powerfully from the pulpit of the Cross.

The disappearance of the Stigmata before the death of Padre Pio, I believe, was a preparation for him, announcing that his long, arduous, fruitful ministry was coming to an end. It was also, once others were informed, a reminder that the greatness of the person lies in who the person is and how his/her life touched others, and not what extraordinary sign they may have possessed for all to see. It was also a sign of the humility of our human nature; this nature, before the greatness of the majesty of God, can do nothing but let go of anything that may have singled it out from among its own. Humility is recognizing the smallness of our greatness when we stand before the greatness of the source of all that is. Even Padre Pio, whose fame knew no boundaries for so many years, when Sister Death came to call him home, looked like just one of the friars. The people knew different; but his body reminded us all that we must seek beyond the miracle of the moment and strive to enter the mystery of the eternal.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, the month of September is very meaningful. Celebrate his Stigmata with gratitude to God for having given to the world for so long a time an image that was a constant reminder of God's love for humanity and our need to come to the Cross of our salvation. Celebrate his birth into eternal life with joy and thanksgiving, because our Spiritual Father and Founder intercedes for us as he promised. Celebrate the disappearance of his Stigmata on any day between the two (September 20 - 23), as you reflect deeply and personally on the importance of who you are before God and how God has called you to live His Will, rather than seeking after passing attractions for the world to see; these attractions and applause mean nothing unless we can lose them all in God. Even the greatest of all spiritual gifts means nothing, St. Paul tells us, unless in our hearts there is love - a disinterested love that lives for God and does not seek its own publicity.

There is so much Padre Pio tells us this month from silent lips. He preaches a powerful sermon from the quiet of his resting place on earth in the Basilica of Our Lady of Grace, and he speaks to our hearts from his place with God. Whether we bear visible signs of our vulnerability in our bodies, or invisible wounds in our souls, let Padre Pio remind us that our vulnerability, our brokenness, our wounds last only a lifetime; after all this, there is Heaven! As the time approaches for us to enter the Father's embrace, we will have understood, through our own woundedness, God's tremendous love; He will gently lead us into His embrace. All the wounds will go and no scars will remain because we will have been made whole by becoming one with the Wounded Healer, as was our Father, Padre Pio.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio look over each of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. Peace and Blessings
Fr. Francis A. Sariego, O.F.M. Cap.
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