

# Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

Bringing the month of September to a close, the Catholic Church in Cuba and the United States was privileged to receive the Holy Father, Pope Francis, on a pastoral visit. As Chief Shepherd of the Catholic Church he was coming to address the World Meeting of Families being held in Philadelphia. But also, as Chief Shepherd, he took the opportunity to speak with his spiritual children in Cuba, and three cities in the United States: Washington DC, New York City, and finally Philadelphia. Everywhere he went, the welcome and joy was overwhelming. His message was simple, to the point, non-judgmental, directly challenging the various matters that besiege the world today, both Catholic and secular. The specific purpose of his journey was the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, yet all the matters about which he spoke or mentioned affect the world community of whatever background, and specifically families that form the nucleus of society.

Everything the Holy Father mentioned will no doubt be published soon and commented on for a while. Politicians will speculate about what side of the political spectrum he favored. Society will speculate what issues he manifested a more liberal approach towards. Religious bodies and/or individuals will offer remarks concerning his liberal or traditional views. Dialogue and discussion of topics mentioned and comments made are part of growing in knowledge and understanding, we must remember our Holy Father was here as a religious leader who is called to speak the Gospel truth of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is a living Word that lives today, in the twenty-first century, and thus will also have an impact on the life of today's world, Christian as well as not.

The Gospel reality in the world affects the lives of millions of people. One cannot speak about Jesus effectively without touching the mind and hearts of the listeners. No one can hear about Jesus and remain indifferent. Jesus challenges us to make decisions that ultimately will affect our lives. From the sick and lonely, the marginalized and dying, the Catholic and non-Catholic, believers and non-believers, the single and married, and those preparing for marriage, children and the un-born, immigrants and refugees, and so much more all revolve around one great and essential truth: **ALL LIFE MATTERS! LIFE FROM CONCEPTION TO NATURAL DEATH IS A GOD-GIVEN GIFT THAT MUST BE RESPECTED, LOVED, PROTECTED AND CARED FOR.** Anyone who cannot accept this actually jeopardizes his/her own right to live life to the full. If I do not respect the life of another, how can I believe that disregard will not one day involve my right to life?!

What more appropriate time than October, the month dedicated to Respect for Life, for us to reflect upon this focal point of our "mission and ministry" as Catholics and as members of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina stands out as one of the most conspicuous promoters of the dignity of life in modern times. During his lifetime hundreds were attracted to this man who spoke outright about our Catholic Faith and its need to be lived today. He initiated the Prayer Groups as a way for men and women from all social levels to live a more meaningful life centered on God, with a purpose of touching the lives of others. Thousands of his 'Spiritual Children' form this 'Militia of Prayer' as a 'Sign of Contradiction' in today's world. They proclaim all that we believe and live as Catholic Christians. We firmly stand as prophets of life and love in a world so impacted by a culture of death and violence. In this culture and society that often forget the value of life and dignity of each person, we need citizens who courageously take a stand for the sake of these God-given values.

Padre Pio, following the example of the Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi, instilled a spirit that sought to seek peace in understanding rather than tranquility through aggression and war, justice in mercy rather than retribution in violent reprisal, availability to all rather than opinionated distance from those who do not share the same ideas and values. Padre Pio never shirked his civic duty, and freely spoke out when Catholic and Christian values were in jeopardy. He could easily be a patron saint of 'Civic Duty' because of his responses to issues that were affecting the daily lives of people who visited or wrote him about many facets of their daily lives. He did not let the opinions of others condition his personal conclusions and decisions, and often kept silent when obedience demanded it of him. But when justice, mercy and charity were in danger, he spoke out ... and how! As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio we have a responsibility to follow the example of our Patron and Spiritual Guide. Paul, the Apostle, and Matthew, the Evangelist, offer us insights upon which to reflect that we might be elements of reform in our society and be true Advocates of Peace and Proclaimers of God's Love and Life.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes: *Take as a model of sound teaching... what you have heard me say, in faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the rich deposit of faith ...be strong in the grace which is ours in Christ Jesus* (2 Timothy

1:13-14; 2:1). *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). *I charge you to preach the word...whether convenient or inconvenient - correcting, reproving, appealing - constantly teaching and never losing patience. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but, following their own desires, will surround themselves with teachers who tickle their ears. They will stop listening to the truth...* (2 Timothy 4:1-4). These powerful words, addressed to a young shepherd of souls, are words that bear significant weight for us today.

Matthew, in turn, offers us an interesting nuance to consider. The Gospel account according to Matthew presents Jesus' question to His disciples at Caesarea Philippi. While we obviously focus on the confession of Peter's faith and his office of leadership in the Church in this Gospel passage, there is an interesting 'side-thought', quite relevant to us today. Jesus asks His disciples: *Who do people say that the Son of Man is?* (Matthew 16:13) The response He is given by the group is: *Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.* But when He pointedly asks: *But who do you say that I am?*, Peter, without hesitation, proclaims to Jesus: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God* (cf. Matthew 16:13-19). Jesus praises this response and entrusts Peter with the leadership of the Church.

What interests me here is not the confession of faith, nor the commission given Peter to shepherd the Church, nor the authority to bind or loose. What I would like to reflect on with you is something I feel very timely for us at this moment in our national history. Obviously, we are not a political caucus, but a people who pray. We are not civic activists, but a people who are concerned about what happens to themselves and others. We are not social opportunists or congressional lobbyists, but a people who speak with their lives what they believe in their hearts. Nonetheless, our faith conviction demands that we express openly what we believe a child of God is called to live, without compromising values and principles for the sake of convenience, comfort, camaraderie, and the like. Compassion encourages me to find ways to assist people in need, but it cannot demand that I permit or do evil for the sake of good. The end does not justify the means. We derive our strength and courage from knowing that *if God is for us who can be against us?* (Romans 8:31). This truth about God's everlasting love for all is *the truth that will set you free* (John 8:32). This "truth" is not the conclusion of a majority vote, but the result of a deep-rooted conviction on Who Jesus is.

There is a problem however, 'Truth' seems to be 'relative'. In other words, we make the truth what we want it to be rather than what it is. Words are used and expressions fabricated to convey messages which justify manipulating the truth. There are many 'truths' that believing people - of most religious denominations, not just Christians, let alone Catholics - hold sacred, just as our Holy Father recently implied and/or explicitly stated in his various reflections to the thousands who came to see him. There is the 'truth' of the sacredness of life from conception to natural death. There is the 'truth' of the sacredness of the human person whose dignity must never be abused in any way. There is the 'truth', inherent in nature itself and the complementary nature of both sexes, of the unique relationship in marriage of man and woman, in a total surrender to one another and open to new life from their intimate and surrendering love. There is the 'truth' of the 'cry of the poor' whose social challenges must never be condoned or justified for the sake of the whole and 'big business'. There is the 'truth' of the right of all people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that does not infringe and/or minimize or destroy that of another. There is the 'truth' of every person's right to a good life based on personal efforts and responsibility, rather than national, religious, racial, and whatever other criteria. There is the 'truth' of God's right to be adored and honored in all creation, as His creatures respectfully and responsibly use the gifts entrusted to humanity with a sense of awe, and co-responsibility among all people. We could list so many other 'truths' to keep in mind. Some might object to any of those mentioned and/or add others. These were listed as examples in order for us to recognize how public opinion, 'Gallop Polls', political correctness, ignorance, manipulation for personal interests ... can so easily present these 'truths' and others in a false light and questionable importance.

*Who do people say I am?* (Matthew 16:13; Mark 8:27; Luke 9:8) The 'people' give a list of prophets' names, among them they listed even Jesus, as though He were just another prophet vying for first place among the other 'wonder-workers' of the Old Testament. When we allow our desires to rule our minds, even the 'truth' can be misread, misunderstood, and misleading. To allow ourselves to be guided by polls and opinions is to chance letting *the blind lead the blind* (Luke 6:39; Matthew 15:14), possibly having both fall into the same ditch. The 'Gallop Poll' the apostles took among the crowds that followed the Master only prove once again that public opinion is never totally correct nor necessarily true. Often those who seek our approval, selection, and/or election in political campaigns, forget the 'truth' and for the sake of expediency and election, will sell out the 'truth' basic to all people, and tickle ears with novelties that raise false hopes, that ultimately, if implemented, destroy the dignity of the human person in one degree or another. People will often look for what they want to see in someone. They will hope and believe in those things they desire and believe will make them happy. It is not always the basic value and truth of what they believe, but the immediate convenience, comfort, control ... or maybe even "escape", it promises to offer.

We are a nation conceived in liberty. Liberty, not license! A Democratic Republic is one that offers the right to govern ourselves through our elected officials, but it has no right to contradict the basic principles and values that protect and elevate the dignity of every human being, who for any believer in the existence of God is a child of God. Even non-believers - that is, those who do not believe in any God - still have a sense of respect and dignity for the human person, otherwise they go against themselves. Conscience, the 'inner voice' guiding the mind and heart of every human being, accuses us every time we seek to justify as right what we know to be wrong. The one who excuses himself usually accuses himself. Where have our basic values gone? The values and principles, rooted in the acceptance and belief in a Supreme Being, regardless of religious affiliation, were the standards that guided the foundation of our nation. Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, and all that follows from these. Pope Francis greeted our nation remarking that we are the "land of the free and the home of the brave". We are free to be responsible for our choices, and must be brave to choose according to God's will implanted in our hearts and not seek a momentary convenience that will erode or directly destroy us!

Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness are still available. The promise is still with us. We must exercise our freedom and be brave about working towards ensuring these gifts for all. At times we act as though we have forgotten these wonderful gifts we as a people have to offer. The challenges thousands still accept, risking even their lives to achieve what our nation offers them in our Constitution because of the Declaration of Independence from tyranny of any kind, from within or without, should inspire and encourage us all. We cannot forget this. Only in Christ can we experience that total freedom in truth, and bravely accept the challenges that make us go beyond the limits we set in our lives.

Catholic Christians cannot be intimidated nor allow themselves to be confused by false promises made by the very ones who should be professing values that uplift the human person and offer hope. They cannot promote matters that compromise basic values that erode and destroy respect for every person, including infants in the womb, couples seeking a meaningful relationship in marriage, those seeking to better their life in a country not their own by birth, and so on. It is time to re-evaluate our commitment in Faith to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Public opinion, majority vote, or deceptive terminology must not alter the basic principle that life is sacred from conception to natural death. Every life, and all lives matter!

Political correctness, public opinion, majority vote, and the like, are very informative. They help us to realize and hopefully understand the difficulties, fears, dangers, hopes, situations, and more, that Christ's Gospel must confront when permissiveness and indifference appeal to a vocal group. Our conviction and personal commitment to the Faith courageously stands up, stands out, stands for all that it means to be a Catholic Christian. It is not intimidated by criticism, cynicism, sarcasm, threats of any sort (religious, social, economic...), and even deprivation of personal freedom, or anything else we could imagine.

Spiritual Children of Padre Pio realize that a true relationship with God through meditative and devotional prayer opens our heart to God's Word, celebration of the Eucharist and reception of Holy Communion makes us *live no longer I, but Christ lives in me* (Galatians 2:20), and common sharing of our Catholic Christian values fosters personal awareness of the world around us and growth in a more determined response to the challenges society offers us. These challenges are often masked under the guise of political correctness, friendly tolerance of different opinions and ideas concerning the rights and privileges local-national-international bodies offer. John, in his letter to the Churches says at the end of one: *My children, beware of idols!* (1 John 5:21). Let us be aware of those whom we set up as 'the answer' and whose appealing promises we set above our God-given values. These "I-dolls" are phoney; when they become the idols of our life, we live in a world that leaves us empty, unfulfilled, and never at peace. Only God and His Divine Will can fulfill us in this life and lead us to the next with Him.

Padre Pio never shirked his responsibility as an Italian citizen. He spoke respectfully and openly about the issues that faced his nation. Political leaders would often seek him out to speak with him. He spoke respectfully, tactfully (Padre Pio's tact could be rather 'forceful' at times, never really needing to be explained or "clarified", and always truthful. We, as Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, cannot let 'factual incorrections' and/or indifference condition our hearts with disinterest, our minds with erroneous opinions, and our actions based on the promises aimed at dispelling our economic, social, national fears, or even making them increase in intensity so that we easily allow a "political savior to redeem us". Let us remember Jesus' words, our Holy Father Pope Francis' words, and the words and example of our Spiritual Father Padre Pio. In various ways they remind us that God loves us into life and daily calls us ever closer to the fullness of Life with Him. To God EVERY LIFE MATTERS! We are His children, redeemed in the Blood of Christ. We must live and proclaim this truth!

My 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. Sariago, O.F.M. Cap.  
National Coordinator