

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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February 2016

Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

Don't despise humble beginnings. Don't belittle what seems insignificant. It is often in and through the common and ordinary that great things happen. It is often in humble beginnings that great people are born and formed. There is a powerful reminder that states: *The three hours of redemptive suffering of Jesus on the cross were preceded by three years of ministry among God's people in Israel and thirty years of silent preparation in Nazareth.*

Jesus lived thirty years in the anonymity of the humble town of Nazareth. He lived as a laborer, although qualified in His field as an exceptional wood worker, but manual laborer nonetheless. Scripture tells us that after his return from Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph at the age of twelve, *he came down with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and men.* These words strike us somewhat strangely. Jesus, Who is God, *grew in wisdom, age and grace!?* As we are reminded in Scripture, *He was like us in all things but sin.* Jesus had to experience all that it means to be human. He knew the often humdrum pace of everyday living. He knew what it means to experience enthusiasm about the possibilities available to His efforts, and yet He did not expect surprising and extraordinary events - miracles - to assure his choices and the positive outcome of his work. He lived in the uncertainty of the next moment, just as we do.

The Year of Mercy carries with it the wonderful truth that God became one of us with us. St. Leo the Great tells us that the Incarnation is the "Condescension of Compassion". In other words, it is the fact that God came down to share our human experience. The word "mercy" when taken from the Latin word "misericordia" can easily mean, loosely translated, taking the misfortune (or misery) of another to heart. By sharing with us in all things but sin, Jesus showed us the Mercy of God who came not to condemn but to save. This is the mercy we seek for ourselves and thus must be ready and willing to offer others, whoever they may be. Let us remember the words: *The measure you measure with will be the measure used to measure you.* (Matthew 7: 2)

We have not yet learned to live and accept the wonderful gift of God's providence when we expect to be titillated by special happenings, pats on the back for everything we do, or even expect God to step in with a *minor miracle*, just to make sure we are on the right track. The exciting experience is life itself! The hidden years that far surpass the years of ministry and hours of redemption are a powerful reminder for all who are always waiting for the miracles of God. They encourage us to move on and to get acquainted and in harmony with the God of miracles. They encourage us to wonder gratefully at the many ways God makes His providence known, rather than to constantly seek after His wonders. As an unknown writer once stated: *when you are able to see the invisible, you will be able to accomplish the impossible. To see the invisible* is to live in faith. *To see the invisible* is to expect no outward show and still to know that God is with you. It is this hidden life, without the "frills" of faith, that has the power to transform us.

It is this "frill-less" surrender to God, that allows us to surrender to one another in an expression of merciful awareness of our common bond in Jesus for Christians, and in God for all human beings. Mercy goes far beyond the act of forgiving, or a generous donation offered someone who is needy. Mercy, of its very nature, expects us to "disarm our hearts" to all people. The common life we share is a reminder each moment of our own frailty, regardless of how we might attempt to camouflage it so as to seem what we are not to others. Mercy reminds us that we are who we are before God, and so are all others who share the journey of life. The hidden life of Jesus was exciting from the fact that Divine Mercy was totally hidden in the "batch of dough" of human nature, and became slowly apparent to others in the Father's time. Mercy lifts up the other for the sake of the other, and God lifts us up so that we can continue to look at each other in the eyes and love each other with our hearts.

Our Spiritual Father and Founder, Padre Pio, was not a stranger to the hidden life. Although his unique gift of the stigmata made him world-renowned, his life was that of the simple, humdrum, ordinary life of any friar. He rarely if ever left the area of the Convento and Church of La Madonna delle Grazie or the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza. People

came in the hundreds and thousands over the course of the years to see and hear him. Regardless of this, his life was that of a friar who obediently fulfilled the normal daily ministry of celebrating Mass and hearing confessions. The extraordinary experiences that made him renowned among people flowed from his response to grace and God's will. Others shared in his giftedness according to their perception and response to the Lord Who spoke to them through him. Padre Pio was an obedient son of St. Francis. The extraordinary gifts were God's acknowledgment of Padre Pio's total availability to the Divine Will. He spent hours and years in the confessional, dispensing the graces of God's Mercy to countless numbers of the faithful who came seeking the mercy of God through him. Even when his "manner" was somewhat gruff, it was the mercy of God that shook people into the reality of the state of their souls - as they themselves testified - so that their remorse and repentance could be effective, and not just some ritual without meaning.

The Stigmata, years of loss of blood and minimum food intake without losing strength or weight, the reading of hearts, the bilocations, the levitations, the graces God granted to people through his intercession while he was still on this earth, and much more, are not insignificant gifts in the life of our Father. Nevertheless, his life was lived in the common, ordinary experience of any other friar. In fact, because of the extraordinary gifts the good Lord granted him, he was less able to be free to move around as he willed and was truly "nailed" to his friary - in the same place - for fifty years.

Padre Pio was a man profoundly in union with God, yet he still went on spiritual retreats like all the other friars to strengthen his prayer life. He was a man who was effectively able to intercede with God for the healing of others, yet he himself suffered from physical ailments and even needed the expertise of qualified surgeons like any one else. As Pope Francis reminded those who are in service to others, Padre Pio in many ways "smelled like the sheep" to whom he ministered. Yes, he was very different, but he took every person and their pains to heart (misericordia - cor). Padre Pio was a man who directed hundreds of souls in the course of his years, and who was able to lead many back to a deeper relationship with God, yet he himself had a spiritual director to guide him, a confessor to absolve him, ... and even suffered often from a sense of abandonment, just as many of us may feel at times when things get rough and our faith is challenged..

The hidden life of Jesus, and the wonderful example of our Founder and Father, Padre Pio, are eloquent reminders of where we encounter God and how we are called to grow in holiness. We encounter God where we are, and we grow in holiness by doing what we know and believe to be God's will, even if it consists in fulfilling the normal responsibilities of everyday life. In this hidden life - common every day life we live - we manifest the Mercy of God opening our hearts to one another, as God does every moment of our lives, for each one of us, by name. We are not an anonymous mass of human beings. We are children of God whose names are written in God's heart. Thus, mercy demands that we see Jesus in the eyes of those whom we encounter, and not consider them "just another human being". When we have experienced God's love for us, and are honest about what we know we truly deserve, how can we be otherwise for our "companions on the journey"?

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, each Group is a unique expression of unity in diversity. There are so many factors that distinguish one Group from another, and even one member in the Group from another in the same Group. Yet, our common bond in Jesus, Mary, and Padre Pio brings us together on our journey to the Father through a God-centered and holy life. Our Groups are powerhouses of prayer. They are made up of people who experience the power of prayer because they pray. They do not just say prayers. They raise their minds and hearts to God, and open their hearts to envelope all God's children in their prayer. The Spiritual Children of Padre Pio who constitute the Prayer Groups live in the hidden reality of their daily lives, but impact acutely on the life of the Church and the world because of their relationship with God. The monthly meeting of Eucharistic Prayer, devotional prayer, and fraternal sharing of our Catholic beliefs is a strengthening experience that urges our sisters and brothers to live the hidden life the rest of the month, until the next meeting, with increased commitment and joy. The unique expressions of each Group form a wonderful mosaic of the vitality of our prayer life and the gift that our Catholic faith is.

As members of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, you are not bound by vows or promises. There are no sanctions placed on those who fail to participate in a meeting. Here in our United States most people within the Church still do not know anything about the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio and the Prayer Groups. Many of you become Apostles of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups by offering opportunities for others to find in the spirit of Padre Pio what you have found by letting them notice how your journey in the spirit of Padre Pio has impacted your own everyday life. Some Groups are rather small and yet continue with enthusiasm and constancy. Other Groups are rather large and have more activities to attract others to various celebrations. But all, without exception, feel a loving relationship with Padre Pio whose life and words have touched their lives, as they seek to bring what they have discovered to others - another aspect of mercy.

My ministry among you is that of a brother working with his sisters and brothers bound by a common goal - our personal sanctification. Everything else is peripheral. Yet, becoming a "saint" is never an isolated experience. Even hermits and recluses who live their lives alone, cloistered nuns and monks who live enclosed apart from society, saints from all areas of life whether secular, married, single, old, young, have the common awareness that no one is an island. We become saints recognizing the presence of others and opening our hearts to them. Here we are again driven by "Mercy" and not self-centered pride.

Let us take the opportunity of this month which quickly introduces us to the Lenten Journey to reflect upon our own response to God's will. Let us examine more deeply our participation in the Prayer Group spirit of prayer, reflection and service. Let us pray for each other throughout the Association that we may feel a deeper sense of our being one family in the spirit of Padre Pio. Let us remember that the Year of Mercy already in progress is offering us opportunities to see our lives in relationship to God obviously, but also in relationship to one another. People walk through the many "Holy Doors" that have been blessed throughout the world for this Special Year of Grace, but the one door that often is closed is the door to our hearts. We can cross the first threshold all we want for others to see, but unless we allow others to cross the second one, the first will have little or no effect in our lives. *Mercy I desire and not sacrifice.* As we continue our monthly routines, let us keep in mind the gift we can be to our sisters and brothers around the country.

Have a Happy Lent! Yes, a "Happy Lent"! Lent is a Season intended to lead us closer to God through the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus Who redeems us in His Blood. Though sad at how it had to be, it is wonderful and joy-filled at what the Paschal Mystery accomplished. We are called to enter the mystery and live its reality every day. God's Mercy loves us into life, His Mercy loved us by His death, and His Mercy invites us every moment to bring all that we really own to His Divine Heart. Everything we received is God's gift to us; all we really own as ours are the sins that misuse or abuse the gifts we have received. Lent in this Year of Mercy offers us the possibility to walk with one another, recognize that we are all in need of God's Mercy, surrender ourselves to God's Love, and thus bask in light of God's Son, Who is the Mercy of the Father Incarnate.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard and protect; and Padre Pio watch over each of you with loving care.

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