

# Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

Love is a difficult word to define. It is an expression we try to explain, but never seem to be able to do so adequately. We all have our concepts of what love means, and how to convey what we call love in our lives. A great deal of the difficulty has to do with language, and also with how we use the word so freely in everyday expressions that refer to pleasure and delight. This often causes confusion. Love is such a basic concept in every heart, and a universal need for every life; and yet how difficult it can be to truly understand and live this basic reality for our existence and the driving force of everyone's life. Without love, whether for God, myself, another, some thing, or whatever, we may never take the first step in doing anything. It is precisely here that we encounter the first big hurdle to overcome: Love is not doing; Love is being.

As strange as it can seem, the period of Lent is a time for us to grow in love as we reflect upon the depth of God's merciful love for us in Jesus. Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Love of God. Jesus shows us the merciful and loving face of the Father. The Advent / Christmas Season celebrates the "condescension of compassion" as St. Leo the Great calls the Incarnation, of God Who enters the reality of humankind that humanity might be once again elevated to that grace-filled state that was ours at the time of Creation before the Fall. Lent / Easter Season celebrates humanity's journey in Christ through His Passion-Death-Resurrection (The Paschal Mystery) to enter the reality of God's New Life in Christ through His Holy Spirit. Jesus elevated our lives. Because of Jesus, everything we do, even the most commonplace things, has an eternal value, as long as it is done in love. The beauty and power of God's is manifest continually in His Divine Mercy that offers us every opportunity to enter the Heart of Jesus opened for us on the Cross by the soldiers lance, into the eternal Father's loving embrace.

One of our early American Presidents, President Thomas Jefferson, is quoted as saying: *Wisdom is knowing what to do; Skill is knowing how to do it; Virtue is doing it.* We all know what is expected of us as God's children and as sisters and brothers in the Catholic Christian Family. We know what is necessary to achieve our Christian goals and what we are expected to do as witnesses of our Catholic Faith. The problem, or difficulty, is in doing it! The will - our "free" will - gets in the way. Our "will" becomes our "won't", and our "won't" becomes our "can't". We fail so often to surrender ourselves to God Who speaks to us in and through His Word and His Church.

Love is expressed fully in the total surrender of the one who loves and the one loved as they surrender to each other without counting the cost. Total surrender allows us to investigate and question, without doubting. Total surrender strengthens us when we are suffering or burdened, so that we persevere in trust. Total surrender gives us courage in the face of persecution of any kind and even death, with serenity, peace and joy. There is so much that we could enumerate, but the basic truth that makes the rest meaningful is as the Apostle John states in his letter: *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him* (1 John 4: 16).

We began the Lenten Season with the reception of the Blessed Ashes. These symbols of humility and conversion are given to set a tone for the ensuing forty days that lead us to the celebration of the total emptying of Jesus for us on the Cross and our rebirth in Him on Easter Sunday. Many, however, take pride on Ash Wednesday by openly displaying a black cross traced in ashes on their foreheads. They want others to know that they are Catholic - although now some non-Catholic groups have a similar ceremony at the beginning of Lent - but their lives seem not to change at all. It is the smudge on the forehead and not the sign of the cross on the heart that seems to matter. Many would rather shake hands with themselves, rather than be lifted up in the Father's hands.

Lent for some is like the beginning of the New Year. People propose resolutions intended to make them better, or healthier, or more efficient, but something always seems to block the realization and progress of these good intentions. Then, when we allow our good intentions to be overwhelmed by our entrenched habitual actions, discouragement usually follows and then some reasoning process will help us to justify not challenging ourselves to go any further, thus halting our growth in the spirit. If we do this at the beginning of the New Year, don't we often see ourselves acting the same way for Lent? How many

make resolutions to pray more intensely, to be more sacrificial, to participate in the life of the Church more deeply, to be more charitable, and so on? Usually to be charitable - in common usage - means to give something to a needy person; this is praiseworthy and necessary, but often it is someone's way of buying away their responsibility to be loving, to give of themselves, rather than just their things. When we reflect on it, much of what we propose for Lenten practices are basic; we should be striving to do them always and better, without forgetting and striving to live the purpose for them more fully: LOVE. Our Holy Father Pope Francis reminds us that the signs of an effective celebration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy are how we practice the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. In other words, we are expected to show our love for God by manifesting our love for ourselves loved by God through how we concretely manifest our love for others.

The threefold responsibility of the Church consists in Her call: to Preach/Teach; Celebrate the Mysteries of God's Love in the Eucharist (and the Sacraments that lead to and complement the Great Gift of His Presence); and to Serve. If we strove to do what is already expected of us, and did it well, what strides we would make in our spiritual growth! Preaching and Teaching inform us (Wisdom); Celebrating the Mysteries, especially the Eucharist, strengthens and prepares us (Skill); Service makes our heart witness with our life to what we believe about Jesus and what our role is as one redeemed in His blood (Virtue). This Service, as an external sign of what we believe, leads to Christian justice by rendering to those less fortunate than we what they deserve as God's children and thus it concretizes in our actions the charity/agape/love with love from God's perspective, that we as Christians are called to live out and do to others. Our love is expressed in taking to heart the other, especially in his/her need, and responding as I would desire were I they. In effect, that is what one of the "definitions" of mercy could be: "misericordia" = "miser" (difficulty, misery, need, and so on) and "cor" (heart)

If we made Love our Lenten challenge, and sought every possible way to live it, how different do you think things would be in our life! If we thought of love not only in the sense of pleasure or personal delight, but as a daily surrender to God's will and to those whom we encounter each day, especially those who challenge our thoughts, words, responses, reactions, and the like, how different would our character be, and how much we would be able to control those attitudes we allow to control us! Love is a two-way street. Even those who refuse to respond to love are still affected by it. Remember, that before we can ever hope to receive love from those like ourselves, we have to be able to be loving.

Padre Pio would never have reached the heights of holiness without a deep abiding love for God and others. It was a love he sought to instill in all who asked for his spiritual guidance. Let us take to heart the following words Padre Pio wrote to his spiritual child, Raffaellina Cerase, in a letter dated 25 April 1914. Consider Padre Pio's following words as though our Father were writing personally to each one of us.

*Beloved ...in Jesus, ... Place your unlimited trust in the divine goodness...Our enemy (satan) who plots against us wants to persuade you...despise him in the name of Jesus and laugh heartily at him...You may fear, if you like, but it must be that holy fear, I mean to say the fear that is never separated from love. When fear and love are united, they help each other...Love makes us hasten with rapid strides, while fear...makes us watch prudently where we place our feet and guides us so that we may never stumble on the road leading to heaven. I know...that the cross is painful and that for those who love, a thing is almost unbearable when it exposes them to the danger of offending the One they love and adore. But Jesus tempted in the desert and hanging on the Cross is clear, obvious and very consoling proof (of His love) ...Courage then and go ahead. God is with you, and hell, the world, and the flesh will one day, to their confusion, have to relinquish their weapons and admit once more that they are powerless against a soul that possesses and is possessed by God...Calm yourself...because...it is the Lord who is acting within you...so let Him guide you on the difficult journey of this life.*

My sisters and brothers, let us allow the love of Christ to guide us on our Lenten journey. Keep focused on the Crucified. In His love we are enlightened that we might see more clearly who we really are; we are impassioned to love Him more dearly; we are empowered to follow Him unreservedly more nearly. What greater basis for our Lenten journey and daily practices can there be than to make a conscious intention every day to accept all things and everyone as a gift of God's love. Prayer, Penance, Almsgiving, Faithful response to rules and regulations, as necessary as they are, profit us little if they are not expressions of a love that continues loving. When we totally surrender ourselves to the One Who surrendered Himself for us on the Cross, then it is that our Lent leads to a growth in the spirit and a conversion of heart that makes Easter a true Resurrection Day.

As Spiritual Children of St. Pio of Pietrelcina let us surrender ourselves to God. We never lose when we give everything over to the One Who gives everything, especially Himself, to us. There is always such fear in saying 'I surrender'. When we say it to God, why be afraid? God knows what we are capable of and where we are headed, long before we do. Abandoning ourselves to His Will, truly trusting in Him, and living every moment as a deliberate act of surrender to the Divine Will, we cannot help but experience an inner peace, serenity and joy. We will discover and live a more balanced and cheerful life, even in the midst of difficulties. When God is in control, we are always headed in the right direction. Just as a husband and wife surrender themselves in love and the two become one, let us become one with God as we surrender to His Divine Will. Emptying ourselves of our own material and earthly desires, false ambitions, self-centeredness, pride, will allow the joy of new life and rebirth to be so palpable that our Easter celebration will be as though it were that first Easter Sunday. Jesus is alive! He is Risen! He precedes us on the way! Let Jesus come alive in your hearts and lives so powerfully that, like the first followers, we will be, as Saint Augustine calls the People of God redeemed in the Blood of the Lamb, 'an Alleluia People'.

May we praise Him with our lives!

May the light of Christ's Resurrection shine in us that we *might have life, and have it in abundance*. May the Risen Lord Jesus shower you and your loved ones with peace, joy and abundant blessings for a Happy Easter; may Mary, Mother of the Redeemer and our Mother, help you to live with Jesus in the light of the New Life His Resurrection offers us; and may our holy Father and Founder Padre Pio of Pietrelcina watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. With a promise to keep all of you affectionately in my Easter Masses and Liturgies, I wish you and your loved ones a very Happy and Joy-filled Easter. Christ is Risen! He is truly risen! Alleluia!

Peace and Blessings

Fr. Francis A. Sariego, OFM Cap

National Coordinator