

**Padre Pio Prayer Groups
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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you his peace!

God, even through nature, often speaks to us about life's journey. The Winter Season, soon to be upon us, is announced by days that grow ever shorter and the sun that seems to take its time offering us its light and warmth each day. It is a good time for us to reflect on certain basic realities that we often place at the margin of our mind. Yet, these truths are a fact of our human life and a fact of Eternal Life: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell.

There was a time when these Four Last Things, as they were called, were an indisputable theme for at least some Sundays of November, and always during any Retreat or Mission. They were intended not so much to frighten us into submission to God's Will, as much as to make us realize that we cannot hide from the inevitable; thus, we should strive to know, reflect, and decide, through our understanding of these Four Last Things, what course we will take in life. Once we follow through with our decision, life becomes more peaceful and the going more certain.

October is Respect for Life Month and November encourages us to reflect on Eternal Life - not death alone. The difference between the two is that October offers us opportunities to reflect upon the gift of our natural lives, while November presents us, both through the season of late Autumn as well as through our Scriptural and Liturgical Calendars, with opportunities to meditate on the Life we are called to share with those who have gone before us after our journey on earth is complete. The changing seasons help us to reflect on our ever-changing life. Death and rebirth are constants in nature. Why, then, are so many good, believing, devout people hesitant to reflect upon life, death and eternal rebirth in our own personal lives? We are willing to mention it about others, but always seem to leave ourselves out of the picture.

Jesus, before dying on the Cross, said: Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. These words were the last human expression of His total trust in the Father's love. Before pronouncing them, however, Jesus wanted everyone to know that He had been faithful to the Father's Will and had fulfilled everything that was expected of Him. He said: It is completed (consummated). This completeness expressed the fact that Jesus' entire life was lived in view

of the Life that He and the Father share with the Holy Spirit. Yet, while He lived the Life of the Father and the Holy Spirit, His days on earth were charged with the routine duties of any other human being, plus the particular responsibilities of a carpenter and a rabbi.

Jesus often spoke of the Kingdom of God and the Life to come, but He never dwelled on them as much as on what and how we are expected to be, and what we are expected to do that we might be assured of our sharing in the Eternal Life of God. Our world with all of its technology and entertainment distracts us from the stark realities that never seem to hit home until we are either sick, or advanced in years, or maybe are undergoing or have made it through some life-threatening experience. Why does it take us so long to focus on the obvious and see with the eyes of faith the full picture God offers us?

Our Seraphic Father Saint Francis, when he was told that he would die in a short span of days, composed a stanza to his Canticle of the Creatures. He was inspired to write: Praise be you my Lord God for Sister Bodily Death from whom no one can escape. He sang of Death and spoke of that solemn moment as a loving family member, and praised God for offering us all this wonderful companion for our journey. It would be interesting to take a poll - an honest poll - to see how many of us really consider Death as a friend whose arrival we anticipate and whom we accept as a gift from God for which we ought to be joyfully grateful!

Death is life's constant companion, whether we want to accept it or not. Each day we come closer to eternity. This is a fact of life as well as our faith that we cannot deny nor avoid. The Church - loving, wise and prudent Mother that She is - takes advantage of this time of year to invite us to reflect on the continuation of life beyond bodily death. Seen in the light of faith and God's grace, that solemn moment that converges an entire life experience and responds to God's call bursting into eternity, with an explosion of love and trust, into the Father's loving hands when we are called home, becomes a hope-filled reality to anticipate with serenity.

Even the particular November devotion to the Holy Souls in Purgatory, as well as the daily remembrance at Mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours of all the faithful departed, is a reminder that life continues, and death is only the point of God's transforming love that makes us capable of entering the eternal ground of the Spirit. These Holy Souls are all those who, by God's infinite love and mercy, await with certitude their entrance into Heaven. These souls we remember are those persons who lived in this world, as we do now, immersed in its realities: joys, successes, allurements, confusion, uncertainties, grace-filled moments, sinful moments, and so on. Many are our relatives, friends, and possibly some who may have considered us - or maybe we have considered them - enemies, or at least unlovable. In eternity all animosity is canceled for those who are saved, and even for those still awaiting heaven but certain of the glory to be theirs. Enemies in life are intimately one with us in God when they enter Eternal Life.

Continuing our journey on earth, we do well to keep before us the image of our Father and Founder Padre Pio whose life was lived in constant union with God, yet who was always aware of the needs of those still journeying with him in this world. The Casa Sollievo della

Sofferenza is a magnificent and shining example of Padre Pio's desire to minister as servant to those who suffer, and to offer others the opportunity to share in his ministry. He sought to alleviate pain and postpone death when and where it was possible. Nevertheless, his desire was for the sick and infirm to be healed not just in body but also and above all in the spirit. He envisioned a holistic approach to medicine, before it was even considered on the large scale, that it is today. He realized that many ailments, illnesses, conditions, and the like, often are the product of a soul tormented above all by fear - the fear that life is useless and meaningless, that after here there is nothing. Even basically good and faithful people pose these questions at one time or another. They have moments when they question the futility of their actions, the monotony of their daily work or professions that leads to the lack of real interest and boredom, their inability to understand the purpose of life that seems so short, and more. Thoughts like these lead to anxieties in life, and a fear of death that seems to cut short our chance to make everything right.

The Church encourages us always, but especially in November, to remember that Purgatory is a state where souls experience, after physical death, God's Love, Mercy and Providence. Even after death, God will not be outdone in providing all the means necessary to bring us to Himself. The month of the Holy Souls reminds us this and offers us the hope that heaven is ours for the taking. Washed in the blood of Jesus, we become heirs with Him of Eternal Life. Our prayers for the Holy Souls unite us with those who have passed from time to eternity. With our prayers we assist the Suffering Souls in Purgatory, and they in turn pray for us, the Militant Souls on Earth. We form, with the Church Triumphant in Heaven, the Communion of Saints composed of wayfarers journeying to our true Home in Heaven. We support and assist one another until we pass from time to encounter one another in eternity.

Padre Pio had various experiences with the mystery of human death and the Holy Souls. When one lives in the light of eternity, every moment is a precious occasion to grow in grace. From the time he was old enough to understand, we are told that Padre Pio had mystical experiences. Eternity and Heaven were realities that he thought everyone experienced. When he discovered that his was a privilege, he kept his experiences to himself and to his spiritual director alone. The profound relationship with a God Who was always so real to him, urged him to seek to instill this deep conviction and trust in God in others. Padre Pio asked his Spiritual Children not to think of death, but to focus on life so that through the Eucharist, Our Lady, the Church, and one another we might strengthen our spirit to walk firmly and decisively toward our destiny with God. As a true son of Saint Francis of Assisi, even our beloved Padre Pio was able to anticipate the arrival of Sister Death with awareness of and resignation to Her arrival. His peaceful death pronouncing calmly the names of Jesus, Mary was the crowning moment of a job well done. He had celebrated his last Eucharist entering into the mystery of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of the Jesus Whose wounds he bore and of Whom he was called to be an image in this life. He was surrounded by thousands of his Spiritual Children gathered for the fiftieth anniversary of the reception of the visible stigmata. Several hours later, no longer in mystery, but experiencing the transforming miracle of God's love, he saw in truth the Object of his desires for so many years. Death was truly the loving Sister who finally took him home!

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio let us follow his example. Let us take the wonderful gift of life that has been entrusted to us and live it fully and joyfully. The burdens we may be asked to bear help us to set all things in perspective. We live, as Scripture tells us, as pilgrims and strangers. Let us be grateful for all we have and can achieve in this life. Let us trust in Divine Providence in all our needs. Let us eagerly anticipate our ultimate encounter with our Loving God, Whose Life we are called to share together with our sisters and brothers in faith when life's course on earth is complete.

Allow me to share this simple prayer as a final reflection: Praise be you my Lord for Sister Bodily Death from whom no one can escape...be praised my Lord because the sobering thought of our passage from time into eternity allows us to put all things and situations into a grace-filled perspective. May the thought of the Holy Souls in Purgatory encourage us to remember your mercy, love and providence, that we may never fear in life, even in those moments when we seem to lose our way. You, Father, call us to life; in Jesus You give us hope; and in the Holy Spirit you strengthen us on our journey. May Mary, Mother of all Your children, those who already live in glory, we who are still in journey here on earth, and those awaiting Your call in heaven's vestibule in Purgatory, lead us ever closer to one another and to You our Lord and God.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard and protect you; and Padre Pio, our Father and Founder, look over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings

Fr. Francis A. Sariago, O.F.M. Cap.

National Coordinator