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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you peace!

In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, found in the book of Genesis, we are immediately struck by the innocent victim led to sacrifice by his own father. Before Isaac, it is Abraham who was led as a victim; he is told to sacrifice what he holds most dear, and thus becomes a 'victim' of his own commitment to the will of the One God he had come to know and of his personal integrity to be faithful to this God. Abraham left everything and everyone, arrived at the Promised Land, patiently awaited for years the birth of a son, and now God is asking him to offer this long-awaited and intensely-desired sign of God's favor and his family's continuity in sacrifice. This image of Abraham's offering prepares the way for another sacrifice of an innocent victim that will take place centuries later, the sacrifice of Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, on Calvary.

In the Genesis account, there are two fathers: Abraham, who offers his son in sacrifice but who is stopped at the last minute and whose son is saved; and, God, Who offers His Son, the Christ, Who is not given a reprieve but Who must die that others may have life in abundance. Is God then cruel and insensitive? If this were the case God would no longer be God! Jesus is the beloved Son of the Father, just as Isaac was the beloved son of Abraham, and yet this Son is destined to be a sacrifice. Why? Saint Paul offers an answer in his letter to the Romans: God did not spare His own Son but handed Him over for us all. (Romans 8: 32) In speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus gives us the reason: God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, so that all who believe in Him might have eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3: 16-17) God loves because He is 'Father'. He is the One Who takes the initiative in all things, even regarding the sin and ingratitude of His children, His own creation. God will stop at nothing, even to the death of His Son, to fulfill the promise made to our first parents at the beginning of human history.

Sacrifice has been an integral part of human life. Everyone seeking holiness and spiritual perfection has adopted the challenge of sacrifice as an indispensable element, without which, we cannot hope to grow. Sacrifice and victimhood, something spoken of in previous letters, take on many forms according to the spiritual and physical disposition of the person.

Padre Pio continued in his life, what many holy people before him had done. He too was offered the opportunity to make a free-will-gift of himself in loving sacrifice to God for himself and others. The redemption fulfilled by Christ is continued today through the collaboration of generous souls who are willing to detach themselves from everything, and offer themselves exclusively for the glory of God and the building up of His will on earth. Padre Pio understood the presence of evil in the world. He seriously accepted the challenge to take up his cross and personally follow in the footsteps of Christ and His redeeming Passion-Death. Though Isaiah spoke of 'the Anointed One-to-come', we can easily apply his words to Padre Pio: It was our infirmities he bore, our sufferings that he endured, while we thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted. (Isaiah 53:4) Padre Pio himself alludes to this in a letter to Padre Agostino when he writes: Everyone holds me in contempt. I am alone fighting and weeping, night and day: Father Provincial...has been silent; my confessor chastises me...I am totally alone...on my ascent to Calvary. (19 July 1915) The key expression is 'ascent to Calvary'; he indicates that he is being crucified with Christ. The Lord told Padre Pio: Be holy and help others to be holy. This holiness is assured when It is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me (Galatians 2: 20). But to have Christ living in me, means that I must Live Jesus, who emptied Himself even to death, and death on a cross (Philippians 2:8), whatever that 'cross' may be in my life.

For Padre Pio the cross is an honor and a dignity. God Himself spoke to his heart and touched his life singling him out to offer his life for the good of the whole world. Aware of this, Padre Pio invited, and continues to invite through the Prayer Groups around the world, generous souls ready and willing to collaborate with Christ and offer themselves totally for the salvation of others, in the spirit of the passage from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians that states: I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, the Church. (Colossians 1: 24)

This total trust and abandonment to God's love, mercy, and providence cannot go 'unheeded'. As some jokingly say, 'No good act goes unpunished!?' Of course goodness does not bring punishment, but grace and blessings. However, in a world riddled with the presence of the evil one, where the greater good is present, there the spirit of evil will put his paw to distort or destroy. In the midst of Padre Pio's acceptance to be one with Christ, satan continued to increase his torments. The more Padre Pio sought to 'Live Jesus', the more he was tormented by the spirit of evil and his minions. Padre Pio wrote to Padre Agostino: 'barbablu' (Padre Pio's name for satan) won't admit defeat. He has appeared in almost every form. For the past few days he has paid me visits along with some of his satellites armed with clubs and iron weapons and, what is worse, in their own form as devils. I cannot tell you how many times he has thrown me out of bed, and dragged me around the room. No matter... I have to have patience! Jesus, our dear Mother, my little Angel, St. Joseph and our father St. Francis are almost always with me. (18 January 1912) To many, these words seem an exaggeration or even a 'psychotic' hallucination; the many friars who lived with Padre Pio can attest to the truth of his words and the physical reality of all satan's vexations against Padre Pio.

Throughout his entire life, at one time or another, to the purifying work of grace that Padre Pio accepted whole-heartedly and the wild fury of hell's attacks, Padre Pio also experienced and suffered from the misunderstanding of those closest to him. No one seemed to really comprehend the full import of what was happening to Padre Pio. From 'the little friar who looks so pale and is so holy' as the people of Pietrelcina would say during the first years of his religious life when he stayed in his own hometown, to the unusual occurrences in the few friaries in which he was stationed, to his definitive transfer to San Giovanni Rotondo until his death, Padre Pio was subjected rather regularly to scrutiny, questioning, medical exams, and even open cynicism, denial, skepticism, and suspicion. To all this were added the bodily pains of his own frail health and, of course, the ever-present pains from the wounds he bore. He truly was a 'Man of Sorrows' a 'Suffering Servant'.

If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21) We hear people say: 'I wish I could live it all over again. I would do things a lot differently'. In hindsight we see things more clearly and at times with regret. The more we brood over those negative moments in our life, the more they may tend to lead us to periods of sadness, discouragement, or even depression. We look back and realize that there is no turning back. There is no time machine that allows us to correct past mistakes and go on as though nothing had ever happened. The 'ministry of reconciliation' that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Corinthians speaks to this precise point. It is the mood and spirit of Lent and our whole Christian life. Paul reminds us that, If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old has passed away (2 Corinthians 5: 17). This is the 'ministry of reconciliation' that Padre Pio was instrumental in bringing thousands of souls to experience in their lives, through the 'Tribunal of Mercy' (the Confessional), through the gift of the Spirit's Wisdom and Understanding (in his compassionate and direct counsels), and through his daily personal sacrifice one with that of Christ (the Mass, the Eucharist). To restore all things in Christ (Ephesians 1: 10) was his mission and ministry. He became one with Christ, Redeemer of Humanity, whose words from the cross, It is consummated (John 9: 30), would urge Padre Pio on, that he might be consumed with the same Love everyday of his earthly life.

The Lord chose Padre Pio as a victim and slowly led him to the heights of the Hill of Calvary. This may leave us perplexed that God should bring someone to such a state that is definitely not like any with which we are associated. It is just not in harmony with our abilities or capacities, nor can we compare it to the ordinary life we live. Nonetheless, by our very Baptism we are called to be such 'victims'. It is enough for us to carry our daily crosses, be seriously committed to our daily responsibilities, participate in the sacrifice of Christ, the perfect victim, by peacefully accepting any sufferings that may come our way, welcoming the effects of the passing years on our bodies that remind us of the ultimate end of this earthly life and the beginning of eternity. We can live the words of Jesus, Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. (Luke 9: 23) St. Paul indicates how we can become one with Christ in a life of ongoing conversion and perfection: Respect those who are laboring among you and who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you, and show esteem for them with special love on account of their work. Be at peace among

yourselves. We urge you, admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.(1Thessalonians 5: 12-18)

My brothers and sisters, Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, the entire month of March is dedicated to the Lenten journey. It may take us some time to "get into" the Lenten spirit. Let St. Joseph, the silent man of Scripture whom we venerate in a special way during the month of March, be our guide. In the silence of your hearts let the Lord speak to you; listen to His words. Let the example of Padre Pio who bore his own crosses and accepted to bear those of others when they were in difficulty, encourage you; ask him to be your Cyrenian. Let the words of the great apostle of the Gentiles remind you of what is truly essential: 'Being Christ to one another joyfully and lovingly'.

Whatever you may want "to do" for Lent is commendable, but remember that all those 'things' and 'actions' must be directed to our 'becoming' more intensely souls who accept to walk with Christ, as far as the summit of Mount Calvary, to be crucified to this world with all its false enticements and allurements, and to be renewed in the Spirit.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you: and Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. May your journey from ashes to palms lead you to a wonderful celebration of the mysteries of our redemption in the Masses you attend, and especially during that great time of prayer, reflection, and 'immersion' into the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Passion-Death-Resurrection during Holy Week. You will all be in my prayers and Masses; I humbly request that you keep me and all our Prayer Groups in yours.

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

PS - Please click the link on the main webpage "Current Information" then "From the Desk of the Coordinator". Among the listed items please click the title "International Database"