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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

**The Risen Christ bless you with His peace!**

One of the most joyous anthems of the Church is the Regina Coeli. Too few of us know it as a prayer in the home, but many of us recall it as the Eastertime noonday prayer of our Catholic school days. There is a story about this anthem that gives it greater meaning. In a fearful pestilence, Our Lady's portrait reputedly painted by St. Luke was being carried in a procession which included Pope St. Gregory the Great. As they approached St. Peter's Basilica, the air became pure and free of pestilence. At the bridge which joins Rome to the Vatican, angels were heard singing above the picture: "O Queen of heaven, rejoice, Alleluia! for He whom you deserved to bear, Alleluia! has risen as He said, Alleluia." When the heavenly music had ceased, St. Gregory added, "O pray to God for us, Alleluia," and raising his eyes to heaven, saw the destroying angel sheathing his sword where he stood atop the monument of Hadrian's Tomb. On the top of the building the Pope later erected an immense statue of the angel, his sword in the scabbard. And to this day the structure considered Hadrian's Tomb is called the Castle of Sant' Angelo.

How could we allow this most sacred time of our Christian calendar to go by without thinking of that simple Virgin of Nazareth, whose cooperation with the Father's Will accepted the work of the Holy Spirit to 'overshadow' Her and thus give us Jesus, the Messiah, our Savior and Redeemer. Infinitely less than God but eminently greater than all humanity, Mary stands above us, yet always journeys with us. Why?! Because we are Her children entrusted to Her as She stood at the foot of the Cross. The 'Woman', praised in the first Book of Sacred Scripture, who gave birth to the Christ, is the same 'Woman' who gave birth to the Christian as the Church was born from the open side of Her Son as He hung on the Cross for all humankind. From that moment, Mary watches us with a mother's eye, intercedes for us with a mother's concern, and embraces us with a mother's love. Created in the image and likeness of God, humanity appeals to Mary as the 'highest honor of our race'.

Mary's presence, prominence, and popularity, even among those not of the Catholic/Orthodox expressions of Christianity, are indicative of the yearning of the human heart to be loved. After the Marriage Feast at Cana, our Heavenly Mother takes a silent place in the Gospels. We meet Her again at the foot of the Cross and then in the Upper Room awaiting the Promised Gift of the Holy Spirit on the Early Church. Not until St. John writes of the 'Woman about to give birth'

assailed by the 'dragon' in the Book of Revelation do we meet 'the Woman' again in Scripture, and for the last time. The Church has always seen the image of the 'Woman' of Sacred Scripture as the image of Mary. Our love and devotion for Mary has kept Her always alive in our hearts. She is the one to whom so many of us run with our joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and fears. She is the one most Catholics will defend when Her name and honor are being attacked. We speak of Her as we do of Her Son. The Real Presence of Jesus in the Sacrament is equaled by no one and nothing in this world. Nonetheless, often we speak of Mary as another kind of 'presence' that accompanies us in such a way that, with Her in our hearts and minds, we move forward confidently, trusting our Mother is with us in Her love and powerful intercession.

Padre Pio reflects on Mary and Her presence with him at Mass in these words written to Padre Agostino: The tenderness and beauty of Mary! I have never sufficiently appreciated her heart and her hand which have bestowed such benefits on me with so much love...How often has she consoled me! What great care she took to accompany me to the altar ... It seemed to me that she had nothing else to think about except myself as she filled my heart with sentiments of holy love ... (to Padre Agostino, 1 May 1912)

What was celebrated in sign, Mary bore in Her heart and mind with a depth and reality that no one ever could or ever will be able to equal. She not only received the Eucharistic Lord - Her Son, Savior (yes, 'Savior', because she was sanctified and freed of Original Sin ahead of time in her Immaculate Conception, but had to be redeemed nonetheless), and God - but also maintained such an intimacy by grace upon grace, that we can lovingly and devotionally say that heaven walked with Her wherever She went. To see Mary was to see a glimpse of heaven upon earth. Isn't that what happens to us - or at least should - when we receive Jesus in the Eucharist? When we allow the Sacred Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of the Savior to enter our humanity and become one with us in an intimate and sacramental manner, aren't we doing just as Our Blessed Mother did so many centuries ago? We 'give birth in faith to Christ' as St. Augustine reminds us. This faith and its challenges, at Communion time, must be embraced, energized, and empowered to manifest itself in the life of the one who receives the Eucharistic Lord.

Continuing his reflections on the Eucharist, Padre Pio writes: My heart feels drawn by a higher force each morning before I am united with Him in the Blessed Sacrament. I have such a hunger and thirst before I receive Him that I almost die, and precisely because I am incapable of not uniting myself with Him ... Instead of being appeased after I have received Him sacramentally, this hunger and thirst steadily increase. When I already possess the Supreme Good, then indeed the abundance of sweetness is so great that I very nearly say to Jesus: 'Enough, I can hardly bear any more'. I almost forget that I am in the world; mind and heart desire nothing more and sometimes for quite a long time even the will to desire anything else is lacking in me. ( to Padre Benedetto, 29 March 1911)

I feel a great desire to tell you many things ... My head and my heart were burning with a fire which did me good. My mouth tasted all the sweetness of the immaculate Body of the Son of God ... If I could only bury within my heart these consolations, I should be in paradise! ... How happy Jesus makes me! How sweet is his spirit! ... Jesus, my food! ... What distresses me most is that I repay all this love of Jesus with so much ingratitude ... He continues to love me and to

draw me closer to Himself. He has forgotten my sins and one would say that He remembers only His own mercy. Each morning He comes into my poor heart and pours all the effusions of His goodness ... But praised be the mercy of Jesus! (to Padre Agostino, 21 March 1912)

What wonderful words! What powerful expressions of an intimate love between the human and the Divine! When we encounter individuals who are deeply in love, that love can be seen in their demeanor. Ask them about their love, though, and they seem embarrassed to respond. The intimacy true love reaches in hearts and souls 'in love' can only be experienced, never exhaustively explained. It can be seen in its effects but not really 'dissected' in explanations. Love is of God, and true love is a mystery to which all are called. Love must be lived to be experienced, and once experienced it must be loved to be lived fully. The 'virtuous circle' of love consists in this: the more we love, the more we know love and are capable of loving. The Eucharist we receive at the moment Holy Communion - our 'sacred bonding' with Jesus - offers us the opportunity to enter the Love of God in Jesus. We allow His Holy Spirit to 'overshadow' our lives with grace. Just as Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit and became the Mother of God, so we have the possibility to be filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit according to our cooperation with grace, and thus we 'give birth to Christ in our hearts'. The deeper the 'communion' with Jesus, the more we experience what Padre Pio sought to convey in the passages from his letters we just read.

The millennial continuation of the Real Presence of Our Savior among us around the world depends upon the consecration of the sacramental signs of bread and wine. This is accomplished through the ministry of those men called and ordained to the priesthood. The faithful share in this priesthood through Baptism. In the Eucharistic Sacrifice they accept to participate actively in the mystery of the Life-Passion-Death-Resurrection-Glorification of Jesus. They acknowledge their belief in the Sacrifice offered and strengthen the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ in their Holy Communion worthily received. They, like the priest, are called to let the Sacred Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of the Savior enter their lives and flow through every fibre of their being, thus enlivening their faith and filling their hearts with inexpressible inner joy and peace - the effects of the Eternal Love that possesses them. How many of us can really say we allow that to happen? How many of us 'feel' the effects of their Holy Communion? How many consider the expressions used exaggerated, unreal, poetic, or of another era?! There are those who reading the words of Padre Pio, and not knowing who wrote them, would think them written by a 'religious fanatic'. Yes, we are incapable of expressing the depth of the love we experience in the Eucharist, often because we do not give ourselves the time and silence to allow the Sacred Guest to speak to our hearts. We are always in such a hurry. How many good Catholics run out of Church as soon as they have 'devoutly' received Communion?! - and I do not mean those who must go to work or whom some serious act of charity is calling. The brief period after Communion, before the Last Prayer-Blessing-Dismissal, is an awesome moment, and a necessary one for us to allow the Truth Whom we have received, to lead us on the One Who is the Way, as He nourishes us with Himself and strengthens us on our lifetime journey to Eternal Life.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us remember a great saint of the nineteenth century who died the year Padre Pio was born, Don Bosco. His dreams, visions, and prophecies concerning the Church are quite revealing. Among them he speaks of the Church as a ship, with the Holy

Father at the helm, steering it through severe weather on rough and stormy seas. The ship moves to a safe harbor as it is directed between two columns. The Eucharist is atop of one and Our Lady is atop of the other. The Eucharist and Mary are the strengths (the 'columns') of our Catholic Christian faith. Mary, so loved by Padre Pio and his Spiritual Children, leads us to Jesus. Mother of the Most Blessed Sacrament, First 'True' Tabernacle, First Monstrance, shows us the way. Let us follow Her example and invoke Her prayers and protection in the ancient Easter Marian Anthem that reminds us of the severe plague that subsided at Her intercession. The Church and the world need the intercession of the Mother of all Humanity to abate the plague of anti-Catholic, anti-Christian, anti-God campaigns that afflict the world today. May we witness Her almighty intercession with the Eternal Father. We rejoice and are glad for the Lord is truly risen, and sing our 'Alleluia' of thanksgiving ahead of time to God Who always hears and answers our prayers. God renews the joy of our youth...For the Lord is truly risen, Alleluia. 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 each one of us; 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