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The Lord give you his peace!

On 10 August 1910, Francis Forgione, Fra Pio of Pietrelcina was ordained a priest in the Canons' Chapel of the Cathedral of Benevento. The years in preparation were not easy ones. His health problems were always a concern for his superiors. They questioned a certain stability necessary not only for the priestly ministry but also for the austerity that his Capuchin life demanded of him. The sincerity and faithfulness to his professed life as a Capuchin priest were never in question. The superiors were deeply concerned about his physical resistance to the added demands of his priestly ministry. Difficulties and concerns were eventually resolved and Fra Pio received the necessary permission to be ordained. With the imposition of the hands of the ordaining bishop, 'Fra Pio' became 'Padre Pio', 'another Christ' in the ministerial priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church. His years of preparation and uncertainties came to an end. He and Christ would now share the awesome mystery of redemption in the celebration of the re-presentation of Calvary; and he would strive every day of his life to become more intimately one with the Victim he offered and received.

After his ordination in Benevento and a brief stay in Pietrelcina, Padre Pio went to Naples for a medical check up. His health seemed to be deteriorating quickly. In fact, the doctors diagnosed Padre Pio with a little more than a month at best to live. They urged the Minister Provincial to get him to the nearest friary so that he could be comfortable with his religious family. He arrived at the friary of Venafrò towards the end of October, and there he lived in prayerful communion with God and his Capuchin brothers for several weeks until he went to his hometown of Pietrelcina. Strange happenings! Elsewhere he was deathly ill; at Pietrelcina he quickly regained strength and apparent health. Of all the mysterious happenings in the life of Padre Pio, no one ever knew, or has divulged, why it was 'necessary' in God's design of things for Padre Pio to spend so much time away from the friary living in his hometown under the guidance and spiritual assistance of the revered and holy pastor of the town. Here, as later at San Giovanni Rotondo for over fifty years, Padre Pio offered the Eternal Victim in the Eucharist for all humanity. Together with the Sacrifice of Christ, he offered 'his Mass' daily placing himself on the altar of unconditional surrender to God's Will where the sacrifice of Jesus was mystically renewed in his personal spiritual passion- death and, yes, even 'resurrections' confounding the odds and prognoses of those who thought his end was near. Man proposes; God disposes.

A beautiful reminder often found in sacristies for the priest to reflect upon before celebrating the Eucharist says: Priest of God, celebrate this Mass as your first Mass, as your last Mass, as your only Mass. Each day Padre Pio lived this reminder in the total experience of the Eucharistic

Mystery. It was an added suffering for him when, because of health, he could not celebrate the Mass. The priesthood was not an extra 'apostolate' or 'ministry' for him. The Eucharist was his life. Even when age and health affected him, accompanied to the altar, he entered a realm of reality that others could only imagine. The pain of becoming one with the Victim was also the joy of celebrating the gift of heaven on earth. Preparation for Mass was lengthy and intense; thanksgiving after Mass, though filled with those who sought his blessing or desired to kiss his wounded hands or hoped to hear a word or catch his gaze, was filled with the gratitude of one who had heard, seen, looked upon and touched with his hands the Lord of life made visible to him that he might proclaim and testify to the eternal life that was with the Father and made visible to us. (adapted cfr. 1 John 1: 1-2)

Eucharist and Reconciliation are one celebration of the Father's mercy, love and providence in Jesus. Over the years, Padre Pio's days were taken up with hearing the faults and sins of thousands and being the instrument of reconciliation between God and them. Correspondence with those who came to know of this 'Wounded Priest of the Gargano' was so great that friars were assigned to help respond to the letters from around the world. People of all stations in life - professionals, politicians, prelates, blue-collar workers, farmers, priests and religious, believers and non-believers, friends and 'foes' - seemed to fulfill the saying made to Jesus when the apostles finally found Him at prayer, after a grueling day of preaching, teaching, and healing: Everyone is looking for you.

Then there was the Hospital, the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, that would demand his attention in his later years. This was the 'Work' that Padre Pio began to remind his spiritual children and all others who sought his prayers that faith without works is dead. The ultimate Sacrifice of Christ that he shared with the Savior through his priesthood, made him ever more aware of the sufferings that surrounded him and the needs of the people. Physical healing would only be complete when the soul also experienced God's healing grace. The Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza is a reality that necessarily flows from the Eucharistic and priestly heart of Padre Pio. Jesus, the Suffering Servant, instilled in His twentieth century representative the personal mission to assist the sick and infirm, in their most vulnerable moment in life, that they might touch the love and compassion of God through him. The Eucharistic Lord filled his life with the wisdom that comes only from God and the strength that is fruit of one's total trust in Him. The fruits of his relationship with Jesus were so innumerable that people today can still recount how Jesus touched their lives through him.

What did Padre Pio have to say about the wonderful privilege and awesome responsibility that the Lord called him to share with Him in becoming His priest-victim for the modern world?

- I have lots of things to tell you but find no words to express myself. I can only say that when I am close to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament my heart throbs so violently that it seems to me at times that it must burst out of my chest. Sometimes at the altar my whole body burns in an indescribable manner. My face in particular seems to go on fire. I have no idea, dear Father, what these signs are (To Padre Benedetto, 8 September 1911).
- After Mass my head and my heart were burning with a fire which did me good. My mouth tasted all the sweetness of the immaculate Flesh of the Son of God. At this moment when I still feel almost all the sweetness, if I could only bury within my heart these consolations, I should

certainly be in paradise. How happy Jesus makes me!...Jesus, my food! (To Padre Agostino, 21 March 1912)

- During my Mass in the morning I was touched by a living breath. I cannot convey the slightest idea of what happened within me in that fleeting moment. I felt completely shaken, filled with extreme terror and I almost passed away. This was followed by a state of total calm such as I had never before experienced. (To Padre Benedetto, 27 July 1918)

- My dear Father, as I write where do my thoughts fly? To the great day of my ordination. Tomorrow, the feast of Saint Lawrence, is also my anniversary. I have already begun to experience again the happiness of that day which is so sacred to me. Already this morning I began to have a taste of paradise... And what will it be when we taste it for all eternity? When I compare the peace of heart I experienced on that day with the peace of heart I have begun to feel since the eve of this feast, I find no difference. (To Padre Agostino, 9 August 1912)

- I was about to vest for Mass but was obliged to retire from the sacristy and go elsewhere to give vent to my pain. While I was celebrating Mass, exactly during the consecration, Jesus comforted me for a brief moment, but then it began all over again. (To Padre Benedetto, 3 June 1921)

Padre Pio took to heart the words recited by the Bishop at his ordination: Imitate what you touch, so that, celebrating the death of the Lord, you may mortify in your body all vice and concupiscence. He became a 'victim' with Jesus now that he was 'another Christ'. He offered his life for and with others.

For the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, participation at the Eucharist must not be merely a pious practice among others. It should not be a devotional exercise we perform, even in a hurry, to say that we 'got the Mass in', without any awareness that the Mass is the center of our life as Catholics, much less as spiritual children of Padre Pio. Jesus is here and awaits us! The celebration of the Mass is such a sublime act that we must be prepared to offer our very selves to God together with Jesus. One of the main moments in the monthly meeting of our Prayer Groups is the celebration of the Eucharist and Eucharistic Adoration. There is a fundamental reason for these, wanted by Padre Pio. Christ must be the Center! If He is not, everything else becomes just 'nice' things that we say and do, but they lack the substance; they lack the source and goal; they are merely gibberish of words and useless flaunting of activities.

Padre Pio accepted his ministerial priesthood as the gift it was. We, as his spiritual children, must accept our sharing in the priesthood of the baptized by the way we become the Eucharist, in our own daily lives, fulfilling the roles that God has assigned us in the accomplishment of His Divine Plan of Restoration of Humanity in the Person and Passion of Christ.

In this month that celebrates also the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us remember what this wonderful privilege tells us, among other things. We are all called to share in the gift of the Resurrection of Jesus. Our whole person - body and soul - is destined for eternity. Mary's acceptance of the Father's Will made Her the First Disciple and the Mother of the Christ and thus Mother of the Christian. Her acceptance of the Father's challenge to be Mother of the Messiah introduced Her to all the other privileges we celebrate in Mary and, ultimately, Her Resurrection, ahead of time, as Queen of Heaven and all Creation. The Word

was made Flesh in Her and through Her. The Eucharist is made 'Flesh' through the words of the priest, as well as in each one who receives Him. In Mary's Assumption let us remember the dignity and glory to which we, Her children, are called. Let the Eucharist be our pledge of future glory, as it was for our Father and Founder Padre Pio. Thus the Mass we celebrate and offer with the priest will be a sun that irradiates blessings and joys on us and on all whom we encounter. It will become for us, as one of our Capuchin Saints, Saint Lawrence of Brindisi, said of it: The Mass is my heaven on earth. That it could be so for us!

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

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator