

Padre Pio Prayer Groups
National Office
St. Francis of Assisi
1901 Prior Road
Wilmington, Delaware 19809

tel: (302) 798-1454 fax: (302) 798-3360 website: pppg.org email: pppgusa@gmail.com

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

In a moment of anguish and inner pain, Padre Pio wrote to his spiritual director Padre Benedetto. He wrote to Padre Benedetto of a spiritual difficulty he was experiencing, and also asked about a person whose spiritual welfare concerned them both, but with whom Padre Benedetto was in more direct contact.

Padre Benedetto responded to Padre Pio's letter briefly and to the point: It is not possible to keep in touch directly with that soul...and...You should not be worried about what you are suffering, because whenever there is a desire for divine love and a holy fear, we may be quite sure it is a question of a divine action invariably directed toward the soul's eternal good. So do not worry.

As you can see, even the saints could not have things as they thought they should be. Desirous of living in the prompting of the Spirit for them, they sought direction from persons reputed for being people of knowledge, good sense and holiness. They accepted their advice and direction so they could be more certain to follow God's will and not just their own impulses or desires. The way to heaven is not paved with acts of our own will, camouflaged to look like God's. God speaks in many ways. Often the response to our prayers seems totally contrary to the request. What we see as effective, God seems to consider unnecessary. The desired presence, encouragement, counsel we seek or want to offer is often shelved and we are asked to be patient, to let things be, not to worry...to let go and let God do as He wills.

Whether it is in the lives of those we want to assist, or more intimately in our own life's search for a deeper relationship with the Eternal One and a more meaningful life, God must be first! Your will and not mine be done! The words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before our redemption was secured for us on Calvary, are words that must take hold of our lives. We must die daily to our ego and self-centeredness, in order to come alive in the Spirit and be shining images of the Light Who came to lead us from spiritual darkness to the brilliance of a life-giving existence. How do we do this?

Dying is the answer and key word. It's a question of death and dying. These two words stand out especially during the month of November dedicated to the memory of those who have gone before us into eternity. The Holy Souls in Purgatory are the myriads of people down through the millennia who await now the promise to be fulfilled for those who were faithful but must be purified in the fires of God's love, mercy and providence. They were where we are; they are where we hope to be, by God's grace. Heaven is humanity's goal. Since our nature, subject to the consequences of Original Sin, affects the purity of our intentions, it is only God's love that can make us worthy of Eternal Life. The stages leading to the beginning of this Life are bodily and spiritual dying and death. But, as much as we articulate these words and recite them in prayers, most people feel an aversion to them. We often quickly find substitute expressions to camouflage these words so that they sound less final, less drastic. Everyone seeks to prolong and better his/her life, often through what seem to be or are in fact foolish and exaggerated means. People will pop pills, smear salves, perform tiring and sometimes even dangerous calisthenics, some even go so far as to have surgical procedures performed, some have themselves frozen until they can be "defrosted" at a later time, and so many other means are sought or employed in the hope of prolonging one's life or retarding the aging process. But, ultimately, Sister Death does arrive to accompany us from time into eternity. Sister Death is sent by our Loving Father to lead us home to His loving embrace.

Our Christian Faith and Catholic tradition remind us of the Four Last Things that all people will eventually encounter: Death, Judgment, Heaven or Hell. While the first two are inevitable for all, the last two, Heaven or Hell, are determined by the choices one knowingly and decidedly makes while on earth. Some things we accept easily: we accept life as the fact that it is. Other things we conveniently forget or avoid. We avoid thinking about death and try to avoid it at all costs, no matter how inevitable it is. We reason out of our lives and minds what might cause harm and assure ourselves of what we consider better things, thus eliminating personal responsibility and accountability. We make heaven not the ultimate goal to which we should aspire by a faith-filled life, but a right we have to possess. Following this process, we almost eliminate from our minds and reflections the reality of that place that Jesus Himself reminded us is reserved for those who knowingly and willfully opt to distance themselves from God and His Divine Will. Where your heart is there will your treasure be. If our heart is in heaven, our lives and actions will always be directed there.

This reasoning process is usually the result of fear for sins and faults that were never totally corrected in life. We forget that God's mercy knows no limits for those who trust in Him. Thus, the Church continually reminds us that God's Word speaks in many places of praying for the deceased, and some of the parables of Jesus speak of places where debts are paid back after the normal course of a life is ended or interrupted. These reminders tell us that between eternal bliss and eternal damnation there is a place of hope that allows us to enter into the love, mercy and providence of God. This place - Purgatory - tells us that God's love will never close His Heart to wayward children who truly repent, and that He, from all eternity, has provided a last resort to definitively bring us to Him.

Purgatory is a teaching that has been ridiculed by those not of our tradition, and even downplayed by some of our own Catholics. We hear so much about toxins, toxic waste, toxic gases that can cause innumerable deaths. We are concerned about the toxic matter that is in the earth and needs thousands of years to decompose and deactivate. The word "purgatory" refers to a place where we are cleansed of those spiritual toxins that still infect our soul after its departure from this life. God's justice cannot allow such imperfection to invade heaven, but God's mercy will not allow one who died still infected, but sincerely seeking spiritual healing, to suffer eternal separation from Him. Why are we so prone to believe the "miracles" that scientists promise to do for us, and yet doubt God's all-providing and merciful love for his weak children who sincerely seek Him?!

While it is impossible to explain eternal truths clearly in human terms, it is interesting to read what the saints have to say about Purgatory. Saint Frances of Rome tells her spiritual daughters that Purgatory is nothing other than a section of Hell which is divided into various parts. Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us that the fires of Purgatory are similar to those of Hell. Even Padre Pio, in a letter to one of his spiritual daughters, states: My daughter, in certain spots (Purgatory) is like Hell. The greatest pain of Hell, and thus of Purgatory in this sense, is the separation from God through one's own fault. There is, however, an essential difference: Hell is permanent; Purgatory is temporary.

Purgatory is a hell with hope. This contradiction in terms does make sense: The loss of God is hell, but the knowledge and assurance of the soul's eventual entrance into eternal life is Joy. Thus, Purgatory is a place where the pains of despair are tempered by the refreshing breath of hope. This hope accompanies the souls throughout their sufferings as an encouragement and support. Throughout life's journey the Church prays and supports her children who suffer in the antechamber of Heaven. The Church Triumphant glories in God's presence and intercedes for all of us. The Church Militant continues life's earthly journey and battles between the two forces that determine the spiritual valor and value of each combatant. The Church Suffering lives the pains of separation in hope-filled joy, confident in God's mercy, in the prayers and sacrifices of their sisters and brothers still on pilgrimage in this world, and of their imminent release and entrance into the Father's eternal and loving embrace. Purgatory is that place where God's justice and mercy meet. Where God's justice is His mercy. Where souls who struggled valiantly through life and were wounded in the daily battles they endured, bare their scars before God, and implore the compassion and mercy of the Father that Jesus manifested to others when He walked among us.

Padre Pio's experiences with the Holy Souls were innumerable. He himself tell us that he was uneasy when he first realized that the souls themselves were visibly present to him and asking his prayers, especially the great prayer of the Eucharist, to liberate them from their purifying pains in Purgatory. He eventually became so accustomed to their visits and conversations that they became the ordinary extraordinary moments of his every day experiences. When we view life through the eternal perspective offered us in Jesus, we see death as the doorway that leads to a Life fulfilled in every way, there God is all in all. There we see God face to face as He is. There faith and hope no longer are needed, and Love reigns supreme. There we surrender

ourselves totally to the One Who surrendered Himself for us to death and to death on a cross. There the One Who enfleshed Himself in our human history transforms time into an eternal intimacy of never ending joy for those washed in the blood of the Lamb. November, with its somber weather (at least for us in the Northern Hemisphere of the world), cold days, sleeping nature, is just God's way through creation to remind us of the ongoing life-giving process of God's grace. What seems like death is nothing less than the dormant period of hidden activity, the process that brings new life.

Everybody talks about heaven, but it seems as though so few are in any hurry to get there. As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us look to heaven and live in its light. Let our hearts not be troubled at the thought of what leads us there. As Jesus tells the Apostles: You have faith in God (the Father); have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwellings places. I am going to prepare a place for you so that where I am, you also may be. Our unity as Prayer Groups, our Eucharistic celebrations and adoration, our Rosaries, our sharing of Catholic values, our acts of charity on behalf of those less fortunate than we, seek to keep us focused on our goal - Heaven. With our sites clearly focused on eternity, our course is direct, our goal assured, and our journey is peaceful and joyful even in the midst of difficulties and burdens, through the support, concern, and encouragement of those with whom we share the same spiritual gifts.

Let us always remember to pray for the Holy Souls of the Faithful Departed that they rest in peace and come quickly to the joys they so intensely desire. Invoking our heavenly Mother's intercession, we ask that she, Mother and Queen of the Holy Souls and of all God's children, pray for them.

Before concluding this letter, please accept my sincere best wishes for a very Happy Thanksgiving. In the midst of our personal difficulties, or the problems and fears that we as a nation experience, there is a God who cares for us. Give thanks to God for being God. Give thanks to God for His love. Give thanks to God for having created you so that you could know, love, serve Him here and share eternity with Him. Give thanks to God for He is good, His love is everlasting. (Psalm 136: 1)

May the Father in His love shower His mercy upon us; may the Son "be Jesus" to us as Redeemer and Savior and not our judge; and may the Holy Spirit enlighten our hearts with the gift of His grace-filled presence. May Our Lady guide, guard and protect us at all times; and mayr St, Pio of Pietrelcina, our Father and Founder, keep all of us, his Spiritual Children, in his loving care.

Be assured of a remembrance in my prayers everyday, and especially this month on Thanksgiving Day, as I personally thank God for all of you and for your love and commitment to the spirit of Padre Pio with which you have accepted to be his "Militia of Prayer" for a world so much in need of opening its heart to God's Will. As we praise God in thanksgiving for all His blessings to us, we thank God for calling us to be a blessing to others. We thank God for being God, creating

us as his beloved children, and giving us in Jesus the grace to be sisters and brothers redeemed in the Blood of Christ.

Happy Thanksgiving to you and your loved ones!

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator