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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

May the Infant Jesus grant your heart the Peace you desire.
May His Star enlighten your mind with the splendor of His Truth.
May His Love consume your heart so that it beats solely for Him. (P. Pio)

Peace, Truth, and Love are the gifts Padre Pio desires for his spiritual children. Padre Pio offers this greeting as a prayer for all his spiritual children that they receive the life-enhancing effects of the Father's greatest gift, Himself in Jesus, Whose birth in time we anticipate and celebrate during the Advent-Christmas Season. His greeting is more prophetic than it might seem to those who read the words as a mere traditional 'season's greetings'. The three gifts mentioned are the beginning of hope proclaimed at Jesus' birth - Peace; the process of Jesus' life and ministry - Truth; and the source, norm, and aim of Jesus' life - Love.

Peace, Truth and Love are independent attributes and virtues that have an effect on each other. Taken together, they have the ability to fill a soul with real and lasting Joy. When we enter this 'three-step program', we have an insight to understand a little more the depths of the Christmas Joy we wish one another. Most people want to be 'happy'; and there is obviously nothing wrong with being happy. Happiness is a wonderful experience. Happiness often brings with it a sense of elation, relaxation, optimism, and more of those 'good feelings' we all enjoy. Regretfully, this sensation is not permanent. Unless there is Joy in our heart and soul, happiness is only a passing moment with no real lasting effect except that of regret that it did not last longer; and it leaves a yearning for the 'feeling' to return. When we follow the 'process' of that simple Christmas Greeting of Padre Pio, Peace-Truth-Love, a more lasting Joy enters our heart and soul. It is this Joy that Christmas and the Mystery of the Incarnation help us to acquire. When we understand how the Eternal Word, equal to God from all ages, entered human history so that humanity could enter the timelessness of God's Love, we lay the groundwork for the Peace-Truth-Love of God to possess us. God Himself offers us insights into all this through His own inspired Word.

Take care you remain tranquil and do not fear ... Unless your faith is firm you shall not be firm! ... The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (cfr. Isaiah 7: 4-15) For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and

forever peaceful. (Isaiah 9: 5-6) ... who brings glad tidings announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation ... (Isaiah 52: 7)

There was a time when we would hear the word 'Shalom', the Hebrew word for 'Peace', extended to others at the moment of the Sign of Peace during Mass. Our own Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi made the word 'peace' his own particular greeting: The Lord give you peace! When we reflect upon what peace means to us and pray for it, most often what we ask for is tranquillity of soul or cessation of some external violence affecting ourselves or others. This peace is most needed and an appropriate gift to prayerfully request of God. However, in Scripture, the word 'Shalom' that we translate as 'peace' has a deeper and more life-altering meaning. Our ancestors in the faith of Abraham, from whom our Savior descended according to the flesh, used this word to mean 'completeness', 'fullness', 'integrity', and the like. Anything flowing from this 'fullness' and 'completeness' is another expression of 'shalom'.

The Mystery of the Incarnation begins with 'shalom'. The Angel Gabriel came to Mary and greeting her said: 'Shalom' favored one! The Lord is with you. (Luke 2: 28) This greeting of fulfillment, completeness, wholeness filled Mary with a sense of confusion at why this should be said to Her. The prophecies were now to be fulfilled, the time established had reached completion, the person to enter human history was the Creator/creature in the wholeness of a Person Whose two distinct and total natures were not in conflict but in total harmony with each other. 'Shalom', the Angel said to Mary, as an introduction and encouragement to accept the challenge because, with Her consent, the Father would send His Spirit to overshadow Mary that His Covenant and all the Prophecies would be fulfilled in Jesus, His Incarnate Son, the Word made flesh. 'Shalom-Peace' is anything but an apathetic courteous greeting. It is an eternally packed word that brings harmony and serenity, and leads to acceptance of the Truth.

Jesus then said ... 'If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (John 8: 31-32) I have much more to tell you ... but when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. (John 16: 12-13) Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said, 'Father, ... Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. (cfr. John 17: 1-17) Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. (John 18: 37)

Peace of heart and soul is a liberating gift. Inner peace frees us to be who we were created to be, there is no longer any need to protect an 'image' of what we want others to think of us. Protective comfort zones are eliminated. Intimidating precautions and false securities that offer illusory hope are suppressed. Deceptive images we use to camouflage our real personalities are 'unmasked'. A soul at peace is transparent and that person is at peace with him/herself. Transparency is Truth. Peace frees us from the need to 'compete' with others. Self esteem is rekindled and we accept the fact that You are who you are before God and nothing more (St. Francis of Assisi). Truth and transparency, fruits of a person at peace with God, self and others, inevitably leads to Love.

The eyes of the Lord are upon those who love him ... He gives health and life and blessings. (Sirach 34: 17) For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts. (Hosea 6: 6) Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him ... Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. (John 14: 21-23)

Love is a deceptive word. It is most often used to express an emotional rapport between persons. While love can be expressed as a 'fuzzy feeling' of the senses, true love is something else. When we define love, we have already limited or even destroyed it in our minds and hearts. Peace that leads to transparency is capable of love in its fullness. We know that love is God. True spiritual love is manifest in the ability to totally surrender ourselves to the other. This surrender is not a submission to an other's dominance. Loving surrender does not count the cost, it supports and encourages, it lives the present, in view of the future, grateful for the experiences of the past. Love helps us to live in the present, and thus in the Presence of God.

It is a marvelous blessing for anyone to possess Peace-Truth-Love. To state it this way though, seems so academic. They are academic qualities, virtues, attributes that can be taught, preached, reflected upon but what are the practical effects of these three Christmas gifts of the Father to His world in Jesus? Simply put:

- Peace calms the heart and soul. It offers the space for serenity within and brings about a certain contentment, tranquility, silence in our personality and demeanor. A peace-full person is usually calm, balanced, thoughtful, patient, prudent ...
- Truth encourages the person to greater transparency, thus, to live a simpler life. A simplicity of lifestyle eradicates all exaggerations, false securities in persons, places, and things. We are relieved and free to just be ourselves.
- Love is the last of the three 'steps' that challenges us to open our hearts to others. The inner peace and total transparency free us to accept others as we would be accepted. They become 'companions on the journey' who enhance and support us as we do them. They are not obstacles to overcome or enemies to conquer. They are sisters and brothers in God's great family of creation redeemed in the Blood of the One Whose Birth we celebrate. In His Blood God's Covenant with Humanity is ratified and we become truly adopted children. We are children not of the womb; we are children of the heart, the Eternal Loving Heart of the Father.

In the various passages of Christmas greetings found in his letters, Padre Pio always has us recognize the gentleness and love that Bethlehem seeks to convey, regardless of the rejection, poverty, and sheer indigence that Mary, Joseph and the Infant Jesus had to undergo. It is the serenity (fruit of peace), the transparency (fruit of truth) and the surrender (fruit of love) that gave the Holy Family that Joy that no one could take from them. The cold of the night was nothing compared with the warmth of God's love in their hearts, and their love and surrender to each other. It is this message I believe Padre Pio seeks to convey with that simple greeting. Writing to his spiritual daughter Erminia Gargani at Christmastime, Padre Pio says: May the Infant Jesus always reign in your heart ... Our Lord loves you ... Do not neglect to turn to his holy goodness with every confidence for this reason ... Stay very close to the crib of this gentle Infant, especially during these holy days of Christmas ... Have a great love for this heavenly

Infant, and be respectful in the familiarity you will obtain with him through prayer, and full of delight at the joy of feeling within you holy aspirations and affections ... (Letter, 18 December 1918)

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio let us accept the greeting as a blessing and a challenge. Let us strive at this Holy Season and throughout the year to seek that peace that only God can give. Let us gratefully accept God's will for us and the role He has asked we fulfill in our life. Thus we shall see all others in the same light, that is 'blessed' and 'challenged'. May the words of the angels at Bethlehem to the shepherds be in our hearts and on our lips: Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests (Luke 2: 14). In this Christmas, a time for gift-giving and gift-receiving, let us recognize the gift we are and are called to be. Let us become a joy-filled, life-giving, sister and brother in the family of Padre Pio's Spiritual Children. For this intention and whatever ones you may hold most dear in your hearts, be assured that you and your loved ones will be remembered in a special way in all the Masses I celebrate during this holy season. 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.

In the Name of Jesus I wish all of you a Spirit-filled Advent and a Holy and Happy Christmas Season. As you enter the new calendar year with all its expectations and uncertainties, hopes and fears, may your dreams be fulfilled in a world renewed in Jesus and filled with His Spirit. Let us never forget: A Child is born to us! A Savior is given to us! Come, let us adore Him! Fear not! It is I! I have conquered the world!

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator