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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

**The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord let his face shine upon you,
and be gracious to you!
The Lord look upon you kindly
and give you peace!
(May He live in you.
May you always live in Him)!**

In a troubled world as ours, these words taken from Scripture, God's blessing entrusted to Moses and Aaron for His People, are the words that Saint Francis of Assisi made his own blessing. We Franciscans know this blessing quite well, and with a few variations once in a while, use it often as we offer this precious blessing-gift and invite all to live in, be at ... and just be 'peace'. Only God is Peace, but we too, sharing in the life of God through grace, can also be such a sign to others of that gift, that we seem to 'enflesh' the gift of peace that our world so desperately needs and wants.

Since the pontificate of Pope Paul VI, January 1 has been celebrated as the World Day of Prayer for Peace. This occurrence, assigned to the first day of the new calendar year, is celebrated on that day dedicated to Mary, the Great Mother of God. Seemingly distinct, they both are essentially connected in such a way that we Catholics could never consider one gift without invoking the intercession and assistance of the other 'gift' to all humanity. Mary is God's 'gift' to Himself and to all of us. Her name means peace for so many. Mary, Mother of God, Queen of Peace, introduces us to a new calendar year and encourages us to keep all these things (of the past) in (our) heart so that we may face the future confident that God will provide for all who do whatever He tells you (John 2: 5). As Mother, Mary shares in the life of Her Son, Jesus. The "sign of contradiction" ... accepted or rejected by others affected the heart of Mary as it affected Her Son. A Mother can never really be separated from the life of her child. She feels in her heart what he child goes through in life. Love never lets go! As Mother of the Christ She is also Mother of the Christian and thus Mother of the Church. Mary, our Blessed Mother, presents Jesus to us at the beginning of this calendar year and journeys with us. The doors of a new year open for us, with all the hopes and uncertainties there are. Mary enters with us and encourages us to follow more trustingly in the footsteps of Jesus.

The word itself - 'January' - indicating the first month of the calendar year, is taken from the Latin word for door, as well as the ancient Roman deity with two faces - one that looked back and the other that looked forward. It is interesting to note that the temple dedicated to this deity was closed only during times of peace, probably, as a reminder in times of peril, telling everyone to look around and be careful. Perhaps we should take the hint and look around us and within us and be careful. As this new year begins, one of the great gifts we seek in our lives is the gift of peace. The peace around us however can never become more than a truce (i.e. cessation of violence until violence starts up again) until we become people at peace: at peace with ourselves, with God, and consequently with others. Peace of mind, peace of heart, peace of soul are the first requisites leading to an

inner stability that allows us to see others and things objectively, recognize ourselves honestly, and respond rather than react to the circumstances of life.

Peace is a challenge for everyone today. This challenge demands that we gamble all we have on acquiring it. But what 'peace' are we seeking? The difficulty is in understanding just what we mean by 'peace'. What 'peace' am I ready to gamble all I have to achieve? Am I willing to stake all I have by disarming my heart to the world? Am I willing to stake all I am on God's promise to be with me and make me His 'prophet' in a world still closed to God's gift of peace, yet dreaming and struggling to achieve it alone? Am I willing to stake everything on Life rather than continue to live compromising with the world to live a precarious 'truce' that is always ready to break down and explode?

We do not like imperatives - categorical do's and don't's. They leave no room for 'wiggle space'. They are 'either-or' requisites that most people feel are an abuse of their freedom. There are certain imperatives that 'must' be accepted for the sake of our well-being. Regarding the question of peace, here are a few I believe to be extremely important:

- Peace must be rooted in God and God's Will. We seek peace through human mediation, diplomatic encounters, etc. These are humanly necessary, but when God is left out of the equation peace can never be lasting. Peace can only be realized when we journey from the poverty of Bethlehem into the Wounds of the Risen Lord. He is our Peace!
- Peace must be directed through the circumstances of life to those areas where it is most needed that it can produce fruit. We cannot expect 'peace' to happen without knowledgeable contact and participation in the world, bold witnessing, ... being 'prophets' in a desert of howling sounds that seek to drown out the voice that cries 'peace'.
- Peace must be sought through justice. Peace without justice is worse than war. Without true, sincere, God-centered-respect-for-the-other justice, we live a lie that eventually tears the false fabric of apparent peace. When one suffers at the hands of another for whatever reason, there can be no peace, and that voice cries to God for 'justice'.
- Peace that does not cost us some pain is sterile. Peace has a high price. Peace is not some prize we win at a lottery by gambling some of our surplus resources. Everyone must be involved, and everything is at stake. The moment I hold back in mistrust is the moment the process will not work. Peace is the new 'martyrdom' of our age. It is the verifying result of our ability to be or not the 'family of humankind'. To make a family thrive everyone is asked to make sacrifices. Without sacrifice, without pain, peace is sterile; it just doesn't happen.
- Peace is not a 'one-shot-deal'; it must be an ongoing process from one generation to the next. The moment we think we have achieved our goal and stop striving for it - just as in one's personal spiritual journey - that's when we start falling back into our old ways, and even become worse.

In his letter to Padre Agostino, dated July 10, 1915, Padre Pio writes: May Jesus be always in your mind, in your heart and before your eyes. May he invariably be your beginning, your continuation and your end and absorb your entire life in himself. May Jesus' Mother and ours obtain for us from her Son the grace to live a life entirely according to the heart of God ... We should always endeavor to have a will that seeks nothing but God and his glory. ... But we will never advance even a single step in this virtue if we do not strive to live in a holy and immutable peace. ... we should not allow the enemy to creep into our hearts and rob us of this peace. ... Peace is simplicity of heart, serenity of mind, tranquility of soul, the bond of love. Peace means order, harmony in our whole being: it means continual contentment springing from the knowledge of a good conscience; it is the holy joy of a heart in which God reigns. Peace is the way to perfection, indeed in peace is perfection to be found. ... We should be on the alert for every slightest sign of agitation and as soon as we realize we have fallen into dejection we must turn to God with filial confidence and abandon ourselves completely to him.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, we take his words to heart and attempt to live them more deeply. The gift of peace of soul we seek through our personal prayer and reflection. This peace we cannot keep for ourselves alone. Just as Padre Pio sought to lead others to a greater relationship with God, and through his ministry of reconciliation to help them rediscover their inner peace - or discover it - we too must be instruments of God's peace. We may not preach great and captivating sermons, or build majestic monuments to our faith, or feed thousands of the world's hungry, or cure or console innumerable sick and infirm. We may not have the magnetism of a Padre Pio, Theresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Paul the Apostle, but still, by disarming our hearts toward others, we can incisively be a source of peace and serenity to many.

Peace in the world is a dream we will long for throughout our lives. It may seem impossible. The only factor that continues its impossibility is the person who refuses to strive for peace. As Padre Pio spoke to Padre Agostino regarding inner peace, we are reminded that only the one who is at peace with his/her God and him/herself can truly and effectively be an Instrument of Peace to others and to the whole world. Let us pray for the courage to be these 'instruments' the world so desperately needs. Let us be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve this goal. Let us be rooted in God's Will in all things. let us strive to go beyond the purely intellectual understanding of peace and begin to 'roll up our sleeves' to help bring it about. The first place, where the process begins, without which it will be totally impossible to be lasting is **ON OUR KNEES BEFORE THE PRINCE OF PEACE HIDDEN IN THE SILENCE OF THE TABERNACLE, AND IN THE DEPTHS OF HEARTS THAT YEARN FOR HIM.**

There are many fears and insecurities in the hearts of so many people today. Our nation is going through some difficult times. Peace is the best gift for which to pray, both for ourselves and for our entire nation. We pray for peace within, that we may have insight and vision to see more clearly where God is leading each one of us. We also pray for our leaders, that they may tirelessly and sincerely work for justice and peace in our nation and the whole world.

My prayers are with all of you and your loved ones for a most blessed and peace-filled New Year 2018. 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.

JESUS, OUR PEACE, DOES NOT DISAPPOINT ANYONE WHO PLACES TRUST IN HIM. LORD, THIS YEAR AND ALWAYS WE PLACE OUR TRUST IN YOU!

**Jesus, be a guiding star before you.
Be a soothing wake behind you.
Be a rolling path below you.
Be a flaming hope within you.
Be all things - now and forever
(for you, with you, in you and through you).**

Peace and Blessings
Happy and Blessed New Year 2018
Fr. Francis A. Sariego, O.F.M. Cap.
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