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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

**The Lord give you his peace!**

What attracted and still attracts many to Padre Pio? For a number of people the obvious response is the 'extraordinary character' that surrounded his life: stigmata, prophecy, healing, bilocation, reading of hearts. God offers us the extraordinary signs to remind us that God is with us. Suspending or enhancing the laws of nature are a message that what seems permanent is only passing. Saint Teresa of Avila says: Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. all things are passing. God alone remains. Who possesses God possesses all things. If we seek only the extraordinary, we may fail to recognize the wonderful gifts found in the 'ordinary' experiences of life. God is always at work fulfilling His will in the ordinary and extraordinary. In the same way, if we focus on 'the wonder of the miraculous' in the life of Padre Pio, we may lose sight of the ever-present gifts of grace in him. We too share those gifts with him according to our cooperation with God's grace. The gift of grace we receive at Baptism awaits to be developed in our own unique way so that our lives be God-centered, following Jesus and the Gospel ... in a word, that our lives be holy!

Holiness is not a static quality. It is exciting and 'ever-new', to paraphrase Saint Augustine, O (Holiness), ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved You. True holiness is a reflection of the One Source of all Life, Whose Love is eternal, and Who is always at work in creation. Like the moon, a 'holy' person reflects the light of the Son of God, Jesus, in Whose Name we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 18:28). Holiness reflects the goodness of God in our human nature. Though weak and infinitely less perfect than God, grace urges us to be active agents of God to others. As the adage goes, saints, like the prophets of old, are called into service for others in the name of God, in order to give comfort to the troubled and to trouble the comfortable. They are women and men who have turned their lives over to the Lord, and who must confidently struggle like all human beings to fulfill the purpose for their existence. Scripture tells us that this purpose is: Be holy because I your God am holy (Leviticus 19:2) ... Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

We grow in holiness according to our personal cooperation with grace and thus achieve that perfection, of which Jesus speaks to his disciples, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit Jesus gave as the Gift of Easter to His Church is the same Holy Spirit we receive at Baptism and Who strengthens us at Confirmation. The Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son is the 'God within' (In the Greek the word is 'en-theos' from which we get the word 'enthusiasm') encouraging us to be excited about life and our role in fulfilling God's eternal plan for all creation. 'Holy' people are not secluded from the world. They live aware of their responsibility 'to be Jesus', to be the image of Christ to others. Like Jesus, they too must endure the consequences of rejection as well as the joys of acceptance.

The various words taken from Hebrew and Greek originally used to express the word 'holy' actually indicate a 'separate-ness', an 'other-ness', an 'un-earthliness'. The world and our lives seen from that perspective make the challenge more interesting. Holiness is not a question just of not doing bad things. It is a life grounded in the reality of the world of which we are intimately a part by nature, but lived in a way that allows the 'super-nature' to always be the root and goal of every moment. It takes a lifetime to fulfill and that's what makes it interesting and exciting. Every moment till the end of our earthly journey is an act of faith in God, of trust in His providence for the future, and of love for the One Who journeys with us through time to eternity. The Eucharist, source of holiness, is the constant pledge and strength of the One Who said: I am with you always (Matthew 28: 20). It is the Eucharist that gives meaning and purpose to all we do, since in this wonderful Sacrament we are one with the Lord in everything. We do not always seem to achieve what we proposed in life. What matters is that we achieve what God disposed for us in life. Father ... not my will but Yours be done (Luke 22:42). Holiness is a question of seeing and living all things in the light of God's Eternal Will. We must be able to say with Jesus: It is accomplished (John 19: 30); or with Saint Paul: I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance. (2 Timothy 4: 7-8).

Goodness surrounds us in many ways. Often we fail to recognize the depth of it because it is so 'normal'. Holiness takes on many faces. Character, circumstance, challenges, and the like, influence how holiness is perceived and/or expressed. One drawback is that 'saints' are often targeted, ridiculed, ostracized, 'scrutinized' in a spirit of charity and transparency that often causes true inner suffering. Padre Pio was the object of just such an approach his entire life. Even at the time of his death there were people who had their own misgivings regarding Padre Pio and his mystical experiences and 'heroic' virtue.

A lot has to do with how holiness is portrayed and perceived. There are varied ways in which sanctity is portrayed, presented and even promoted in this world. The image is so often distorted, exaggerated, and sometimes even rendered ridiculous because of fanaticism and misguided 'religiosity'.

- Self-styled saints make it difficult for anyone to live with them, since they see themselves as the 'code of holiness'. Holiness without humility is just pride with a mask!
- There are good people who struggle each day to live God's will and pray and want others to do the same. They forget that holiness like love is an act of the will. Holiness strives to cooperate with God's will at every moment. The good flowing from our lives, in God's good time, touches others. No one can be forced to be 'holy' but anyone in proximity to many 'well-meaning holy ones' are often 'bulldozed' into one practice or another. 'Live with a saint and become a martyr' is an adage that may have its foundation in these two examples. They forget that the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).
- Then there are the 'saints' who strive to live in God's will, to 'live Jesus' and His Gospel, and who offer others by their words and example the opportunity to understand God's love. As they grow cooperating with grace at their own pace, they become an encouraging example for others. Nevertheless, the more they affect the lives of others by their good example, the more they become the object of scrutiny and personal demands to ascertain their authenticity.

Until his definitive re-entry to San Giovanni Rotondo on 18 March 1918, Padre Pio's difficulties revolved around his mysterious illnesses and military conscription. Things would change a few months later. People recognized the goodness of this friar wherever he was stationed. He had young aspirants and young adults who happily received his spiritual guidance or even the more formal 'spiritual direction'. He was a 'good' and 'holy' friar like others, even though people recognized that he was 'different'. However, after he received the Stigmata on 20 September 1918, his real 'Way of the Cross' began. One would think that such an 'obvious' sign of God's favor would lead people to reverently flock around him, and the 'official' Church to appreciate and revere a favored son so singularly blessed. That's not the way it works! Thousands did flock out of reverence and curiosity, but still many were there throughout his life to be a constant thorn for him and, consequently, for all who lived with him. The holy person lives a more intimate image of Jesus, Who Himself was rejected and scorned, though His spiritual and human integrity were without question. The more Padre Pio manifested extraordinary mystical signs in his life, the more he became the object for deeper scrutiny of every facet of his life. Even those close to him in the Order and in the Church had confusing opinions regarding him.

In a letter to Raffaolina Cerase Padre Pio speaks of holiness in very simple terms: Holiness means getting above ourselves. It means perfect mastery of all our passions. It means having real and continual contempt for ourselves and the things of the world to the point of preferring poverty rather than wealth, humiliation rather than glory, suffering rather than pleasure. Holiness means loving our neighbor as ourself for the love of God. In this connection holiness means loving those who curse us, who hate and persecute us, and even doing good to them. Holiness means living humbly, being disinterested, prudent, just, patient, kind, chaste, meek, diligent, carrying out one's duties for no other reason than that of pleasing God and receiving from Him alone the reward we deserve...Holiness contains in itself the

power to transform a man into God, according to the language of the holy books. (30 December 1915).

Spiritual Children of Padre Pio have a number of 'things' that they 'do'. Adoration, prayer, reflection are a part of the monthly activities of the Prayer Groups. Then there are many people who think that it is enough to have their names written in San Giovanni Rotondo to be spiritual children of Padre Pio. Padre Pio made it quite clear that he expected certain ways of being before he would consider someone his spiritual child. The basic objective of being a spiritual child of Padre Pio is to be a saint! This is not exaggerated or proud. All of us are called to holiness. Life and the things we do are intended to help us to fulfill this challenge. In Padre Pio we find a privileged soul who speaks to our heart. His example and words help us to see God active in our lives and evaluate our response to God's will. Like a great leader, Padre Pio helps us to have confidence in God and in the gifts God has given us. Padre Pio explained and enlightened people in their difficulties and doubts, supported and encouraged them to accept their own challenges that are permitted by God for their own growth in grace. No one can make us holy but God, and our own free will that seeks to cooperate with God's Will.

Let us all make a committed promise to the Lord each day to be holy. Let us offer each day and all it contains to the Lord. If we begin each day recommitting ourselves to the 'Covenant' the Eternal Father made with us in the Blood of Jesus that is renewed every time the Sacred Sacrifice of the Mass is offered, the gifts of the Holy Spirit will strengthen us to become the holy people we were called to be, and have sought to become through the intercession and charism of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. We all have an invitation to eventually meet in heaven. Padre Pio said that he would be there 'putting in a good word' for his spiritual children and opening the doors for us. Let us be mindful of his own admonition to those who call him their spiritual father: 'Do not be an embarrassment to me'.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio look over each one of you, his spiritual children, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator