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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you his peace!

St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Order of Friars Minor, who died in 1226, and St. Pio of Pietrelcina, a Capuchin Franciscan friar, who died in 1968, are bound together till the end of time because of the uniqueness of their experience with the mystery of our Redemption. September is the month that both, on different days and centuries apart, were granted an awesome privilege. The personalities and family backgrounds of these two men were very different. The ministries they each fulfilled were as equally different. The manner of their encounter with people was also quite distinct, though their objective was always the same: lead others to Christ. Jesus was their common bond. Jesus was their focus. Jesus was the 'treasure' where their heart could undoubtedly be found. For both, the mystery of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus was a life-giving and living experience they not only contemplated but eventually lived in a most emphatic manner for all the world to see.

St. Francis of Assisi was born into a rather well-to-do family. The attractions of his native Umbrian society and the amenities of the self-made upper middle-class family into which he was born conditioned and captivated his early life. He took advantage of the love and material gifts his father and mother gave him to the point of being considered the 'king of revelers' during his teens and early twenties. The heart knows what the head often refuses to acknowledge. Thus, in his early twenties, Francis acknowledged and sought to fill a profound void in his life. He knew he had to rid himself of his 'wants' that for many so often seem or become 'needs'. He eventually discovered the treasure *that moth cannot destroy nor rust corrode*. His spirit of Gospel life attracted thousands to follow his ideal. In September 1224, two years before death would usher him into eternity early in life, while at prayer at a solitary site on a mountaintop in Tuscany, he received the answer to his prayer. He prayed *O Lord Jesus Christ, two graces do I ask You before I die: the first, that in my lifetime I may feel, as far as possible, both in my soul and body, that pain which You, sweet Lord, endured in the hour of Your most bitter Passion; the second, that I may feel in my heart as much as possible of that excess of love by which You, O Son of God, were inflamed to suffer so cruel a Passion for us sinners*. A winged Seraph appeared to him and signed him with the visible marks of the wounds of Christ. St. Francis of Assisi, the Little Poor Man, the Universal Brother, had become a living image of the Crucified Christ. The marks gave witness to the integrity of the person who bore them and credibility to the message he had now become. *When a spirit of indifference was taking over the world, (The Lord) renewed in the flesh of St. Francis the sacred Stigmata of (His) Passion to rekindle in our hearts the fire of (His) love* (adapted Opening Prayer for the Feast of the Impression of the Stigmata).

Our own Spiritual guide and founder, St. Pio of Pietrelcina was born almost seven centuries later. As a child he was privileged with mystical experiences he thought were common to all, until he realized otherwise. He was

simple and very different in personality and family background than St. Francis of Assisi. The needs of his family would compel his father to emigrate to America several times to make enough money to compensate for what was lacking at home. From childhood, Padre Pio knew the value of work and how the hardships of life can overwhelm even the best of persons when faced with dire need. Nevertheless, St. Pio too felt a need to be emptied of 'useless baggage'. He entered a community of men bound by a common goal: to live the Gospel life in a more austere expression of the life of the followers of St. Francis of Assisi, the Capuchin Franciscan Order. Early in his priesthood, while at prayer in the choir of the little church of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo, on September 20, 1918, Padre Pio also saw a mysterious figure who left him visibly marked with the Wounds of the Passion of Christ. As his spiritual Father, St. Francis of Assisi, Padre Pio became a living image of the Crucified Christ in a world whose technological and social advances had begun to gnaw at and erode the spirit of faith and morality of the world.

Both men received a wonderful privilege that carried with it a great responsibility. Ordained ministers of the Church, Francis a Deacon and Pio a Priest, they were entrusted with the same mission: to rekindle the fire of Divine Love in the hearts of God's children. The Stigmata they bore speak volumes for those willing to 'read' them in a spirit of faith. To see each was to see the living image of the Crucified. To see them was a challenge to change. To encounter them was to recognize God speaking through them reminding all of God's limitless love and calling everyone to cooperate with grace and become the persons we were all created to be: children of the Father, redeemed in the blood of the Son, bound together in the family of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those willing to understand and accept the message of the wounds and persons signed with them, knew they were 'called to action'. The Stigmata call to action not apathy, loving not loathing, conviction not complacency, determination not doubt, commitment not compromise, life not lethargy.

Like the great priest-prophet of the Old Testament, Ezekiel, Padre Pio was to prophesy to a lethargic world suffering from spiritual dryness. Ezekiel's prophetic words speak of numberless, dry, lifeless, disjointed bones, lying on a vast field, (see Ezekiel 37: 1-14); they could be compared to Padre Pio's time - in some way even to our own - when war and its after-effects on society, economic difficulties, contagious illnesses, social restlessness, scandals among consecrated persons in the Church, immorality and amorality were taking their toll on the spiritual life of God's people. Even those of deep faith felt a dryness and spiritual fatigue. They were looking for understanding and direction. They sought out one who would journey with them and nourish them with God's Word and healing grace. The wounds of Jesus came alive in their hearts when they assisted at Padre Pio's Mass. The healing words of absolution spoken to them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation offered the effects of the Blood of Christ's wounds that washed away their sins and restored them to God's grace. The Stigmata he bore were a visible sign to all who saw those gloved hands of a presence that was reassuring, encouraging, life-giving. Isaiah spoke of the wounds of Christ centuries before His Passion and Death - *Through His wounds we are healed* (Isaiah 53: 4-5). Padre Pio accepted to let those wounds come alive once again in his own body, and became a living image of the Crucified for half a century.

The great scene of that field of bones in Ezekiel is also a reminder of what we are without God and what we become once His Word enters our lives and His Spirit-breath enters our hearts. There is a gradual and effective rebirth, a new creation, a re-creation in each one of us. God Himself intervenes by doing in-with-for us what is otherwise humanly impossible. When we feel like 'dry bones' - tired, discouraged, disillusioned, even despairing - it is the moment for us to *hope against all hope* (Romans 4: 18). God Himself will bring about our spiritual 'resurrection' in this life. The sign of our faith is the Resurrection of Christ and the Eucharist offers us the opportunity to participate in His resurrection, pledge of future life and glory. Referring to St. Francis' love for the Crucified Christ, three years before he himself received the visible Stigmata, Padre Pio's words to his spiritual daughter, Annita Rodote, speak powerfully and simply of our need to 'climb Calvary' in order to find meaning and fulfillment.

In imitation of this Seraphic Father (St. Francis of Assisi) let us love Jesus more than anything else. Let us often meditate on the suffering of the God-Man and then it will not be long before the great desire to suffer more for love of Jesus is awakened in us. Love for the cross has always been a distinctive sign of chosen souls. Being burdened with the cross has always been a sign of predilection... Our Seraphic Father understood well that without love for the cross, one cannot make much progress in the ways of Christian perfection ... he would exclaim: 'The good that awaits me is so great that all suffering is my delight' ... Jesus invites us to climb Calvary with him, so let us not refuse. Ascending the painful mount with Jesus will be a joy for us ... Mortification(s) will not be lacking either. Let us love them; let us embrace them with a cheerful soul, and let us always bless the good God in everything. (letter to Annita Rodote, 15 March 1915)

Padre Pio tells us through Annita that the cross is the only way to understand the love of God. Love for the cross is the distinctive sign of chosen souls. Jesus' wounds remind us of how He loved us to His death that we might live with Him. The Eucharist was Padre Pio's participation in this mystery of the life-giving-death of Jesus. He became so much a part of what he celebrated that many believed they saw Christ at the altar when they assisted at 'the Mass of Padre Pio'. He 'climbed Calvary' when he ascended the altar steps and there he was 'crucified with Christ' for the sake of all who came seeking God's love and mercy through his ministry.

Three years after receiving the visible Stigmata, having made his own ascent with Christ to Calvary, Padre Pio wrote to another spiritual daughter, Violante Masone. His words are an encouragement for each one of his spiritual children who strive to live their Christian faith with commitment. *I raised my hand many times ... blessing and presenting you all to Jesus and our common father, St. Francis, so that ... through you they might call many more souls; souls who have strayed from the path of justice and holiness ... Do not stop ... procuring the true path for all ... Always be faithful to God ... Pay no attention to the mocking of the foolish. Know that the saints were always mocked by the world and the worldly, but even so they placed the world and its maxims under their feet (letter to Violante Masone, 31 December 1921).*

We, the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, continue his legacy, and must be resolved to let Jesus come alive in a world grown cold to the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The 'Good News' that we preach with our lives is that *God so loved the world He sent His only Son so that all who believe in Him might have life ... He did not come to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.* When we 'climb Calvary' with Christ and accept to receive 'our own stigmata' of bearing joyfully the responsibilities and burdens that come with life, we begin to rekindle the flame of faith in the hearts of others, as it grows stronger by God's grace in ourselves. Expressions we could take from the two passages referred to above are: *imitate love, meditate on the sufferings and love of Jesus, love the cross, grow in Christian perfection, CLIMB CALVARY, embrace with cheerful soul everything, be faithful, place the world under your feet.*

Simply stated, Padre Pio offers us, through his letters to Annita and Violante, a simple and powerful way to strengthen and deepen our spiritual lives. The impression of the Stigmata of Jesus on Saint Francis of Assisi and St. Pio of Pietrelcina, celebrated this month, challenge us to remember and live the words *Per Crucem ad Lucem - Through the Cross to the Light.* May our hands be impressed with the marks of those whom we encounter and touch; our feet be those of *one who bears peace* and calloused from moving toward others

who may have estranged themselves from us; and our heart be opened by the piercing sword of love inviting all to enter into God's loving embrace through us.

May God bless you; my 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