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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord Give You His Peace!

Blow the trumpet in Zion! Proclaim a fast, call an assembly; gather the people, notify the congregation; assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep, and say, 'Spare, O Lord, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach...! Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is there God?' (Joel 2:16-17) To the devastation that an infestation of locusts was causing Israel, Joel calls the people to prayer and penance. From the terrible reality of the devastation of Israel to the great promise of the outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord, the people experience the blessings God offers them. *I will pour out my Spirit upon all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions ... I will work wonders in the heavens and on the earth ... Then everyone will be rescued who calls on the name of the Lord...* (Joel 3:1-5) God is shown as both vindicator of His people and the source of all their blessings. When they recognize that they have distanced themselves from the ways of the God of Israel and make effective efforts to 'turn back' to faithfulness to the Covenant, God enters with His help and gifts beyond the people's imagining.

Lent is the time for us to re-confirm our Covenant with God in the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus. All without exception are called to enter the Lenten journey. From Ashes to Palms we journey to the solemn experience of the holiest of all weeks. The week is the Holy Week of the Offering of the Innocent Lamb of God on the Altar of the Cross. It is through the open heart of the Lamb that the Holy Spirit is poured out on the world. Through our participation in these mysteries we are led from our spiritual separation and devastation to adoption as children of God.

Ash Wednesday begins the sacred season of Lent. Forty days established to help each one of us in our Christian commitment to *walk in the way of true conversion*. In the Opening Prayer of the Eucharist for Ash Wednesday in the Latin Sacramentary, we read these words: *O God our Father, grant that your Christian people may begin with this fast a journey of true conversion, that the weapons of penance may make them victorious in the battle against the spirit of evil.* (free translation) This prayer, that opens the season of Lent, gives us the steps we follow on the forty-day itinerary ahead of us. The prayer mentions: **CONVERSION, JOURNEY, BATTLE, WEAPONS, VICTORY ...** and a constant presence on this journey through life, 'the evil one'. These are strong words. Reflecting on them and acting on them can make Lent a spiritually beneficial time for all who acknowledge their value and seek to implement them during the holy season of Lent, and throughout life.

CONVERSION - Conversion is a 'turning around' or a 'change in direction'. As Christians we realize *My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways My ways*, as God says through the prophet. We are challenged to have a change in ideas, visions, desires, and to think as Jesus would think. It is Jesus who tells us that sin is the greatest evil that can befall a human being since sin is capable of leading us away from God for eternity. Grace is God's

greatest gift because it offers us a share in the very Life of God Himself. Before our conversion can begin, we must believe that sin is harmful. In an era that seems to have lost the sense of sin, it might not be easy. Then we must start making choices that are according to Gospel values that remind us of the choices Christ made and expected of His followers. The easiest way to do this is to live in God's Will, just as Jesus sought always to fulfill the Will of the Father, even when it led Him to Calvary and the Cross. A virtuous life makes the difficult demands doable: humility, obedience, charity, patience, temperance, chastity, and so forth. We act as Jesus acted, doing good to all, friend and enemy alike. As Jesus forgave those who offended Him, and loved everyone, even to his own death on the Cross, we love and forgive. This awareness and desire to 'change direction' and 'turn back' to a more grace-filled life, sets us on a ...

JOURNEY - Nothing happens immediately. Anything worthwhile takes time if it is to be effective and lasting. The first blast of enthusiasm often fizzles out quite soon. When desire leads to conviction and conviction to commitment, then the journey begins firmly, fixed on the goal, and 'full steam ahead'. This lifetime journey of conversion begins when God gives us His love and sanctifying grace at Baptism, the first conversion we experience. At that moment, through the will of our parents and the Church, we are freed of Original Sin and set on the road of life's experience filled with sanctifying grace. Through life, unfortunately, this grace will be tarnished and perhaps even lost for a while. The journey offers us the opportunities to regain and grow in this love of God for us. The dangers are always present, especially when we reach that point in our development that makes us, as were Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, knowledgeable of good and evil and capable of making personal choices in this regard. Thus, life's journey often, not to say always, is a...

BATTLE - Conversion is a constant battle. It is a battle with the forces within us and around us. Sometimes it is a battle with two forces within us. St. Paul himself writes about the spirit and the flesh often seeming to be at odds with each other. The great saints even struggled with faithfulness to virtue. The battle is not a lost cause. There is only one God and no matter how strong, the 'spirit of evil' is, it can never be equal to God! The spiritual battle is an experience that strengthens the weak and challenges the strong in spirit. No one willingly encounters an 'enemy' it will not be able to overpower. God's graces are always available. God's Holy Spirit and Wisdom, available to those who seek them, help us first to discern who the 'enemies' are. There are three: **Satan**, the **world**, and **vices and sins**. The problem is when we allow them to control us. Satan, chief architect of all that is evil, is *always prowling like a lion*, as St. Peter writes, *looking for someone to devour*. 'Direct assault' with most would be foolish for Satan because Satan's involvement would be obvious, and I would hope that there are few if any who knowingly and willingly would desire to accept damnation for eternity. So, after denial, delay and discouragement, which are some of Satan's best tools to lead souls astray, Satan uses the world and our own desires and needs. The world, theater of redemption, is a blessed creation that has been adulterated by humanity over the millennia. Read or watch the News, look at TV, live in certain areas of our nation; you cannot help but be aware of an 'epidemic' of violence, immorality, obscenity, blasphemy even against the goodness of God, dabbling in the occult and satanic practices. How easy it is for weak, frightened, tired, confused, indifferent, and/or otherwise challenged souls to accept to follow the easy road. This road avoids challenges to change and grow. It does not seek the strength and wholeness that comes with standing with and for the God-given values and principles in every human being, in particular the gifts we Catholics profess with our lips, and must also proclaim with our lives. In so doing, the vices and sins we allow to control us are probably the most difficult 'enemies' we encounter. They lurk within us. Becoming our 'friends' we learn how to co-exist and forget that, sooner or later, their presence will erode even the best of 'finishes'. We are God's masterpiece and cannot allow ourselves to be tarnished, pitted, rusted, and destroyed. To refinish the masterpiece we are, and overcome our 'enemies' that cause this decomposition, Lent offers us the appropriate tools. Used well, they are our invincible...

WEAPONS - For millennia the People of God have always known the best 'weapons' to use against anything that may lead them away from a holy and healthy relationship with God. In the Liturgy for Ash Wednesday, as well

as throughout the season of Lent, we are reminded of three essentials that help us to ‘turn around’ and regain and grow in God’s grace: **PRAYER, FASTING, AND ALMSGIVING**. **Prayer** establishes, strengthens, or re-establishes our personal relationship with God. Through prayer we see ourselves from the perspective of the Divine Plan. God becomes a ‘Real Presence’ in our lives in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. He is our daily Viaticum for life’s journey at every moment and in every encounter throughout the day. Then it is that the gift of existence and life we recognize in persons, places, and things remind us of the awesome presence and love of God for all and in particular for ‘me’. How can anyone not accept the challenge to keep him/herself always available to the love of such a God? Thus, the **fasting/penance** we perform are not negative acts of renunciation or denial, as much as positive choices we make to avoid allowing ourselves to be controlled by anyone or anything that could or would lessen or destroy our relationship with God. Only the individual can know what is necessary for his/her particular life, and the Church asks that we, as a Body of the Faithful, a Mystical Body of Christ, practice certain external acts that proclaim to the world to Whom we belong, for Whom we live, in Whom we journey, and Where we hope to arrive one day, freed of our excess baggage. Aware that we are all children of the same God and called to share the same journey, though each in his/her own unique manner, our **almsgiving/or charitable acts** is an openness of heart that assists, where and when possible, all our sisters and brothers who, as we, seek the same goal, whether they know it explicitly, or indirectly through us or the circumstances of life.

Our desire for personal **conversion** compels us to take the first of many steps on a **journey** on which we encounter friends and foes of our spiritual lives who must be embraced in love or fought in a spiritual **battle** with the **weapons** of faith (prayer), hope (letting go and trusting in providence to fulfill our needs), and charity/love (disarming our hearts to others as we seek to assist them however possible). Once we have embarked on this journey, guided by the Spirit of God, following the footsteps of Jesus, there is nothing less to expect than...

VICTORY! - We are victors in the Victim. We walk the road of the Cross. Though there are many difficulties we must overcome, our victory is basically a victory over ourselves. We seek to overcome that part of ourselves that hesitates or refuses to let the Holy Spirit work in and through us. The journey of Lent leads to a victory so often misunderstood. It is a victory whose trophy is a blood-stained Cross and a mangled, tortured, derided Person, executed as a common criminal. His “crime” was truth, compassion, and love. The paradox of the Cross is the glory of the Christian. The sign of contradiction becomes our sign of commitment. It is a commitment to Life through death to ourselves. *It is no longer I who live but Christ Who lives in me.* Jesus Himself said, *when I am lifted up I will call all people to myself.* We come to the foot of the Cross, at the end of our Lenten journey, not as vanquished victims, but as victors who *bear the brandmarks of Jesus in my body, therefore let no one bother me.*

Padre Pio, takes on the same theme in his letter to his spiritual daughter, Raffaolina Cerase. *For pity’s sake remember and never lose sight at any moment ... to take watchful care ... I beseech you, then, by the meekness of Jesus and by the mercy of the heavenly Father, never slacken on the path of virtue. Keep on running and don’t ever make up your mind to stop, for you know that to stand still on this path is equivalent to retracing one’s steps ... For pity’s sake, don’t render fruitless and don’t neglect the grace which was bestowed on you in Baptism and has increased in great measure by means of the other sacraments. Be watchful and never place too much trust in yourself or count excessively on your own strength. Try to advance more and more on the way to perfection and practice charity more and more, for charity is the bond of Christian perfection. Throw yourself confidently into the arms of the heavenly Father with childlike trust and open wide your heart to the charism of the Holy Spirit who is only waiting for a sign from you in order to enrich you. Yes, let us do good.* (10 December 1914).

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, take seriously his words to Raffaolina. They concisely repeat the process upon which we reflected. Lent is a time for us to keep focused and watchful (*never lose sight*), keep moving on the road and don’t stop on the journey (*never slacken on the path of virtue*), beware of pitfalls (*never place too much*

trust in yourself...don't neglect the grace of Baptism), use your spiritual weapons (advance and practice charity ... Throw yourself confidently in the arms of the heavenly Father), know the victory that brings holiness and peace (the Holy Spirit is waiting...to enrich you). At the end of this quote from his letter, Padre Pio tells Raffaolina, and us as well, Yes, let us do good. To do what is good is to do what is of God. To do what is good is to strive to be good. To be good is to live in God's grace. To live in God's grace is to have begun our heaven on earth. Lent is the beginning of our journey from Ashes to Palms, from Palms to Calvary, from Calvary to the Empty Tomb, and ultimately from the Empty Tomb to the fullness of Life. Lent is not a time for slackers. As one of our Capuchin saints of the twentieth century said, You don't go to heaven in a taxi! Let us be serious about our 'return to the future'. I like this phrase taken from the title of a comedy, because it says that we are called not to be someone else in the future but to be who we were created to be from all eternity. Thus, we must recapture and grow in the image of God and Christ in whom we were created, that the future prepared for us may be assured.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, our Spiritual Father and Guide, watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. Have a Blessed and Joyful Lent; it is a time for renewal and joyful awareness of the wonderful things God does for those who turn back to him in love.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator