

Padre Pio Prayer Groups
National Office
St. Francis of Assisi
1901 Prior Road
Wilmington, Delaware 19809

tel: (302) 798-1454 fax: (302) 798-3360 website: pppg.org email: pppgusa@gmail.com

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Risen Christ bless you with His peace!

When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he steadfastly set his face to Jerusalem ... (Luke 9:51). How often we correctly focus on the heart of a Scripture passage, but miss a detail that can offer deeper insights for a better understanding and appreciation of what we have read. The brief passage with which this letter began tells us so much about Jesus and how He 'approached' the fulfillment of His mission among us. The phrase merits our reflection as we approach Easter, the great celebration of our Redemption and New Life of grace in the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus. There is nothing more essential for us than to consider our life and our active participation in the Paschal Mystery. We unite ourselves with Christ in His obedience to the Father's Will, to His personal surrender and all His obedience implies. In so doing we encounter a more profound value to our earthly life, and thus can live in the hope of an assurance of Eternal Life. The reason I say that *there is nothing more essential for us* is because once we recognize, understand and accept God's Plan for all creation and particularly for ourselves, our life takes on a whole new meaning and expression.

The Lenten season invites us to 'set our face toward Jerusalem', just as our Savior did. Though the words from the Greek and Latin Vulgate texts can be translated in several ways, the original more faithful expression to the ancient text - *He resolutely set his face towards Jerusalem* - offers us a powerful image of Jesus 'eyeing' His opponent and moving in for the encounter and confrontation. The text speaks volumes of the character of Jesus and His personal compliance with the mission entrusted Him by the Father. Jerusalem is not another town on the itinerant schedule of Jesus the preacher. Jerusalem is not just another platform for his preaching/teaching and healing ministry to attract the crowds at Passover. Jerusalem is an anticipated and desired destination. Jesus has actively been moving both psychologically to this decisive moment and physically to this 'center of the world' for the Jews and 'Seat of God's Presence' for those who believed in the God of Abraham. Everything must be in place: The prophets and their prophecies must be fulfilled and the 'backup plan' must be ready, before 'setting his face to Jerusalem'. It is time for Jesus 'to allow' his life to be taken for the sake of all humanity. Let us never forget that no one takes His life from Him: *I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father* (John 10:17-18). Determining episodes in Jesus' life and ministry had led to this climactic moment. Each experience tested His obedience and resolve to fulfill the Father's Plan as willed. His trust in the Father and determination to obey whatever the cost to Him were put to the test, and ultimately triumphed for the sake of us all.

- He 'plunged' into the River Jordan to be baptized by John. His plunge was an acceptance of the ministry entrusted to Him by the Father. His ministry, as Simeon had prophesied so many years before in the Temple, was to be *a light of revelation to the Gentiles and glory of (the) people Israel* (Luke 2:32), and at the same time He was *destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel, and to be a sign that (would) be contradicted* (Luke 2:32). Jesus 'plunged' into the realities of our world. This world accepted Him, but also confronted,

contradicted, and condemned Him, and all this was done by recipients of His love and gifts! And He *set His face toward* them!

- He contended with the 'demon' of comfort, compromise, convenience in the desert, and withstood the easy road of complacency with the power of conviction in the Word of God. God's Word is God's Will and God's Will overcomes all things for those who place their trust in Him. Jesus did not run from the 'demon' but confronted the adversary face-to-face. Jesus was opposed by spiritual beings, who as yet were not sure if their Vanquisher was He. The word 'if' used by the tempter is so revealing! 'If' is never to be used when speaking with Jesus. No hesitancy! Let go! ... as Jesus did when *he set his face towards Jerusalem*.

- At Cana He changed water into wine, thus giving evidence of His power and uniqueness. This miracle attracted many to Him. The immediate fulfillment of His mission now begins when His followers 'believe in Him'. The extraordinary character of His actions captivate and mesmerize the wonder-seekers, as well as the vast numbers seeking hope for their confused lives. The subtle challenges of the desert test return; miracles are signs but do not make for solid faith. True Faith seeks to enter the mystery and never demands to see miracles. Only in the mystery can the miracle be an effective sign and make sense. Jesus would be opposed by those who needed 'to be entertained', or whose 'hopes' were not met according to their desires. And He *set His face toward* them!

In three years, an entire life would come full circle. The purpose for His birth would finally reach its climax, not with joyful acclamations of a people's fulfilled hopes, but with the shouts and jeers of a rabble crying out '*Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*' Beneficiaries of only goodness and compassion were instigated to cry for execution by some of the leaders of the people who could and should have known better, had not ambition and jealousy clouded their vision and hardened their hearts. None of this was hidden from Jesus' knowledge. He knew. He had told His disciples that He would be betrayed, captured, tortured, killed, and on the third day rise. When Peter would not have Jesus accept this fate, what to Peter sounded like total failure and defeat, Jesus turned to Peter and said, *Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are not thinking as God does, but as human beings do* (Matthew 16: 23). Jesus knew quite well what lay in store for Him! And He *set his face toward* it all.

At the Last Supper, in the Upper Room, we can almost enter the mind and heart of Jesus. It is a powerful moment, filled with human sentiments. An inner sadness, a last hope and attempt for conversion are so evident when Jesus appeals to his betrayer: *Jesus was deeply troubled and testified, Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me* (John13:21). Failing to change the heart of Judas, Jesus seeks support and strength from the others. Going with them to the Garden in Gethsemane He falls to the ground in prayer. *He was in such agony and He prayed so fervently that His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground* (Luke22:44). He prayed the same prayer three times: *Father, if You are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but Yours be done* (Luke 22:42). Jesus was that *One Solitary Life* Who knew what His life entailed and what awaited him, and still, from the very beginning, *He set His face toward Jerusalem*, and everything He was born to accomplish.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you (Luke 13:34), was the city of Prophets and Kings. Jesus entered to the acclaim of the crowds who had so often heard His preaching and had benefitted from His awesome power over both the spiritual and material worlds. In the course of one week, the crowds praised Him on Sunday strewing the road for Him to walk on their cloaks and palm branches, and jeered at Him as the Great Sabbath approached calling for His death. *The people yelled, His blood be upon us and upon our children* (Matthew 27: 25). And *Jesus set His face to Jerusalem* and Mount Calvary; He was *like a trusting lamb led to slaughter* (Jeremiah 12: 19) without uttering anything in his own defense or denouncing

those who condemned Him. His greatest sermon would be preached from the throne of a Cross were his prophetic words would resound in the hearts of the faithful down through the centuries.

There is a word that stands out for us to consider this month, as we celebrate our Redemption in the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus the Christ: **SURRENDER**. From all eternity, Jesus surrenders to the Will of the Father. *Though He was in the form of God ... He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave ... He humbled Himself becoming obedient to death, even to death on a cross. Because of this God greatly exalted Him...* (Philippians 2: 6-11). 'Surrender' is a powerful word. It can also be disconcerting and even frightening when one considers 'surrender' as a way of life. Jesus 'surrendered' to the Father's Will from the first moment of His existence as a human being. This kind of surrender leads to victory and glory, not defeat and infamy.

A soldier who accepts to put his life on the line for the sake of his country, never wants to surrender to the enemy against whom he defends himself. An athlete who has prepared for months or even years of exercise, diet, and hard work, does not want to forfeit or concede to his opponent in a game or match and thus declare his/her competitor better than he/she. A student who prepares for final exams and has truly applied him/herself to studies, finds it difficult to 'surrender' to the fact that tension, lack of sufficient time for study and/or exam taking, circumstances, and the like, contributed to the fact that the test or exam could not be 'aced'. And what if the daily matters with which we normally contend try our patience to the point that we just 'can't take it anymore' and want to 'give up'? There are numerous ways we may 'surrender' in life. It is no wonder that 'surrender' does not sit well with most people. It is a word we would rather not have in our vocabulary. For most, 'surrender' is synonymous with weakness, failure, ineptness, shame, maybe even cowardice, and so much more. The spirit of the world is always urging us to 'look out for yourself', 'be the first', 'be the best and don't be concerned about the rest', 'do what you have to do, but never give up'! How many children grow up to be psychologically wounded adults because they cannot get beyond the perfectionism expected of them in childhood. Sometimes it is necessary to 'surrender' to another for help if we are to go beyond our limitations. This 'surrender' can be necessary and healthy, and can bear with it positive and lasting results.

Spiritually, there is another 'surrendering' that is absolutely necessary for victory and success; without this 'surrendering' our lives ultimately are total failures. Another word for it is 'abandonment' - abandonment to the Will of God and total trust in the power and presence of a God Who calls, challenges and completes in those surrendered to His Will what is for their ultimate and eternal good. When our spiritual life is surrendered to the Father's Will, we never lose sight of our duties and our goal. Jesus fulfilled His duty as Messiah and Victim, and achieved the goal for humanity as Redeemer and Victor. We share in that same Life by Baptism and Grace, and share more profoundly in the same victory every time we enter and receive the Eucharist worthily. Thus we allow the graces of redemption to strengthen and guide our life's journey, that the image of God in Whom we were created might be restored. *The Word was made flesh* to restore the image of God to creation, and ultimately those created in God's image and likeness.

Of the three great 'tests' Jesus experienced from others, the last was the most difficult. The first came in the desert from Satan who challenged the method Jesus would use to achieve our redemption. The second came from the people who sought Him out with keen hopes of being 'filled' rather than 'fulfilled'. The third, and most difficult and subtle test, came from a dear friend and His Vicar, Peter, who sought to dissuade Jesus from *setting his face to Jerusalem* to be captured, tortured, and killed. Unknowingly, Peter's loving concern was most insidious and dangerous. It challenged Jesus to 'not surrender' as He had done till then. Jesus' followers loved Him and He loved them for loving Him. And it was an awful thing to go up to Jerusalem to die. But *He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem*. This was the only way. This was the Divine Plan. This was the Father's Will. This was Jesus' Will!

In the letters to his spiritual directors, Padre Pio offers profound insights into his total surrender to the Will of God: *I am completely resigned to the divine will with regard to the humiliations which increase for me as the days go by* (P. Benedetto, June 1, 1910). *I can hardly go on any longer... May God's will be done! ... I am always ready to do the will of God and my superiors* (P. Benedetto, June 25, 1910). *I am resigned to everything and feel prepared for anything that may come. May the Lord do with me whatever is pleasing to Him* (P. Agostino, July 28, 1915). *I am consumed by the desire to adhere most fully to the adorable will of my God and not to swerve a hair's breadth from it.* (P. Agostino, September 25, 1915). *How fine a thing it is to be able to live according to what the Lord disposes! I feel that this gives me continual new strength...* (P. Benedetto, March 18, 1917).

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, the season of Lent speaks to us profoundly of Jesus and the mystery of our Redemption, and of Padre Pio and the witness of his life immersed in the mystery of the Passion of Christ so visibly apparent for over fifty years. From the few words taken from his letters to Father Benedetto and Father Agostino, we can see where Padre Pio found his strength. We never lose when we give everything over to the One Who gives everything, especially Himself, to us. There is always such fear in saying 'I surrender'. When we say it to God, why be afraid? God knows what we are capable of and where we are headed, long before we do. Abandoning ourselves to His Will, truly trusting in Him, and living every moment as a deliberate act of surrender to the Divine Will, we cannot help but experience an inner peace, serenity and joy. We will discover and live a more balanced and cheerful life, even in the midst of difficulties. When God is in control, we are always headed in the right direction.

Calvary was most certainly a frightening thought that loomed always in the heart and life of Jesus. His humanity did not seek pain and death. But His heart knew that there was only one way to fulfill His Father's Plan, and that is all that mattered. The empty tomb was the visible sign of the Father's acceptance of Jesus' total emptying of Himself in deference to the Father's Will. It was the Father's response to the Son's love. Even Padre Pio accepted whatever was asked or imposed on him, out of love, even when it hurt him deeply. Love is a total surrender. The love for the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit kept Jesus in total harmony with the Father's Will. Let us love enough to surrender ourselves to God. Just as a husband and wife surrender themselves in love and the two become one, let us become one with God as we surrender to His Divine Will. Emptying ourselves of our own material and earthly desires, false ambitions, self-centeredness, pride, will allow the joy of new life and rebirth to be so palpable that our Easter celebration will be as though it were that first Easter Sunday. Jesus is alive! He is Risen! He precedes us on the way! Let Jesus come alive in your hearts and lives so powerfully that, like the first followers, we will be, as Saint Augustine calls the People of God redeemed in the Blood of the Lamb, 'an Alleluia People'. May we praise Him with our lives!

May the light of Christ's Resurrection shine in us that we *might have life, and have it in abundance*. May the Risen Lord Jesus shower you and your loved ones with peace, joy and abundant blessings for a Happy Easter; may Mary, Mother of the Redeemer and our Mother, help you to live with Jesus in the light of the New Life His Resurrection offers us; and may Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. With a promise to keep all of you affectionately in my Easter Masses and Liturgies, I wish you and your dear ones a very Happy and Joyous Easter.

Christ is Risen! He is truly risen! Alleluia!

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator