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The Risen Christ bless you with His peace!

The great Italian poet, Dante Alighieri, puts the following hymn of praise taken from his great literary work the Divine Comedy, on the mouth of Saint Bernard, in Canto XXXIII of Paradiso:

***O virgin mother, daughter of your Son, humble beyond all creatures and more exalted;
predestined turning point of God's intention;
Your merit so ennobled human nature
that its divine Creator did not scorn to make Himself the creature of His creature.
The Love that was rekindled in Your womb sends for the warmth of the eternal peace
within whose ray this flower has come to bloom.
Here to us, you are the noon and scope of Love revealed;
and among mortal men, the living fountain of eternal hope.
Lady, you are so near God's reckonings
that who seeks grace and does not first seek you would have his wish fly upward without wings.
Not only does your sweet benignity flow out to all who beg,
but oftentimes your charity arrives before the plea.
In you is pity, in you munificence, in you the tenderest heart,
in you unites all that creation knows of excellence!***

What magnificent words! His praise is the fruit of a heart enamored of Our Lady. This prayer to the Virgin Mother speaks of the depth of the devotion of Dante and his theological awareness and acceptance of the eminent greatness of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of all creation. This is no little matter! It speaks of the devotion and love that people at all levels of society and learning fostered for the Blessed Virgin Mary, the great Mother of God. The words, *Your merit so ennobled human nature that its divine Creator did not scorn to make Himself the creature of His creature*, speak volumes. They remind us of humanity's dignity and the depth of God's love for what might seem to others to be a 'lesser level' of creation. Human beings are a 'lesser level', yes, because not God. But, humanity bears the greatest of dignities because God deigned to become one of His own creatures through the collaboration and consent of one of His creatures. The divine became human through a human, so that humanity could share in the divine who became one with us! What a mystery! What a marvelous gift! And all this because Mary, one of God's own creation, said YES!

Tradition has held that one of the reasons for Lucifer's fall from Heaven was his refusal to accept the Mystery of the Incarnation because it demanded reverence for a 'lesser' creature. Yet, in the words of Psalm 8, King David praises the magnificence of God and prays: O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is your name over all the earth!...What is man that you should be mindful of him ... You have made him a little less than god and crowned him with glory and honor. Creation is the theater of redemption. Creation is the overflowing of God's Eternal Love in time that offers all the 'work of God's hands' the privilege to know, love, and serve God in this world so that all those, created in His image and likeness, could be happy with God forever in Heaven (cfr. Old Baltimore Catechism).

Human beings are called to fulfill key roles in the whole mystery of redemption. In the fullness of time, a young woman from Nazareth, Mary, heard a greeting that challenged her understanding, and she received a privileged gift that she could have refused. The greeting informed her of a unique gift she had received from God Himself - she was full of grace. The privileged gift told her that *you will conceive in your womb and bear a son ... He will be called Son of the Most High ... the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High overshadow you ... Therefore, the child to be*

born will be called holy, the Son of God. Mary totally accepts with unconditional trust not only in her own name, but in the name of all humanity.

In our Heavenly Mother's willingness to become Mother of the Christ, she becomes, at the foot of the Cross, Mother of the Christian and Mother of the Church. The Love that was rekindled in her womb begins a process that will last until the end of time. This Love warms with eternal peace all who follow her example and accept her motherhood in Christ over them. We can see how she becomes the scope of Love revealed ... and among mortal men, the living fountain of eternal hope. In Mary hope is renewed because she stands before us, between the Majesty of Her Son and all humanity. She is not the source but the channel of graces - the Mediatrix of All Grace. Through Her we more easily approach God. Jesus is the incarnation of the almighty God in time so that humanity, in, with, and through Jesus might know God's love and mercy. The humanity of Jesus comes to us through Mary, and our adoption as children of God comes through the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus, only-begotten Son of the Father. It follows that through Mary we receive Jesus, through Whom we are once again restored to grace with the Father. Mary's powerful example and almighty intercession, as the first and greatest among the created children of God, continues her 'yes' to the Father as She carries each one of us, created in the image of Her Son, in Her Immaculate Heart.

On Good Friday we stood with Mary at the foot of the Cross. At that moment Mary mystically 'gives birth' to the Christian/Church, just as years before she had physically given birth to the Christ. We can never forget the words spoken to the beloved disciple who, at that moment, stood in place of us all: *Son, Behold your Mother.* As he took her into his home, we lovingly take her into our heart and life.

Padre Pio's love for our Mother Mary was always evident in his life and good counsels. Padre Pio speaks so beautifully of our Heavenly Mother in one of his letters to his spiritual director Padre Agostino. Mary was as real to Padre Pio during his life in the twentieth century as she was to the early Church in the first century. She was as present to him now as she was then to the early Church. He spoke with her, to her, of her, and encouraged others to keep their hearts and lives open to her loving motherly presence. To some this may seem rather infantile, or lacking in depth; it is totally the opposite. Did not Jesus Himself say, *unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of God?* Did not Jesus say, *I thank you Father for keeping these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to those such as these* (the humble, simple, little ones)? Love for Our Lady and Mother keeps our hearts childlike and simple. In his childlike love for Mary, the following passage taken from a letter to Padre Agostino, can help us to understand the intensity of the love of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina for our Blessed Mother Mary.

Oh, the lovely month of May! It is the most beautiful month of the year. Yes, dear Father, how well this month preaches the tenderness and beauty of Mary! When I think of the innumerable benefits received this year from this dear Mother I am ashamed of myself, for I have never sufficiently appreciated her heart and her hand which have bestowed these benefits upon me with so much love ... How often have I confided to this Mother the painful anxieties that troubled my heart! And how often has she consoled me! But in what did my gratitude consist? In my greatest sufferings it seems to me that I no longer have a mother on this earth, but a very compassionate one in heaven. But many times, when my heart was at peace I have forgotten all this almost entirely. I have even forgotten my duty of gratitude towards this blessed heavenly Mother! For me the month of May is a month of graces ... The first is that she should take me to herself, or else, if I am to go on living, that all the consolations of this world be changed into sufferings for me if she will only prevent me from seeing any more of the wicked faces ... Poor dear Mother, how you love me! ... What great care she took to accompany me to the altar this morning ... I wish I had a voice strong enough to invite the sinners of the whole world to love Our Lady ... (May 2, 1912)

Love for Mary has been strength for so many. Some have dedicated their entire lives to Mary, like the chivalrous knights of old who dedicated their lives and exploits to their special Ladies at the royal court. But devotion to Mary goes far beyond chivalry and exploits. Love for Mary goes to the very heart of who we are as children of God redeemed in the Blood of Christ. A wonderful example of this is one of the most visible and renowned men of the last century and beginning of this, Pope St. John Paul II. Pope St. John Paul II was not only a friend and admirer of the person and holiness of Padre Pio, but also one who followed his same form of simple acceptance of Mary as Mother in his life. When asked what motto he would assume for his pontificate, he gave the simple and deeply meaningful motto: TOTUS TUUS! TOTALLY YOURS! There is no need for explanations. The motto means what it states. Everything is yours! I

dedicate myself, all I am, all I do, everything to you and your loving care to present me and all I have to God. How simple, childlike, trusting, and full of love! For the Church he was its Pastor, and with the Church he was a Christian; he shared the same joys and sorrows, hopes and fears of all the children of God. Even the end of his life was an open book for the world to experience and from which to learn how to die after knowing how to live life fully in the loving embrace of God and the motherly care of Mary for whom he was TOTUS TUUS.

We are children of this age. We cannot extricate ourselves from the times in which we live. The hectic pace, technological advances, social demands, financial difficulties, international concerns, devastating scandals in the Church, and so on, can so easily fill our minds and hearts that there is no more room for that spiritual child to thrive within us. We must be involved in life at all phases and stages, but we must not lose the inner peace and simplicity that help us to put everything in perspective. Love for Mary and a heart open to her can help us keep focused.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us follow the example of our spiritual guide and father. His simplicity and total dedication to Mary encourages us to do the same. The Prayer Groups are all dedicated to Our Lady in the practices expected of us, but let these religious practices not be solely an external act of participation in a group. They are signs of an internal conviction and commitment to a person whose love for us leads us ever more closely to Jesus her Son.

In Mary we have a most powerful and loving intercessor before the Most Holy Trinity. As Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit, Mary, while only human and infinitely less than God who created her, is eminently greater than all of us. Invoke her loving protection and almighty intercession so that living with her in this life, she may intercede for us and assist us on our final journey to eternity and God's loving embrace.

With every best wish for you during this season of new birth and new life, I pray we all live as the 'Alleluia People' we are. Be open to the working of the Holy Spirit. May The Spirit of Father and Son inflame our hearts with His Love and overshadow us with an abundance of graces as He filled Our Mother Mary. Thus animated, may we follow the Spirit's inspiration and confidently respond, as Mary, Padre Pio, Pope John Paul II, and others with a determined 'Yes' to all the Father asks of us, that we may be more like Jesus.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and may Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings
Fr. Francis A. Sariego, O.F.M. Cap.
National Coordinator