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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

How easy it is for one person to affect so many. One person is able to affect a group for good or for bad. A happy person can bring a smile to others; a sad person can put a damper on the attitude of a whole group of people. Consider the political groups in our country; the same issue proposed by different groups encounters various opinions that affect the choice or rejection of others, and hidden or enunciated agendas can alter even the truth regarding certain matters. As individuals we do not always realize the power that our attitudes wield in the scheme of things. Unless we are committed to what we believe and desire, all it takes is a little breeze of negativity to blow out the spark of vision, goal, initiative, enthusiasm, creativity, and the like.

Consider the story of Israel journeying through the desert to the Promised Land. The great God of Abraham had performed tremendous deeds in Egypt to convince Pharaoh that he had better let Israel go, or else! The death of the firstborn in Egypt, while the firstborn of the Israelites survived, convinced the Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave his kingdom. A brief journey to Canaan that should have taken several weeks lasted forty years. Why?! Because of the negativity of a handful of men. (*cf. Numbers 13: 1-35*)

Reason and the ability to analyze our thoughts are powerful elements of any human being. God expects us to make good use of the mind He has given us. We are given the gift to use it to its full capacity in this life. However, because we are more than just a thought process, often the ability of our minds is limited. We are not just a big brain that has a body with which to move around. We are made up of many things: emotions, feelings, intuitions, hopes, fears, joys. We are part of a great world, God's creation, that affects our lives in many ways. All that happens to us and others challenge us to respond, or conditions us to react in some way. How we respond or react to what occurs each day says a great deal about us. When we allow our fears, doubts, questions, to control us - and the key expression is to control us - we can never really make a decision that allows us to move forward, or even backward, freely.

Many of us sadly block God's grace from achieving its purpose or from even getting to us. We are paralyzed, cannot move, and to use an expression that says it all, we suffer from analysis paralysis. We dissect, discuss, dialogue so much that we ultimately fear to move and thus become unwilling even to trust in a God Who, through the events and experiences of life, is urging us to move ahead and conquer the limitations that we allow to hold us back. God calls us, as He did to the early Israelites in Egypt, to be free from the slavery that limits our lives, to a liberation that moves us toward a greater fulfillment of all we can be and most often wish we could become, but are too frightened to attempt. The Promised Land is daily offered us. How long do people roam in the desert of incompleteness, rather than get their feet wet as they cross the Jordan and take possession of what is promised and offered them!

Caleb and Joshua were the only ones of the twelve leaders of the tribes of Israel to speak favorably of the enterprise that would have ended the journey of the Israelites through the desert in record time. Fear at the cost of battle, possibly apathy or care-less-ness now that they were out of Pharaoh's grasp, perhaps even envy or jealousy towards Moses and Joshua his obvious protégé, induced the ten tribal representatives to discourage Israel from taking the land they could have acquired only weeks after they had left Egypt. God was with them to protect them. God told them to inspect and see the beauty and fertility of the land to encourage them. God fought with and for them to reassure them of success so that they would not pull back in fear and

worry. Yet, this band of liberated slaves tasting freedom for the first time in four and a half centuries, would march for forty years through the desert until the last adults of the great refusal had died and their offspring could enter with the assurance and courage of knowing God was with them. Life is a learning process, but it seems as though we are still learning things that we should have learned and moved beyond years ago. Some things just never change! Some of us have to learn the hard way!

Padre Pio, in the midst of his years of spiritual and physical pains and the psychological anguish he felt when his integrity was questioned over and over again for one reason or another, asked prayers for himself because of the anguish he felt, yet he was always uplifting and encouraging to others. Unless the person were trying to deceive him, particularly when it came to the celebration and reception of the Sacraments, Padre Pio could be stern with some but all felt his love, concern, and ultimate encouragement to trust in God and His mercy, and were urged to move on confident in God's love and Padre Pio's prayers. One of the qualities of a good Christian is an affirming spirit that believes in others so that others can believe in a God who believes in them and thus help them believe in themselves to move beyond the impasses of life that impede progress in the natural and spiritual life.

In writing to Padre Agostino, his spiritual director, Padre Pio writes: *Please do not abandon me, my dear Father; you know very well that in God my Savior alone I have placed all my trust, in the firm hope that my trust will not be in vain and that I may always be faithful to him. I feel need, though, of support.* (20 September 1915) Nonetheless, in the same month and year, while going through his own anguish, writing to his spiritual daughter, Anita Rodote, he writes: *Be at peace about everything and don't worry...When you feel distressed, wait patiently for this tender Spouse and you will see that He will not let you suffer at length without being consoled...No, my little daughter, live tranquilly because, up till now, divine mercy has protected you from the enemy's clutches* (12 September 1915)

From his early years, before he entered religious life, Padre Pio is called to enter a battle he would have to contend with his entire life. His demeanor at times seemed that of a man in extreme pain, but when he was with others, he was cheerful, serene, affable, ready and willing to smile and encourage, while his own heart was going through the inner torments he so often experienced. Jesus Himself, while journeying to Jerusalem where He knew He would be betrayed-captured-condemned-executed, always found time, to hear and respond to the needs of others. Padre Pio who bore His wounds also lived His compassion and love for others, regardless of his own needs.

The Padre Pio Prayer Groups are composed of men, women, and even children and very young adults in some nations, who are proud to call themselves the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio. We know what the technical requisites are and how they involve love and devotion for the Eucharist, Our Blessed Mother Mary, the Church, our Catholic-Christian Faith, Charity in Word and Work, Reparation for sin. These practices we fulfill each month when we gather for the monthly encounter. Between one meeting and the other, do we take time daily to reflect and evaluate ourselves to see how we have allowed or not the graces of our external practices to affect our souls and influence our daily lives? Has the Eucharist we celebrate and receive made us truly experience an inner presence that is transforming us to be more like Jesus. Are we becoming more open to others, more trusting, more willing to share knowledge-time-responsibilities within the group and outside the group for the good of others? Do we make the Prayer Group a refuge for our inadequacies and needs or for our loneliness or are we seeking to grow as spiritual children of Padre Pio, and thus become a positive, cheerful, encouraging presence to others even beyond the Prayer Group? Do we allow our own distress from situations of health, family, and the like to affect others negatively, or do we seek to be positive with others, regardless of our own feelings?

In a letter to Padre Benedetto (20 November 1921), Padre Pio writes: *I am consumed by love for God and love for my neighbor. God is continually in my mind and imprinted on my heart. I never lose sight of him. I have to admire his beauty, his benevolence, the agitation he causes, his mercies, his vengeance, or rather the severity of his justice ... How is it possible to see God saddened by evil and not be saddened likewise? To see God on the point of letting fly his thunderbolts? To parry them there is no other remedy than to raise one's hand to restrain his arm, and with the other hand to beckon urgently one's brothers for a twofold reason: that they may cast evil aside and move away at once from where they stand, since the Judge's hand is about to come*

down on them...I am by no means shaken or changed in the depths of my soul...I feel nothing except the desire to have and to want what God wants. In him always I feel at rest, at least internally...For my brothers? Alas! How often I have to say to God the judge, with Moses: either forgive them their sin or else blot me out of the Book of Life (Exodus 32:31-32)

These words speak of the depth of Padre Pio's love for all who in any way entered his life and thus his heart. His trials and problems were not his in which to wallow seeking compassion and pity from others, but rather a strange gift intended to strengthen him to be able to help others endure their struggles and offer them a sign of hope. He offered his own trials in reparation: *for poor sinners and the souls in Purgatory* (letter to Padre Benedetto 29 November 1910), *as a victim of divine love* (letter to Padre Agostino 26 August 1912), *for the needs of our mother Province...the welfare of our Province...in the manner that will give the greatest honor to God* (letter to Padre Agostino 16 February 1915), *for the perfecting of the (aspirants to the Order) which is very dear to me for which I don't spare myself any pains* (letter to Padre Benedetto 18 March 1917), *for the same intention which the Holy Father had when he recommended to the whole Church to offer prayers and sacrifices* (letter to Padre Benedetto 27 July 1918). Through all his personal trials and difficulties, Padre Pio prayed and sacrificed himself for others. He forgot himself that others might be strengthened, encouraged, and lifted up through his prayers and life offered for them.

Addressing the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, 28 January 1995, Cardinal Gilberto Augustoni, at the time Pro-Prefect of the Tribuna expressed his *heartfelt satisfaction for the assiduous and fervent activity carried on by the Prayer Groups throughout the world*. That same year, 25 April 1995, Cardinal Luigi Poggi, speaking to a Regional Gathering of the Prayer Groups, praised the *marvelous harmony between prayer and action* that is so wonderfully present among the members of the Prayer Groups. Other representatives of the Church and the Local Churches have seen and praised God for the good the Prayer Groups of Padre Pio are doing as they fulfill their promises to be faithful spiritual children of Padre Pio.

Let us not lose sight of all the good God can do and is doing through us. The more we strive to work together sharing our time-talents-treasures, and seek to grow in grace by faithfully living as Jesus words direct and our Baptismal Promises pledge, the more will we make an impact for Christ in our world. The key is for Christ not for me-myself-I. Let us open our eyes to see, our other senses to comprehend, our hearts to embrace everyone as companions on the journey. Not only to our own but also to others may we be a sign of hope, encouragement and affirmation, that those who encounter us may see the face and love of Jesus who closed Himself to no one who came to Him and was always ready and willing to respond to the needs of others. Let us never forget that spiritual growth of the inner person is always manifest by the love, concern, and openness we have for those whom, we encounter each day. Prayer, like Faith, without works, is of little worth, when we keep the possible good for ourselves but fail to share God's graces and goodness to us with others.

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 in this month when we remember and celebrate his reception of the Stigmata (September 20, 1918) and his holy passage into eternity (September 23, 1968) pronouncing the most holy names of Jesus and Mary.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator