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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

May the Infant Jesus grant your heart the Peace you desire.
May His Star enlighten your mind with the splendor of His Truth.
May His Love consume your heart so that it beats solely for Him. (P. Pio)

At the beginning of the Liturgical Year for the First Sunday of Advent, the Church prays in the Liturgy of the Hours: *Proclaim the good news among the nations: our God will come to save us ... Come let us worship the Lord, the King Who is to come.* The season is filled with expressions of joyful expectation. The whole world waits for an imminent arrival of one who is to fulfill the hopes and desires of all people.

Advent truly places us into that "heart-set" of anticipation that brings an inner joy to all who allow themselves to "live" the liturgy they celebrate each Sunday, and even weekdays for those who make the effort. Christmas and what follows throughout the Liturgical Year offer us the opportunity to enter the mystery of Christ among us. We listen, as the first disciples, to learn, and then we are sent, as the first apostles, to proclaim. Learning and proclaiming, reflecting and sharing, entering and inviting ... the first experience is for "me" and the result blossoms into an overflow of graces and gifts for others to share them as I have come to receive them. They, in turn, learn-reflect-enter so that they also might proclaim-share-invite. The journey, the "process", begins with the Advent-Christmas Season. We wait for the Master so that we might once again walk in His footsteps and experience the power of His love. Jesus is the "Great Expected One" Who is forever the "Real Present One" among us.

The liturgical seasons help to enhance our spiritual and intellectual journey through life. We deepen our faith and relationship with God as we enrich our knowledge of all He has revealed to us. The seasonal celebrations help us to focus on the mysteries of our Faith. However, with all this, there is no need to wait for seasons and days to be with the *Lord-Among-Us (Emmanuel)*. The Eucharistic Presence - the Real Presence, the Presence of the Prisoner of the Tabernacle - offers us all we could ever desire. The Eucharist is our *pledge of future glory*. We become one with Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. Our hearts and lives feel His love in the mystery of the Faith that believes and the Hope that anticipates with certitude, until we see Him face to face in the fullness of His Love and Glory. *The King Who is to come* already lives among and within us! Give Him the little you have and are. Surrender to His transforming love that never offends our freedom. And let His loving-grace perform the transforming miracle that makes us more and more like Him. All this in-with-through the Eucharist! All we have to do is take the time to be with Him!

The Eucharist is a mystery and miracle. Through the power of the Holy Spirit created "things" (bread and wine) are transformed into the reality of the Body and Blood of Jesus the Christ. Jesus is "enfleshed" in our nature each time the Eucharist is celebrated and the words of Consecration are

pronounced. We accept and follow the example of our Mother Mary, to Whom we were given as children, and She to us as Mother, at the foot of the Cross of Jesus. The "yes" with which She responded to the Angel Gabriel in believing the humanly impossible and accepting the Father's Will to allow the Incarnation to happen, is the same "yes" we offer at each Mass. Our "yes" allows an "incarnation" to take place that cannot be seen with the eyes of the body, but whose effects are made visible in those who live the Jesus they celebrate and receive. Through the hands of the priest we offer ourselves with the bread and wine. We are spiritually "consecrated" in the One Who is the Eucharist and Who lives with us, and abides within us. The town of Bethlehem we "reconstruct" with our creches, represent on our Christmas Cards, indicate as the birthplace of the Son of God, is a constant reminder of Jesus the Christ our True Eucharist. The name of the town Bethlehem means "House of Bread". In this "house" the world was given the "Bread of Life". *He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him. But to those who did receive Him, He gave power to become the children of God ...* (John 1:11-12)

Regarding the Eucharist Padre Pio writes to his spiritual daughter, Maria Gargani: *I think that the Holy Eucharist is a great means through which to aspire to perfection. But we must receive it with the desire and intention of removing from the heart all that is displeasing to Him with whom we wish to dwell* (27 July 1917).

Padre Pio's life was centered on the mystery of the Eucharist he celebrated. The Christ he offered at Mass, was the Christ Whose living image he had become through the gift of the wounds he bore. The Sacrifice of Calvary was the experience that raised him from time to eternity while still remaining among those who, with him and through his intercession, sought to enter the Mystery he lived more deeply than they. Many were attracted by the wonders that enveloped the life of this humble "Friar of the Gargano". Those same persons, captivated by the aura of holiness and his total submission to the Victim of Calvary Who enraptured Padre Pio during "the Mass of Padre Pio", saw beyond the mere repetition of ritual movements and words. The historical Christ, the Bread of Angels and Bread of men, born in Bethlehem of Judah, born in "the House of Bread" centuries before, was actively present with them on the altar through the hands of a simple friar-priest who repeated Mary's "yes" each day.

The world seemed to stop for those present when Padre Pio ascended the altar. The words that flowed from his mouth and the ritual movements he repeated each day spoke of a man physically experiencing the Mystery he had entered. Christ was mystically and really born again and re-presented in His one great Sacrifice of Salvation for humanity. Padre Pio's prayerful pain-filled peaceful presence invited others to share the moment with him. Ordained to be "another Christ", Padre Pio stood between heaven and earth, offering himself together with Jesus. As our Blessed Mother Mary initiated the new era of salvation by her total surrender to the Father's Will, Padre Pio let himself be "overshadowed by the Holy Spirit". Thus the Eternal Word possessed his heart and was the center of Padre Pio's life.

To his spiritual daughter, Raffaelina Cerase, Padre Pio writes: *God, who has bestowed so many benefits on us, is satisfied with such a very insignificant gift as that of our will. Let us offer it to him along with the divine Master Himself in that most sublime prayer, the "Our Father": "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"... The total offering of our will is unfortunately very difficult ... Well, then, His immense love, that same love that induced Him to leave the bosom of His eternal Father in order to come on earth and take upon Himself our fragility and our debts and satisfy the divine justice for us, found an admirable means in which He showed us His exceedingly great love for us. What means was this? Oh, for the love of heaven let us understand what our good Master asked the Father immediately after He had offered our will to Him. In His own name and in ours He asked also: "Give us this day, Father, our daily bread".*

But what bread is this? In Jesus' request here, failing a better interpretation, I recognize primarily the Eucharist. O, the exceeding humility of this Man-God! (23 February 1915)

The words of Padre Pio at the end of the passage above repeat the spirit of the words of our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi prayerfully praising the tremendous gift of the Holy Eucharist. Simply and magnificently St. Francis offers us a meditation on the *wonderful exchange* between the humanity and the divinity in Jesus that the Eucharist re-presents in the Most Blessed Sacrament. The beauty of the prayer deserves to be read:

***O admirable heights and sublime lowliness! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity!
That the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God,
so humbles Himself that for our salvation
He hides Himself under the little form of bread!
Look, brothers, at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before Him!
Humble yourselves, as well, that you may be exalted by Him.
Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves
so that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally.***

We can see how intimately the Eucharist we possess today and everyday helps us reflect on the wonderful mysteries we celebrate at the beginning of the Church Year. We talk about proclaiming God *Who comes to save us*. The Eucharist is the God Who is already among us with the saving power of that one Great Sacrifice offered once that those who *look upon the one whom they pierced*, may be saved. We invite everyone saying, *Come, Let us adore the King Who is to come*. We adore Him hidden in the humility of the small Host and most times behind the closed doors of the Tabernacle. What our senses cannot perceive, our hearts know undoubtedly that ...

***His eyes see the depths of the soul,
His ears hear the yearnings of the heart,
His feet approach all who seek Him in truth,
His hands embrace the sincerely penitent and those in need,
His lips speak in the silence of our being,
His heart is open to welcome all into the Father's loving embrace.***

The simplicity of the Child of Bethlehem; the trusting faith of Mary and Joseph regarding all they were told about the Child; the poverty of the half-heartedly lent dwelling because *there was no place for them at the inn*; the confusion of the shepherds who had to *go see this thing that has taken place that the Lord has made known to us*; the probing curiosity of the Magi who said *Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do Him homage*; the intrigue of Herod who was *greatly troubled at the news and with him all of Jerusalem*; the heavenly joy of the angels who came to *proclaim good news of great joy that will be for all people as they sang Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace ...* speak to us of the One Who was born to die so that we could be born to live forever. His earthly life is repeated over the centuries at many times in various ways in the awesome *Gift* of the Eucharist. The angels proclaim His glory and adore His Presence. Humanity responds as did the people at Jesus' time. The history of Bethlehem and the continued *Presence* in the Eucharist speak of each other. We cannot separate the Crib from the Cross. The wood of the manger that embraced the Infant Jesus in Bethlehem was only a foreshadowing of the wood of the Cross that would lift Him up on Calvary. Hidden Glory! ... to be revealed to humble searching hearts in the mystery of the sacraments until the fullness of His Glory is revealed at the end of time.

Padre Pio loved the feast of Christmas. The birth of Jesus at Bethlehem was a reality that Padre Pio lived every moment of his grace-filled life. In the Eucharist he saw Jesus not born two thousands years ago, but vibrantly alive. Padre Pio gazed upon the mystery of the Incarnation at each Eucharist he celebrated and lived Jesus as His precious Body and Blood penetrated every fiber of his being. The whole story of the Birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, and the time that leads up to it, is an opportunity for us to follow the example of Padre Pio and enter into the song of creation once again as we become players in the great symphony of life that God has written.

As spiritual Children of Padre Pio, have we allowed the precious Body and Blood of the Savior to flow through and take over every fiber of our being? Have we allowed the Lord to be "enfleshed" in our lives so that each Christmas we celebrate the Savior present and alive within and among us, and not just some past event? Do we say with Mary, Jesus' Mother, and with Jesus, *Your Will and not mine be done?* Have we sought to rekindle the vision that Padre Pio had for his Prayer Groups of a people united in prayer, sacrifice and service? Have we worked to make the vision grow into a fresh and vibrant presence of that Jesus Who makes Himself seen and known through us? Do we recognize our own incompleteness, vulnerability, and susceptibility so that we can share, support and encourage one another? Are we as enthused about our being Spiritual Children of Padre Pio and all that entails, as children are when Christmas comes around? Do we see the gift that we are to each other if we allow the spirit of our Father and Founder Padre Pio to lead us closer to Jesus and Mary?

Be assured that you and your loved ones will be remembered in a special way in all the Masses I celebrate during this holy season. May God bless you; Our Lady and Good St. Joseph guide, guard and protect you; and Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

In the Name of Jesus I wish all of you a Spirit-filled Advent and a Holy and Happy Christmas Season. As you enter the new calendar year with all its expectations and uncertainties, may your hopes be fulfilled in a world renewed in Jesus and filled with His Spirit. *A Child is born to us! A Savior is given to us! Come, let us adore Him! Fear not! It is I! I have conquered the world!*

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator.

HAPPY NEW YEAR 2020!
GOD'S BLESSINGS ON EVERYONE!
MAY IT BE A YEAR FILLED WITH GOD'S
PEACE, JOY and LOVE.