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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

***In this New Year of Grace  
May the heavenly Child look benevolently on your soul...  
And may the light that flooded the minds of the devout shepherds at Bethlehem  
enlighten your mind and also never abandon you.*** (P.Pio to P.Benedetto, 1 January 1921)

Unless we listen to what we hear or read, words are just air vibrating and making meaningless sounds, or hollow signs and symbols. We hear the Word proclaimed at Mass; we may even have selected specific Scripture passages for some occurrence. However, reading all of Scripture meditatively - this is the key word - in a systematic manner offers the attentive reader a deeper insight into the history of salvation. Reading meditatively God's Word offers answers to some of the basic questions in life: Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is life all about? Why sickness, violence, death? Why is evil so prevalent if everything came from the hands of an all-loving God? And many more questions that leave the non-believer perplexed. Agnostics and Atheists (if there are any real and true atheists!) need to downplay or deny God, or discredit religious belief systems to quiet their own searching hearts. *Our hearts can find no rest until they rest in You*, was St. Augustine's Prayer. How true that is for us all! ... whoever and wherever God is, He remains the Mystery, for those who do not seek Him, and the Eternal Contemporary, for those recognizing His presence in all creation. The history, counsels, prayers, prophecies, of the People of Israel and the Early Church that we find in Sacred Scripture is our story. We are the People of God who see themselves in the anticipation of a Savior, in our encounter with Him in time, as we forge ahead in faith, hoping to fulfill the purpose for our creation and that we may receive the gift of Life in full.

The drama of our redemption begins in the Book of Genesis and finds its fulfillment in the Book of Revelation. As chief characters in the drama of humanity's redemption, Scripture speaks to us of God's call to life and intimacy with Him, of humanity's disobedient fall through pride because *you will be like gods* (Genesis 3:5), of humanity's recall down the centuries through prophetic people who spoke in God's Name, and of humanity's redemption in Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the One-Who-Is-To-Come Who is the Eternal Contemporary always with us - Emmanuel. The writings of the New Covenant (New Testament), through the teachings of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation, guide us to live gratefully in this world, as *pilgrims and strangers* (Hebrews 11:13), until we reach the gift of Life pledged us when we entered our Covenant relationship with the Father, in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. God's Word helps us to reread our faith history from the perspective of God and eternity, rather than from our limited perspective of time alone. Throughout the inspired Word we seek to re-confirm the Covenant Love established with God in our Baptism, that we re-confirm each day as we enter trustingly and unconditionally into the Father's Will. We are called *to stir into flame the gift God has given you* (2

Timothy 1: 6) so that the excitement of being *a people peculiarly His own* (1 Peter 2:9) may never wane. Thus, *if God is for us, who can be against us?* (Romans 8:31)

God's Word nourishes and nurtures all who receive It in truth and trust. The Word of God gives joy to His People. As long as God speaks with His People, His beloved children redeemed in the Blood of Christ, He is still 'in touch' with them. Scripture reminds us of God's relentless and extravagant love for those who so often do not respond lovingly. After their return from the Babylonian exile, the People of Israel wept for joy when they heard The First Five Books of Scripture - 'The Torah', 'The Law' - read to them. Scripture says that the people stood the good part of a day listening with joy to what for many years they had been deprived (cfr. Nehemiah 9). That word was a constant reminder of God's Loving Covenant with them and they, accepting to listen to the Word, reconfirmed their Covenant with God (cfr. Nehemiah 9). Through good times and bad their hearts were joyful; His Word was His presence; His Word was the sign that God had not abandoned them. Even the most 'tragic' stories and prophecies of Scripture always end with hope in a God Who can never be vanquished. We are reminded of our God Whose Word *will not return until it has fulfilled the purpose for its being sent.* (Isaiah 55:11) All the Old Testament, read in the 'Key of Christ' prepares us to encounter God, the Almighty One, with whom we become victors with the Victor over sin and death, Jesus the Lord, the Word enfleshed in time that we might be 're-created' by grace in His eternity.

The first day of the New Year celebrates the Motherhood of Mary and the Name of Jesus. Mary, the *highest honor of our race* (Judith 15:9), looks down to heaven in Her arms. The Infant in Her arms that She sees and loves is the fulfillment of Her People's prayers and hopes. She says His name JESUS, God is salvation, with a love only a mother can express. All of Scripture is fulfilled in this Infant (cfr. Luke 1:26-35). Mary saw and loved what St. John the Evangelist would write of Him decades later: *He was in the world ... but the world did not know Him ... to those who did accept Him He gave the power to become the children of God ... The Word became flesh and dwelled among us ... from His fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace ...* (1 John 1: 10-16) Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the living Covenant the Father makes with all creation, and in Whose Name and redeeming Life-Death-Resurrection we enter into our Covenant with God through the Blood of the Lamb. (cfr. Revelation 7:14-17; 12:11)

Just as in the time of Jesus, our world is filled with so much that disturbs and distresses us: war, violence, natural disasters, social-economic-political-religious unrest, sickness and disease ... Death! But, if we take time to evaluate the times in which we live, there is so much good that is happening as well: people who believe in peace and strive to live it as a witness for others; women and men who come to the aid of their less fortunate sisters and brothers often at the cost of their own time-talents-personal treasures; young people who seek and truly desire a better world and are willing to work for it at the price of their own comfort and convenience; religious leaders who have stopped anathematizing each other because of differences but are searching for better ways to appreciate the goodness God instills in each; progress being made in curing debilitating and terminal diseases; love that brings young men and women to believe in the future in marriage; infants born as a trust in the value of tomorrow; ... and so much more! What about the wonderful moments that happen to each one of us personally. The God of prophecy is a God Who *sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him.* (John 3:17) All this should encourage our hearts to peace and joy, even in the midst of the challenges and outright disasters of life. Inner peace and inner joy, fruits of loving hearts who trustingly surrender to God, give us the harmony and balance for which we yearn in such a cacophonous and unstable world. God's inspired Word teaches us through the written experiences of our ancestors in the faith. The reassuring message that keeps recurring at all the momentous times of our journey of faith through the millennia is: *Do not be afraid! ... It is!* (John 6: 20)

*Keep cheerful. Be at peace. Let God do as He pleases. None of the things you fear will come to pass. Dear God! How strong is that baptism with which I am to be baptized, that baptism of your Son which I am made to feel so deeply. ... I perceive within me such a mass of feelings and desires that I am unable either to write them down or set them in order. (to Padre Benedetto, 1 January 1921)*

Padre Pio offers words of consolation to set the conscience of Padre Benedetto at rest. It is as though he were repeating a rather amusing statement that says: "What do you mean worry doesn't help! Everything I worried about never happened!" Worry only destroys inner peace and clouds the vision of our hearts. Often we worry about matters we have no control over or of which we have no certain knowledge. Thus we compromise our inner peace and serenity in useless fretting. Be concerned and alert, Yes! But worry is belief that failure is inevitable. This leads to discouragement, which is one of Satan's best tools. While encouraging others, Padre Pio expresses inadequacy in dealing with all that the Lord has given him. He suffers and rejoices, is glad and fearful. His attitude is similar to ours when we are in demanding situations and do not have knowledge of what the next moment will bring. Even the saints experienced sadness, pain, confusion, even fear. They too, as Padre Pio, sought their 'Simon of Cyrenes' to help them bear the 'cross of unknowing' by opening their heart to them. Nevertheless, ultimately, they surrendered to the love and mercy of God, trusting in His divine providence, and accepted everything. Everything was part of God's plan they were called to fulfill. They surrendered and accepted this with joy and thanksgiving.

*I know and see that it (The 'it' are the trials and pain Padre Pio is experiencing) issues from one who is perfectly sane and who loves all that is right and holy. So why do I fear and tremble so much? ... Who is the author of so much feeling, so much simultaneous delight and suffering? ... Rejoice with me in our sweet Lord for the abundant harvest of souls in these consoling days of propitiation. I am really immensely satisfied and happy on this account. May God be blessed for it. (to Padre Benedetto, 1 January 1921)*

The words Padre Pio wrote almost a century ago are as meaningful for us today. As we enter a new calendar year no doubt our hearts and minds are filled with mixed emotions. So much is happening in the world, our nation, and even in our neighborhoods and families, that often we look to the future with a sense of foreboding. The new calendar creates an illusion of being able to be unaffected by the past that no longer exists, while at the same time it leaves us apprehensive about the future in a world in confusion and upheaval in so many places. We get so taken up with the past and the future that we fail to graciously accept the 'gift', the 'present', God gives us to live in the Real Presence of His Eucharist that nourishes and His Word that nurtures and guides. It is now, in the present, today, that the future opens up for each one of us. We learn from the successes and failures of the past; we confidently look forward to a future in God's loving-care; and we live our present with simplicity and trust. We know that we can be effective instruments in God's plan capable of changing the world. We must dispel fear and learn to trust ... trust in God, trust in others God has placed with us, trust ourselves endowed by God with gifts of time to work, talents to use, and the treasure of life and love.

*At His birth, Magi came from the east (Matthew 2:1-12). Their search for the Word made flesh is the search of everyone for the unseen God. When they opened the eyes of their heart and saw God in an Infant, Heaven in a stable, Dignity in lowliness, Wisdom in external absurdity, Power in impotence, Providence in need, Love in rejection ... then, and only then, could they, and we as well with them, acknowledge the wondrous exchange between eternity and time, the Creator and the creature. The Invisible becomes visible. The eternal enters time and is subject to it. The Almighty becomes fragile. The*

Unknowable is seen. The Spirit becomes a body to love and nurture, hands to caress, and a heart beating at one with His creation.

Mary's role in all this should open our hearts in such a love for Her that all this new year we should each day say, with Pope St. John Paul II: *Totus Tuus* - All Yours! All Yours Mother! All Yours Jesus through our Mother! ... yes! God's Mother and ours too! How could we be otherwise than All Hers? God is goodness, Mary is the Mother of goodness. God is Mercy, Mary is the Mother of Mercy. God is Grace Itself, Mary is the Mother of Grace and Mediatrix of all graces. God is Life, Mary is the Mother of Life. God is our Hope, Mary is the Mother of Hope.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio let us live this new year in the peace and joy of those who know God is with us. Let God's Word be our guide and His Eucharist, the Incarnate Word in Sacrament, be our Viaticum through life. Jesus, born in the "House of Bread" is our "Bread for the journey" ("viaticum"). Open to God's Incarnate Word and His life-giving words let us be open to one another in a bond of love and truth that strengthens the unity of our Family of Prayer Groups throughout our nation and throughout the world. As we live in the Word and seek to live His words, may we witness a hope that the world seems to be losing. Some people wait for Friday to 'get off the merry-go-round' of their work-week. Others look forward to Mondays filled with new opportunities and challenges that help them discover the talents and strengths God gives to meet the 'gifts' of a new week. May we all look forward to a New Year of Grace, in which God offers us the occasion to 'unwrap' the wonderful gifts He entrusts to us that we might grow in grace and be His instruments of Peace and Blessings to all throughout the year and throughout our lives. Having begun the New Year with Mary and in Jesus' Name, let us let our Mother's example of silent trust and anticipation of the 'unraveling' of God's will, and the Most Holy *Name of Jesus, before Whom heaven, and earth, and those under the earth bend the knee* (Philippians 2:10), be our standard and strong support, for in His Name is the Father's Love and the Spirit's power. In His Name we find peace. He is Peace and Salvation!

Let us remember the words of St. Jerome: *Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ*. We can take that further saying, as can be seen on some Church signs: *No Christ, No Peace! KNOW CHRIST, KNOW PEACE!* Let us know His Peace in our hearts, homes, and the world around us. **JESUS, OUR PEACE, DOES NOT DISAPPOINT ANYONE WHO PLACES THEIR TRUST IN HIM. LORD, THIS YEAR AND ALWAYS, WE PLACE OUR TRUST IN YOU!** May the Peace, Joy, Blessings ... and Love of this Season fill your hearts and those of your loved ones.

My prayers are with all of you and your loved ones for a most blessed and peace-filled New Year 2020. May God bless you; Our Lady Whose image begins the new calendar year in our liturgy as the Mother of God, guide, guard, and protect you and your loved ones; and our Sainly Founder and Spiritual Guide Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. BLESSED and HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL!

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator