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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

While seated in the inner garden of the friary in San Giovanni Rotondo, facing Monte Nero, the mountain behind the friary, Padre Pio entered a conversation with Padre Pellegrino, whom Padre Pio had dubbed 'The Jack of All Trades': ***For those who do not possess, but desire it, our beautiful faith can be found everywhere. It can be found even in the limpid eyes of an innocent child; even in those three wild flowers which were born on the trunk of that almond tree. We do not need extraordinary things. As long as we do not close our eyes to the chalice brimming with graces which God always places at a hand's breadth from our noses. As long as we do not turn away, out of contempt and carelessness as if it were some base instinct, from our most noble aspiration: that of uncovering in ourselves the imprint of God. We need only move towards the point from which the light rises, even if we do have to climb, carrying the not indifferent weight of our bodies.***

Padre Pio was always consistent. Over the course of the years he ministered to so many souls, his counsels always reached the heart. Simple expressions, basic truths, trusting expectations of those who sought his spiritual direction. Even in his jokes, as well as in his daily interchange with friars and the masses, he never lacked the basic attributes of love, albeit 'tough love', but love nonetheless, in fact, more love for one who needed more understanding, compassion and patience. Some people speak to think, and rattle on. Others think to speak; their words are carefully articulated to avoid equivocation. His words were clear, only those with the 'merchant's ear' (selective hearing) failed to understand.

The life of Padre Pio was immersed in the presence of God; he brought his prayer and his relationship with God to his everyday encounters and experiences, and then brought all whom he encountered back to prayer and the God and Father of us all - something we can and should do ourselves. Had not God entrusted these people and the experiences of the day to Padre Pio? Thus, everything Padre Pio said, no matter how seemingly banal, was never haphazard. There was always something of the love, mercy, and providence of God offered those who had the privilege of being with Padre Pio. The few words spoken to Padre Pellegrino have a great deal to teach us. Let us reflect on them.

For those who do not possess, but desire it ... Difficulties and problems are never too far from anyone. Consider the situation of the world and our own nation these past several years. It is so easy for us to complain about what we need or desire. The obvious response you might expect in a letter such as this one would be 'trust in God'. And, you are correct! But, not because God is that 'eternal magician' that so many want God to be. God is the Source of Life and of everything we in any way seem to possess. What we possess in this life is really the gifts God has entrusted to us for His glory, our good, and the

blessings we are expected to be one for the other. Trust in God and have the desire to do God's will. Open your senses and hearts to God Who speaks in many ways.

... our beautiful faith can be found everywhere ... 'Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder' we are told. According to this statement everyone 'makes his/her own beauty'. Say that to an art critic, orchestra maestro, building engineer. They will make it quite clear that certain basic rules must be present for something to be considered 'beautiful', 'harmonious', 'structurally sound'. There is a basic beauty that flows from the harmony and balance among the elements that make up what our senses perceive. When dealing with living beings, the harmony and balance are an external expression of the inner person that lives and thinks/responds according to the will of its Creator. Faith is found everywhere. All human beings are capable of knowing God. Not all have the gift of the fullness of the Faith, but all are capable of growing in their knowledge of God and are thus called to live what they have come to know. Faith lets me know that God lives and that, without God I would not even exist. If it is so for me, then it must be so for every human being that exists. When all realize the same basic truth and accept to live what flows from that knowledge, there is harmony. The human condition, after Original Sin, unfortunately is weak and falters. Thus the beauty of the Faith is often hidden. Opposition, verbal or physical persecution and violence can affect how Faith is acknowledged or not. Nonetheless it is still accessible. Always, especially in those difficult and 'impossible' situations we must keep the Faith alive in our hearts and encourage, support, foster it in others.

It can be found in the limpid eyes of an innocent child ... Beauty is transparent in the lives of the innocent, who have never been adulterated by the machinations of those who compromise values, conceal agendas, condition situations, in other words who seek to control unscrupulously others, whether in overbearing and dominant ways, but more commonly in daily little ways, unnoticeable in their purpose but effective nonetheless. Those who act in this way worship what St. John calls the 'idol', that is the 'I-Doll', of self-centeredness and pride that excludes all others, even God, from their ultimate goals. Only the 'innocent', as the word indicates are 'guiltless' or, even better, are 'in'(not) 'nocent' (deadly/harmful). They disarm their hearts, see others as sisters and brothers of the same great family of the Father redeemed in the blood of Jesus, and bring a brightness of transparency of life and purity of intention and actions that flow from the very depths of their hearts and souls. That is why the child and the childlike are praised by Jesus. They are 'not harmful' to others, they are 'dis-(h)armed'.

... even in those three wild flowers which were born on the trunk of that almond tree. Everything speaks of the presence, power and providence of God. Everything speaks of the love of God that can bring something unexpected and beautiful from what seems useless and dead. Often these 'flowers' of peace and serenity, that seem present and beautiful at one moment can fade or die so quickly. These delicate flowers, fortuitously growing on a tree trunk, appear in the morning and soon wither away. They are delicate and fleeting signs of God's magnificent artistry with His image in which we were created, just as we see His image in the passing signs of His beauty in nature. Even a 'dead' trunk becomes a source of life. With God there is always hope for new beginnings.

We do not need extraordinary things. What we call 'ordinary' in nature flows in creation from the divine will and is an expression of the many attributes of God. We human beings, especially, created to the image and likeness of God, are anything but 'ordinary'. The experience of life that offers us constant opportunities to uncover the God within us with His grace makes every moment for those who make God their 'center' an 'extra-ordinary' moment. To live in the presence of God is to live in mystery now what we will see face to face in all His splendor when time becomes eternity. That's ordinary!? What a dignity we have! What a promise we have received from the only One Whose Word will not return to

Him without fulfilling the purpose for which It was sent. His Word was sent that we might have *life and have it more abundantly!*

As long as we do not close our eyes to the chalice brimming with graces which God always places at a hand's breadth from our noses. The condition we cannot overlook is the chalice brimming with graces. The 'chalice' signifies our sharing in the passion of Christ that all Christians are called to accept. And the 'graces' are the gifts that flow from becoming one with Jesus. However, that oneness with Christ cannot be selective. It must be all or nothing! In all this, nothing is forced on us. Everything is within reach, clearly visible, and easily accessible. *The hand will reach for what the heart desires.* If we desire to live in-with-through-for Christ, then we will joyfully reach out to take the whole Christ Who accepted His chalice from the Father: *Father, if it is possible, let this chalice pass from me, however, not my will but yours be done.*

As long as we do not turn away, out of contempt and carelessness as if it were some base instinct ... It seems difficult to believe that there are times when we can act 'contemptible' towards God. Willful sin is a knowing and willing sign of 'contempt' for God Who, as with His Chosen Israel, gives us Himself and His pledge of eternal Life, and asks love (to surrender trustingly) and obedience (to listen attentively) in return. To expect all and to return no sign of gratitude for all we receive and never merit is 'contemptible'. Though not as crass, but no less dangerous and harmful, is to take for granted our life of grace and straddle the fence with our responsibilities as children of God and the Church. We jeopardize the holiness to which we are called when we willfully walk 'borderline' lives with morality, constantly criticize the Magisterium, disregard the centrality of the Eucharist, and so forth.

... from our most noble aspiration: that of uncovering in ourselves the imprint of God. Dreams and desires can turn to deceptions and delusions. Human beings by nature aspire to greatness. We seek to better ourselves always. The problem we note also in Sacred Scripture is that often the aspirations of humanity sought and seek to exclude or even override God! Created to His image and likeness, we are in search for a deeper awareness, knowledge and understanding of the God within. *Our hearts can find no rest until they rest in You (God), and God alone!*

We need only move towards the point from which the light rises ... At every point on life's journey we are shown the way to go, all we have to do is open our eyes and our hearts. The light to enlighten the road is not some heavenly body miraculously present, but a mysterious presence within us urging us to read and understand the signs of the times and to listen to what God is telling us and asking of us through them and all our experiences. The light of Faith that shines in the darkness of unknowing will always lead to the point for which (Whom) our lives were created - GOD!

even if we do have to climb ... The road to fulfillment and perfection is always an 'uphill climb'. We use this expression even in very mundane and material matters in which we are involved, and that require more than usual effort. What holds true in the material world is even truer in the spiritual world. He/she who stops on the uphill climb inevitably slides back down. We cannot stop striving to be what God created us to be and are capable of becoming. The 'climb' may be, and most often is, arduous. Life, as we know, was not intended to be easy, but fulfilling. God is not the 'enabler' Who creates us with free will, and then makes 'robotic slaves' of us. God respects our freedom and offers us myriads of ways to help us to choose to cooperate with Him. But, the choice and the decision to respond affirmatively or negatively is always ours! He is at the top of the 'climb' encouraging us to continue and with us to support us on the way and behind us to keep us safe from harm, but God will never deprive us of our privilege to cooperate or not with Him. The choice is ours!

carrying the not indifferent weight of our bodies. The 'indifferent weight' the baggage we accumulate in life can be quite burdensome and challenging on our 'uphill climb'. To name a few, let us consider three types of baggage:

- Material baggage is rather cumbersome. It can consist of anything, much of which is also legitimate and even necessary for our everyday lives, for example: money, apparel, books, gadgets, property, and so on. When these things control us, instead of us using and controlling them, there is a serious problem. Just consider how many useless items we hold on to 'just in case' we need them! Then the 'just in case' becomes 'I can't do without it'. Think of the importance we may give to our homes, automobiles, to money - all legitimate things - that they, rather than God and people, take priority and dictate our personal actions, at times to the detriment of others, or even our responsibilities to God. What about making our jobs or occupations more self-fulfilling than our relationship with God and fulfilling the responsibilities God has entrusted to us for the sake of our loved ones and those we encounter each day? When these 'things take over', they affect our vision of life and the priorities that make life worth living and fulfilling. We clutch onto the creature rather than strive to be embraced by the Creator. We look down rather than up, and begin to 'lose ground'.

- Social baggage is a little more difficult because it deals with relationships, attitudes, goals, in other words, with what comes from within our hearts and souls and involves other people. We all need friends, and our loved ones have a right to our love, concern and, when necessary and possible, assistance. But what happens when our friendships stifle our ability to 'let go' and move forward in the direction the Lord is calling? What happens when we forget that our relatives, friends, even brothers and sisters in religious life, have the same call to faithfulness to God's call and to 'make God first'? If anyone impedes the response of another, that 'baggage' makes the 'climb' difficult and perhaps even impossible. Here we look around and not up. *We exchange the creature for the Creator!*

- Spiritual baggage may be the most difficult to understand and accept because it all seems so good and God-centered, and most times it begins that way. We want to be holy, as God asks us to be holy. We think it is 'all in the words and actions' so our pious practices and prayers begin to multiply. The action, the words, the place, become more important than the reason for them, that is: growing in God's grace and living in God's will. We are filled so much with 'our holiness' that we leave no space or place for God's holiness to enter. We need not 'buy' God's love, nor 'prove' our own. When God inspires to 'do' something extra to what is normally required and expected of anyone, there is serenity and inner peace about it, even when what is asked is difficult or even painful. Here is where we see how spiritual direction can be important to a soul seeking to grow in the spirit of God.

Losing our 'indifferent weight' (unnecessary and extra 'baggage') we alleviate the burdens and are free to make tremendous leaps and bounds in our ascent of the Mount of Perfection and Holiness. Faith tells us what we are asked and where to aim our sites. Hope tells us all is within our grasp and pledges a reward beyond imagining. Love urges us beyond human strength to allow the Spirit of God to lead us upward and God-ward, beyond our pious platitudes, false securities and comfortable spiritual zones.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio let us take to heart in the few words Padre Pio spoke to Padre Pellegrino. Let us be careful not to be spiritual 'Jacks-of-all-trades' who try to do everything good they hear about, but do nothing wholeheartedly and well. Be free of useless baggage so that your daily 'climb' may not lose momentum, and looking at the top where, as he said he would, Padre Pio is waiting for each of his Spiritual Children at the gates of heaven to welcome us with joy.

Keep in mind the words you will hear on Ash Wednesday at the end of this month: ***You are dust and to dust you will return***, and ***Repent and believe the Gospel***. All we have in this life are but dust in view of eternity. Reflect upon the dignity which is ours as God's children through Baptism and in the Blood of Jesus the Christ. Accept the Good News that God loves us and sent Jesus to save and not condemn creation. Padre Pio's words to Father Pellegrino can help us make our journey from Ashes to Palms and from Mount Calvary to the Empty Tomb and onto the Mount of Olives, a spiritually fruitful journey.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio look over each one of you, his spiritual children, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator