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March 2020

Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace!

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. Therefore ... you must try to continually overcome yourself in those daily struggles which the Lord presents to you. And these efforts must extend also to the constant exercise of correcting your defects, acquiring virtue and in doing good. (Letter to Maria Gargani, July 27, 1917)

It is difficult to express the sentiments of faith, interior conversion, call to holiness that one can feel during the celebration of the Eucharist. When the Eucharist is celebrated with a profound sense of awe and meditative concentration, the heart and soul enter a whole new experience that is 'up-soaring' and transforming. Padre Pio always said that the Mass is everything. Every Holy Mass, heard with devotion, produces in souls marvelous effects, abundant spiritual and material graces which we, ourselves, do not know ... *It is easier for the earth to exist without the sun than without the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass!* (Padre Pio) He asked graces of God during the celebration of the Mass both for those present and those absent. We cannot know Padre Pio unless we know him in relationship to the Eucharist. True for Padre Pio, it is also true for us. The Eucharist is the center towards and from Whom all the Sacraments of the Church flow.

The Eucharist was the source of life and holiness for this great spiritual father and guide for so many souls. Those close to him recognized the profound depth of his faith and love that flowed to and from the celebration and adoration of the Eucharist. He excelled in these. The Savior, Whose Paschal Mystery he celebrated and received in a 'holy communion' with the Eternal Priest-Victim, imbued Padre Pio with a fullness that made even legitimate pleasures and comforts insignificant for him. His spirit of mortification and personal sacrifice, both internal and external, and the spirit of detachment before the many misunderstandings, contradictions and struggles he endured, were unique. The trials he endured over the course of his life were burdensome and often seemed overwhelming, so much so that, at times, Padre Pio could be heard to say: *I just cannot do it anymore.*

Through his intimate relationship with Jesus in the most Blessed Sacrament he was able to endure and accompany others closer to the Lord. More than fifty years of faithfulness in prayer and ministry reached the lives and hearts of people around the world with an effectiveness that was truly universal. Just as St. Francis of Assisi was called the 'Universal Brother', Padre Pio, his spiritual son in the Capuchin Order of Friars Minor, could easily be called the 'Universal Spiritual Father'. The souls he guided with his loving and often quite direct manner are too many to count. The years of his priestly ministry allowed him to enter the hearts of thousands. Where did he get all this energy and wisdom? He got it from the

Eucharist he celebrated and received. It was not he but Christ who worked in and through him for others. We have all heard the saying: *God looks not for our ability or inability but for our availability.* He was totally available to the will of God. Are his Spiritual Children as available when God wants, as God wants, because God wants?!

The Eucharist was the source of his total availability and obedience to the Church and his superiors. He was heard often to say: *I must do whatever the Guardian (superior) decides.* In fact, no one ever heard Padre Pio criticize or so much as make a negative comment about the superior in any way. As a true friar, detached through poverty from all things, he depended on the guardian of the fraternity, even in little things. Because he, their Spiritual Father, was detached and truly poor, he also expected that same spirit of detachment from his Spiritual Children. Padre Pio was a realist. He understood that people living in society have needs that friars do not. However, he still knew that without detachment we cannot give room to be 'filled with God'. *Do not let your possessions possess you. Do not let your wants become your needs. Be content with the minimum necessary rather than the maximum allowed.* These are a few of the various ways we explain 'detachment'. The bottom line is ultimately to have such trust in divine providence that we are always grateful for whatever God allows or sends our way, and find joy in life regardless of the amenities.

The spiritual journey upon which we embark may not always be easy. It can be compared to any trip we may take. There can be clear roads with moving traffic that help us speed on our way. However, most long trips can encounter various challenging moments: detours, road blocks, rough roads that affect our 'vehicle', lack of 'fuel', confused or even mistaken directions, fatigue, annoyance, darkness on 'uncharted' roads, blinding lights at night from oncoming traffic, and so on. Self-surrendering love for the Eucharist and faithfulness to the Church assure that our journey to holiness will reach its destination, and that we will have all that is necessary to overcome any obstacle we might encounter.

The difficulties should not discourage us. In his letter to Rachelina Russo, Padre Pio writes: *We must always have courage and if some spiritual weariness comes upon us, let us run to the feet of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and let us place ourselves in the midst of the heavenly perfumes and we will undoubtedly regain our strength.* (July 30, 1917)

Padre Pio knew the Eucharist to be the source and goal of all life. The Eucharist is God-among-us. St. John says in the Prologue to his Gospel account: *All things came to be through Him, and without Him nothing came to be. What came to be through Him was life, and this life was the light of the human race ... He was in the world and the world was made through Him ...* (John 1: 3-10) It is in this world, particularly in the Eucharist, that we come to know Him, that we may love Him and serve Him, as He emptied Himself for us and *came to serve and not be served.*

In a letter to Anita Rodote, Padre Pio writes: *Who is not well with Jesus? What soul thinking of what the divine Master declared: 'I delight in the sons of men', does not feel itself filled with infinite happiness? What soul to whom Jesus has given Himself as its inheritance, can be unhappy? Is He not the same Jesus who is the delight of the angels, and the only object of the pleasure of the heavenly Father? Therefore you are quite right to say that you are well with Jesus. May He be blessed forever that in the midst of a corrupt nation, He desired to draw us close to His love. ... May our souls always rejoice with happiness ... Let us spend the whole of our lives giving thanks to the divine Father Who, in an excess of love for us, sent His only-begotten Son and our most sweet Lord! ... Let us pray to Him that He be generous as usual, with His divine help, so that, through us, His holy Name may be greatly praised and blessed. So that we,*

too, can say in truth, with our heavenly Mother: 'My soul magnifies and praises the Lord'. (September 12, 1915)

The Paschal Mystery we annually prepare for and solemnly celebrate during the Easter Season (Lent-Easter-Pentecost) is the gift of redemption God offers us in the saving Passion-Death-Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The basic elements are prayer, sacrifice and almsgiving, and a heart that acknowledges its vulnerability and sinfulness, and humbly and trustingly seeks the forgiving grace of God. In the re-presentation of the Sacrifice of Jesus, at the Solemn Holy Week celebrations and every time we participate at Mass, we enter the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Our Holy Communion, worthily received, leads us into a deeper relationship with our saving God and transforms us to become a Eucharist capable, through our cooperation with the grace of the Sacrament, of leading others to enter, receive, rejoice in, and be transformed by the same and one and only Eucharistic Jesus working in them through us.

The Eucharist speaks of the total emptying of Christ for each one of us. Padre Pio in many of his early letters speaks of his own spiritual journey. He offers himself as a victim with the Victim of the Altar. This heroic act of entrustment to God, trustingly and lovingly offered unconditionally, does not destroy the one offered, but transforms the person. There is still further to travel on the road to holiness, but already, having given ourselves totally to God, we begin to 'let go and let God'. The liberating moment sets us free from all that we had allowed to possess us.

There is a commonality in the lives of all the saints. Certain elements are basic in order to grow in grace. The Eucharist is the source of holiness. The Eucharist is the Companion (cum=with, panis=bread) with Whom we share not only the journey but our very lives. The Eucharist overflows with graces that fill our lives. The Eucharist gives direction and meaning to all we do. The Eucharist makes life worth living as we journey from life to Life. The Eucharist fills us with the Divine Presence of God and His grace that we may live inner peace, be instruments of joy and blessings, because the Extravagant Love of God has possessed us and made us prophets of His Love.

Padre Pio himself writes to Erminia Gargani letting us see that the external trials may not cease, but we are at peace and on the road that leads to fulfillment. *I am stretched out on the bed of my sufferings, I have ascended to the altar of the holocaust, waiting for the fire to descend from on high in order to quickly consume the victim.* (June 11, 1918) Fifty years after these words were written, Padre Pio was still on pilgrimage in this world. For some the 'holocaust' is consumed quickly, for others, it is a slow divine fire that purifies as it consumes all that is not holy. We become victim with the Victim and victor with the Victor. *No longer is it I who lives but Christ who lives in me.* (Galatian 2: 20)

Whatever you may want "to do" for Lent is commendable, but remember that all those 'things' and 'actions' must be directed to our 'becoming' more intensely souls who, empty of self and 'inner clutter', accept to walk with Christ, as far as the summit of Mount Calvary, to be crucified to this world with all its false enticements and allurements, and to be renewed in the Spirit. *Whatever gains I seem to have had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ.* (Philippians 3: 7-9) As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us make the Eucharist first and foremost in all our considerations concerning Lent. Let us not forget that the Eucharist is the radiating center of Life.

May God bless you; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. May your journey from Ashes to Palms lead you to a wonderful celebration of the mysteries of our redemption in the Masses you attend, and especially during that great time of prayer, reflection, and 'immersion' into the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Passion-Death-Resurrection during Holy Week. You will all be in my prayers and Masses during this holy and joyful season. I humbly request that you keep me and all our Prayer Groups in yours.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator