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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you His peace
and lead you through the mystery of His Passion and Death
to the joy of His Resurrection and our renewed Life in Jesus!

Our world has become more confusing than ever. Things we held dear are disrespected, contradicted, and at times even abused. Values that were the foundation of our lives are challenged, or totally disregarded. Faith and belief in a God Who is the source and destiny of all human beings is criticized as old-fashioned or ridiculous to 'enlightened people'. We sense a subtle persecution of all that we spiritually value and that makes our lives meaningful. Sometimes the subtlety gives way to outright contradictory and derogatory statements by individuals seeking to denigrate and render foolish what has been the foundation of the lives of all believers, even those not of the Catholic tradition. Times never change! The Resurrection and what flows from that historical event and truth has always been a target of those who understand what belief in that great Mystery involves, and what belief in the Paschal Mystery of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Christ can effect in our world through those who surrender wholeheartedly to the Mystery!

Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus is itself a gift of Faith. The Resurrection confirms our belief in the Lord Jesus and all He said and did, and all He is able to continue to be and do for us. The Resurrection is also the moment that challenges us to believe the Lord Jesus, Who is the Christ and Incarnate Son of God, by living without hesitation as He told His disciples to live. One Who rises from the dead merits - to say the extreme least - our undivided attention and unconditional surrender through life. Why would anyone, who has heard of and accepted the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus, refuse to allow the Holy Spirit of God, first Gift of the Resurrection, to lead them to believe the Good News and live accordingly?!

We should not be harsh, however, on those who are still searching nor on those who want to believe but are still cautious because reason is still blocking where faith would go beyond. How did our sisters and brothers in the Faith, the original followers, act on the day of the Resurrection, some even after their companions spoke to them of having seen the Risen Lord and Savior?

- *Thomas...one of the Twelve...said to (the Apostles), 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe' (John 21:24-25)... Pessimism and Disbelief*
- *The two disciples, speaking with Jesus whom they did not recognize as they journeyed on the road back to Emmaus from Jerusalem, said: 'We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel ... Some women from our group ... reported that indeed they had seen a vision of angels ... but him they did not see (Luke 24: 13-25)... Disillusionment and Discouragement*
- *When Mary of Magdala told the disciples she had seen the Risen Lord and that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe (Mark 16:11)... Cynicism and Skepticism*
- *Even when the disciples followed the command to go to Galilee where they would see Him before He ascended to the Father, When they saw Him, they worshiped, but they doubted (Matthew 28:16-17)... Hesitancy and Doubt*

Thomas, Cleophas and his traveling companion, the Apostles after hearing Mary Magdalene, and many of the followers who saw Him on the Mount in Galilee at the Ascension, all had difficulties and even understandable doubts concerning the 'impossibility' of a person rising from the dead ... on his own power! We believe today after the two thousand-year-old event, and after centuries of witnessing the truth by those who believed before us, and some who even gave their lives rather than deny the Risen Lord. The power of the Holy Spirit had to shake them free to see and believe. They loved and believed Jesus, but it took an eternal power and a 'real presence' to lead them into the light of a new Life, rooted in a Person Who overcame execution on a cross and was alive. The death of Jesus sealed the Covenant God made with humanity. And humanity, in Christ, consummated the covenant, fulfilled the prophecies, and set free all who accepted the Gospel Message. *God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might ... have eternal life. For God did not send his Son ... to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him* (John 3: 16-17). The Resurrection was, and is for many, hard to accept. The condemnation and death sentence of Jesus inflicted a mortal wound on the hearts of His followers, and on those still seeking to understand and believe today. Their hearts and minds cannot as yet make the 'quantum leap' of faith into the certitude of the ways of God. Jesus had prepared the disciples for this momentous experience. Many today have heard the story but they could not and cannot fully understand and accept. Why? *Because His ways are not (our) ways, His thoughts are not (our) thoughts.* (Isaiah 55: 8)

Suffering and pain are real! We experience them often in life. The pandemic that has enveloped the globe these past months is a reminder of how truly vulnerable we truly are. There are people who are in continual suffering and deep in pain, whether spiritual, physical, psychological. Unless faith takes over and hope is kindled within our hearts, the love of God that conquers all things is the deepest desire of the heart but the furthest sensation we feel. Serenity and inner peace become just pious words and deep desires. We hear words of encouragement, but are overwhelmed by our own broken body and tired spirit. Even Padre Pio went through moments like this, and so did his spiritual children. The human condition is common to all the children of God, saint and sinner alike. In these days, everyone throughout the world, whether ill or not from the pandemic, lives in the incertitude and fear of "what will happen next".

The Passion and Death of Jesus speak to us of the extravagant and limitless love of God for all humanity. The Resurrection of Jesus gives meaning and encouragement to life. The Eucharist is the Real Presence of the Glorified and Risen Lord Who journeys with us at every moment. The Eucharist re-presents the whole Paschal Mystery and offers us the opportunity to be with the Risen Lord, Whose Sacrifice we enter, celebrate, and with Whom we seek to become one in Holy Communion. The presence of Jesus transforms lives. His bodily presence on earth centuries ago gave Him the opportunity to raise people from the dead, to heal the sick, to give hope to the downtrodden and outcast, to reassure the marginalized, to care for the various needs of those whom He encountered. His sacramental presence raises and heals souls dead and/or weak through sin, speaks to the depths of the heart of those who spend silent time with Him, and strengthens us with the grace of His Body and Blood to accept the demands that life places upon us with the realization that we are not alone but *live and move and have our being* (Acts 17: 28) with the Giver of all good gifts. He walks and works with and within us. His 'Presence' is truly 'Real'. His is a 'tangible presence' that makes Himself felt according to our willingness to see with the eyes of the heart and not the head alone. "Believing is seeing" and experiencing the effects.

Padre Pio went through his own Way of the Cross every day of his life. Some periods were very intense and even extreme for human strength. They tried his limits of human endurance. In a letter to his Spiritual Director, Padre Agostino, he writes: *Dear Father, heaven seems to me to have turned to stone; an iron hand rests on my head and thrusts me further and further away ... Who can tell the weight of the hand that rejects me in this manner?... my soul realizes that it has been rejected and judge for yourself if one can continue for any length of time in such a state... I believe with a dry belief devoid of all comfort*

and only sufficient to save my soul from falling into despair. For pity's sake, Father, tell me if there is any remedy. (February 27, 1916)

Padre Agostino responds: *Believe that Jesus loves you, is with you, and will always be yours. The victim has placed himself quietly on the altar of the Cross, the priest is ready to immolate him, but where is the fire that is ready to consume him? The fire is love. Jesus enkindled this fire long ago in your heart. Up to the present it has been consuming you and it will end consuming you entirely. Very well, place your soul on the altar of sacrifice. The fire is there. All you have to do is resign yourself to the divine plan and holy love will consume the holocaust which will be acceptable to the heart of God...* (February 28, 1916)

The sentiments he felt concerning his physical and spiritual state, as he saw and felt it, were the signs of a person seemingly overwhelmed. Yet, Padre Pio endured not a week, a few months, or a few years; he endured fifty-two more years bearing not only his own physical and spiritual burdens, but those of veritably millions of people. Where did he find the power to rekindle his strength to continue to offer himself - 'victim with the Victim' - on the altar of his daily responsibilities? It was the Eucharist! Padre Pio was in love with the Eucharist. Padre Pio spent hours before the Blessed Sacrament. His ministry of director of lives and healer of souls demanded hours in the confessional and prayerful attention to God's will and Word. It was in his hours with the Blessed Sacrament that he found the strength and the supernatural gifts that made his ministry of reconciliation a saving grace welcoming thousands back to the loving embrace of the Father. Padre Pio rarely used books before the Blessed Sacrament. He passed his time with the Lord in intimate 'one-on-one' conversations. Rising early in the morning, he prepared for the celebration of the Mass, where he and the Lord became one. Climbing the altar steps to Calvary, as the innocent lamb led to slaughter, Padre Pio accepted again and again the ministry of 'being Christ' for the sake 'of the many'. His life was a living sacrifice and a continual prayer of adoration, thanksgiving, petition, oblation and reparation to the Father. He sought to become one with the Son, in the Spirit, for the sanctification of those whom God had entrusted to his care. The Eucharist was his life and he prepared for the celebration of this great mystery for an hour or more; and after his Mass, he assisted at another Mass in prayerful thanksgiving. No one can emphasize enough how essential the Eucharist was to Padre Pio... and how essential it is to all of us!

Before He entered His Passion, Jesus, *having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end: and while they were at supper, He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: 'Take this all of you and eat of it, For this is My Body'. In a similar way, taking the chalice filled with the fruit of the vine, He gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, saying: 'Take this all of you and eat of it, for this is the chalice of My Blood'. (Fourth Eucharistic Prayer)* The Eucharist was a decisive moment in His relationship with the disciples, and it was the last gift He left His disciples to *Do this in memory of Me* after He had returned to the Father. The Eucharist is the Easter Gift as well as the Easter Mystery. The Mystery of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Our Lord is the heart of the Church, the Holy People of God on journey through time toward eternity.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, we pray to him, speak about him, want to know more about the many marvelous and extraordinary things God wrought through him, encourage others to have devotion to him, and so on. The greatest form of admiration is imitation. Do we imitate the love of Padre Pio for the Eucharist? Do we acknowledge the Eucharist not just as the re-presentation of the Passion-Death of Jesus, but that His glorified person is truly present among us and thus should be a source of peace, joy, and love?! We are not stigmatists, or miracle workers, nor readers of the hearts of people, nor anything at all, unless God so desires it for us. Most of us are not called to the unique externals of those particularly called by God as Padre Pio was. Nevertheless, when the Eucharist is truly the center of our hearts and lives, we share, in our ordinary lives, the graces of the saints themselves. Among all the other prayerful devotions, the Eucharist is not so much a 'prayer' as a 'participation' in the intimate life of God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is the goal to which to arrive each day, as well as the starting point from which we all find strength and direction to live the will of God at every moment. The mystery of the Resurrection is a pledge of the glory we are called to share one day.

These days how strongly we are hit by the reality of not being able to congregate, even for the Eucharist. The reasons are serious and sincere. Even the Holy Father has asked that Churches be closed to public worship. We can begin to feel what it must have been like and is for our sisters and brothers who were and are deprived normally of sharing in the Eucharist. Their creativity in fulfilling this basic and essential need for those who realize the awesomeness of the Eucharist is admirable and often heroic. When we cannot participate at Mass, at the very least, take time to reflect on the readings for the day and sincerely and lovingly make an act of Spiritual Communion. Padre Pio tells all his Spiritual Children by example to lovingly enter a living relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist. This Sacrament binds us all together in the great family of the Catholic Church. Thus we proclaim the Resurrection and the power of its grace not by what we necessarily say, but by how people see us live the Eucharist and how it affects our lives.

May the light of Christ's Resurrection shine in us that we *might have life, and have it in abundance*. (John 10: 10) May the Risen Lord Jesus bestow on the whole world the power of His loving grace, an end to this global pandemic, the gift of eternal rest to those who have succumbed to the virus, health to those still affected by it, strength, protection and blessings on the medical personnel and caregivers, blessings of trust and serenity of faith and hope in God's love on the families and all affected by this terrible sickness. May Mary, Mother of the Redeemer and Health of the Sick, intercede for all Her children so much in need of Our Mother's loving protection. And may Padre Pio, whose love for the sick and infirm urged the building of the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, intercede for all of us, his Spiritual Children, and our loved ones, with loving care.

With a promise to keep all of you affectionately in my Easter Masses and Liturgies, I wish you and your dear ones a very Blessed Easter in the light of the Resurrection. The darkness of the night we are experiencing, will eventually give way to the light of the dawn of the Son (of God), Whose Resurrection promises a new day for us all. *You cannot hold back the dawn!* Christ is our Dawn and New Light!

Christ is Risen! He is truly risen! Alleluia!

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator