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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

In the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary,
may you enter the loving embrace of the Eternal Father
Whose Holy Spirit fills us with Life and Love
and give you His peace!

The future of the Church, as always, will be decisively influenced yet again by the saints. ('The Church in the Year Two Thousand', 1970, Joseph Ratzinger)

These are powerful words the professor, who was called to leave the 'comfort zone' of his academic environment, that he loved so much and in which he found fulfillment of his academic desires, to let go, to leave, and to enter the 'hub' of Catholicism, Rome. The future he expected was definitely not the 'future' he was thrust into by the Spirit of God.

Faith is not merely a noun but an exciting and active verb. Our Faith is not solely a matter of what we believe with our minds, but an active profession and ongoing 'development' in life of what is proclaimed with the lips and often explained so exhaustingly in sermons and writings. Faith leads us into a realm we could never enter were it not for this gift. Faith helps us to see with the heart what our senses cannot always perceive. Faith helps us to know without seeing that Someone greater than ourselves is the life-giving Source that creates as an overflowing of His Eternal Love.

Coming from Love Who is The Other (God Father, Son, Holy Spirit) it follows that Eternal Love will not to destroy anything created to His own image and likeness. We are created as an overflowing of that Eternal Love. If then we are called to share the Life of God, it follows that we are created for and called to Holiness. Holiness too is not a noun that indicates some very limited and at times erroneous explanations of what it means to be 'in the world but not of the world'. Holiness is an action word (verb) indicating a decisive direction taken towards the fulfillment of our purpose for being created: to be one with God for all eternity; in other words to be saints!

Be holy because I am holy (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2). As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect and conduct, for it is written, 'Be holy because I am holy'. Now, if you invoke as Father him who judges impartially according to each one's works, conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your sojourning, realizing that you were ransomed ... with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb. (1 Peter 1: 15-19) You are not in the flesh, on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you ... But if Christ is in you ... the spirit is alive because of righteousness ... if you live ... by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body ... For those led by the Spirit of God are children of God ... and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may be glorified with him. (Romans 8: 9-17)

St. Peter and St. Paul, the great columns of our Faith, whose solemnity we celebrate in this month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, speak so simply in their letters to the faithful. They remind us of who we are and how we are to let our lives enter the open door of the Father's Love for us - the Sacred

Heart of Jesus His Son. The pierced Heart of Jesus is the Door to Life thrown wide open on Calvary for all by the lance of the centurion. That pierced Heart offers us access into the loving embrace of our Heavenly Father. That is where we 'find' holiness, and how we 'become' holy. Nevertheless, there are a number of ways we imagine holiness and strive to 'be' or 'become' holy.

- Holiness is a life lived in the Spirit, Who leads and transforms us according to His will.
- Holiness is the exclusive characteristic of God, of His very essence that becomes, or better to say should become, ours as well from the moment that God gave Himself to us, took us to Himself, made us His own, transforms us, and *raised us that we might be holy and unblemished before Him* (Ephesians 1:4) *... to equip the holy ones for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ ...* (Ephesians 4: 12)
- Holiness is allowing oneself to be possessed by the Master within us and permit Him to transform our lives and our minds and hearts, and thus possess a share in the very Life of God. *You are gods, all of you sons of the Most High.* (Psalms 82:6) *Jesus answered, 'Is it not written in your law, 'I said, 'You are gods?'... can you say that the one whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world blasphemes because I have said, 'I am the Son of God?'* (John 10: 34 - 36)
- Holiness is commitment, decisiveness, initiative, divine action that envelops us in love and introduces our minds and hearts to the true image of the world in which we live.
- Holiness is a divine offer for us to enrich our relationship with God and be open to God's transforming grace.
- Holiness knowingly accepts the Mystery of the One Who calls. It is a participation in the immensity of God's gifts and love graciously placed at our disposal.
- Holiness is being what we were created to be. Holiness is willingly allowing all to happen in our life, through the fruits of our works consecrated by our free will offering to God of all we are and have.
- Holiness is actively accepting and fulfilling whatever leads us to live in the mystery of God, and so much more.

The saints have always been the fonts and origins of renewal during good times and during the difficult times of history, and particularly that of the Church. Every age has dire need for saints to indicate the way for people today to live the Gospel values we profess. For this grace we must never stop imploring God. As we implore the saints' presence, prayers and protection, let us not forget that we are all called to be saints. Canonized saints are few compared to the myriad of Catholic Christians who have lived down through the centuries. The holiness and 'sainthood' of which we speak is our life of conformity to God's will in all things, at all times, in all ways, because God wills it.

When we pray *Thy will be done*, most probably we do not really reflect on the impact the realization of those words would have on our life. Yet, that is what God-loving people strive to achieve for an entire life! To live in the will of 'The Other' Who is God, is to live what God wills, to live in His love, and thus to be holy, different, not to *conform to this world but to be transformed by the renewal of your mind* (Romans 12:1-2). We can offer the age in which we live this most valid witness of the authenticity of our Faith and the ever present power of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of those available to His prompting. Holiness does not necessarily change what a person does, but it most definitely changes or enhances why and how the person does it.

To his spiritual daughter, Raffaelina Cerase, Padre Pio writes: *Holiness means getting above ourselves, it means perfect mastery of all our passions. It means having real and continual contempt for ourselves and for the things of the world to the point of preferring poverty rather than wealth, humiliation rather than glory, suffering rather than pleasure. Holiness means loving our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. In this connection holiness means loving those who curse us, who hate and persecute us, and even doing good to them. Holiness means living humbly, being disinterested, prudent, just, patient, kind, chaste, meek, diligent, carrying out one's duties for no other reason than that of pleasing God and receiving from Him alone the reward we deserve. Briefly, Raffaelina, holiness contains in itself the power to transform a man into God, according to the language of the holy books.* (December 30, 1915)

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio we should all be intent on becoming saints. Padre Pio founded the Prayer Groups for the personal sanctification of its members so that through their deeper relationship with God and fidelity to the Church they might be a 'leaven' in the world to help it rise to the full stature of the children of God, and a 'light' to enlighten those who walk in the darkness of disorientation, difficulty, doubt and so much more that inhibits one from recognizing the presence of a good and loving God in their life.

The various devotional and religious practices requested of those who are affiliates of the Association of the Prayer Groups of Padre Pio are rather minimal. The monthly Mass, Rosary, Adoration, Faith sharing and Discussion and whatever else a Prayer Group has decided upon for their monthly gathering are an encouragement for all. Nonetheless, these are only beginnings. Each member should feel the desire to continue these devotional practices and spiritual reading and personal reflection on their own, daily when possible, until the Group meets again. Holiness is not relegated to a once-a-month gathering of a few hours. Holiness is a lifetime experience that reaches its fullness only when God calls us to enter eternity. Since life is the preparation for Life, we must strive to progress, even if ever so slowly, to grow in our relationship with God and live in His grace, or we will definitely backslide quickly beyond the point from which we had begun. The going gets more demanding each time we have to 'begin again'.

We must rid ourselves of mediocrity! Mediocrity and lukewarmness are similar attributes of those who care less about things, and thus are careless about their spiritual growth. How we are within ourselves usually determines how we interact with others and live our lives. The spirit and the body form the one person. How the spirit grows will influence how the body (person) acts. When we are mediocre and tepid in our spiritual life and to those 'things' that pertain to our eternal salvation, then the matter is serious. In the Book of Revelation, the Lord speaks to the Church of Laodicea saying, *Because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of my mouth.* (Revelation 3: 16)

The Holy Spirit fills the person with spiritual fruits and gifts that flow from God's loving and abundant grace, and the person's cooperation and collaboration with the working of the Holy Spirit. Once the Spirit is within a person, though it is possible because of free will, how can anyone sit back and not allow the power of God and the Spirit to excite, encourage and enable the person to *let go and let God*?! The word 'enthusiasm' itself easily refers to the power of the Holy Spirit. Two Greek words form the essence of the word: 'en' = in, and 'theos' = God, thus enthusiasm deals with 'the God within', the God within each one of us. How can anyone remain spiritually lethargic when God and His graces are working within us! Although particular conditions and circumstances may impede certain physical actions, no one can hold back a heart enthused from being open to God in His Spirit!

Holiness is not unattainable. Holiness is a 'universal call' challenging everyone. Holiness is not 'things to do' or 'words to say', though they are all helpful and necessary. Holiness is a Person: GOD! Jesus has shown us the loving face of God. St. John reminds us: *God so loved the world that He sent His Son ... not to condemn the world but that the world should be saved through Him* (John 3: 16) Let us follow the example of the holy ones we honor and venerate. Padre Pio and all the saints, Our Blessed Mother and Jesus Himself, all tell us through word and example that no matter what we do and say to help us keep on the road to holiness only one essential thing is required that is infallible and always successful ... to do the will of God ... to do whatever He tells us. The **will of God is that we be holy.**

In the Universal Prayer attributed to Pope Clement XI we read: ***Lord, I will whatever You will, I will it because You will it, I will it in the way you will it, I will it for as long as You will it.*** There are no conditions, reservations, fine print clauses, or anything at all that might compromise the totality of the fulfillment of God's Most Holy Will in our life. If that is our prayer, each day, and we are faithful to that prayer, then the obvious result must be that we are one with God's will, one with God's grace, and, it follows, becoming holy each day more. To be 'holy' is to Live God's Will *without gloss*, as St. Francis of Assisi told his brothers who accepted to live the life of the friars as a response to God's call. We are all 'saints in progress', rough pieces of material in the hands of the Master Who will fashion us into the best work we can become, as long as we cooperate trustingly and totally with His grace and designs for us.

Remembering the Prayer Jesus taught us, may our heart's desire be: ***Father, Your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven!***

As we seek to become the saints we were destined to be, I pray that 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 the Sacred Heart of Jesus be a constant reminder for you of God's Extravagant Love for us, and through Jesus' obedience even to death, may we live the Father's Will to Life Eternal. Let us live the Ordinary Time of the Church Year that began on June 1st, Monday after Pentecost, day dedicated to Mary, Mother of the Church, in an extraordinary way encouraged and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator