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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord grant you peace!

The source of all holiness is the One Who is not only Source and Means but also the Ultimate Goal for all who seek to be holy. God in Himself is the most essential means to achieve this "eternal challenge" offered humanity. We are flawed because of Original Sin, but capable of overcoming the influence of Satan. Our strength to overcome the limitations of nature and the discouragement caused by our sins, and the nourishment that satisfies the spiritual needs of our soul that hungers for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life, for life, and through the experiences of earthly life until it enters eternity, come from one great and essential source, Who is God-among-us - the Eucharist.

Both the Heart pierced for us and the Blood poured out for us are all vivid reminders not only of the extravagant love God has for all His creation, but also of His Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar. God in His love and immensity remains in heaven, yet through His Incarnation in our time, through the "yes" of our Blessed Mother Mary, continues to journey with us. We encounter God in various ways: on the road to Damascus, as Paul, when God's call is unique, distinct, and unequivocal; on Calvary, when He encounters us in our sufferings of any kind, and especially in that ultimate moment when He leads us from time to eternity; and on the Road to Emmaus, when Jesus, Word of God made flesh, and Sacrament of the Father's Covenant with humanity teaches, enlightens, and strengthens us to help others meet Jesus on the way and to hear and to follow His voice through us.

We cannot reflect enough upon the great hidden Mystery and Real Living Presence we celebrate, receive, and become in the Eucharistic Lord Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Whom we invoke, the simple elements of bread and wine become the Divine Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The more we become like the One Whom we consume, the more we are consumed by Him. Our intimate encounter should be lovingly anticipated through prayer and reflection. We totally surrender ourselves to each other when we two, - Jesus and I - become one in Holy Communion. Thus, this experience in time transforms the moment we celebrate into an experience of heaven, an experience of eternity, that we carry with us.

The Eucharist was the Center of the life of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. He ascended the altar to enter the Mystery of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus. He was transformed and became an instrument of transformation. God called him to serve as a living image of the Crucified Savior Whom Padre Pio offered on the altar. Those who participated in his Mass, and spiritually entered the mystery with him, were profoundly affected. Lives were changed. Many determined to live lives in greater harmony with the will of God. Noises hushed as the Priest-Victim approached. The faithful and the curious watched as Padre Pio approached the altar of Sacrifice where he would offer himself with the Divine Victim. Padre Pio offered the ultimate gift Jesus made of Himself for us in the Sacrifice of the Mass. He became one with his Lord and offered himself with the Victim of Calvary. Jesus was a living Friend ever-present to Padre Pio.

The Eucharist is the continuation of the journey of Jesus with His **com-panions** (**sharers with/in the bread**). The first disciples of Jesus listened, were strengthened and nourished by the Sacred Food of His Body and Blood. These first followers were sent to be Apostles who preached His Real Presence with their lives. Nothing has changed. We too are expected to do the same. At the Eucharist we come to listen, receive, and be sent. The effectiveness of our **Eucharistic ministry** depends on the depth of our conviction in Who the Eucharist is (and not **what**). The totality of our commitment to continue the life of the One we have received will be seen in how we live our lives.

While still with His disciples, Jesus taught them to communicate with God as He did. He encouraged them (and us today) to pray with childlike confidence and familiarity to God, as Father (“Abba” = “Daddy”). He instructed those who believed in Him to ask in their prayer for daily bread. And to insure that what they (and we) asked, once received, would bear fruit for themselves and all whom they encountered, He became their daily Viaticum, “bread for the journey”.

Shortly before His death and departure from this world, Jesus took bread, blessed it, and broke it and gave it to His disciples with the assurance that in their sharing they were receiving His very Body and Blood. When the body of Jesus was broken and His blood poured out in sacrificial atonement on the cross, He remained with his own, hidden but powerfully present in the sacred signs of the consecrated and broken bread and shared wine (his Body and Blood broken and poured out for us). After the Resurrection of Jesus, his followers gathered again and again to take, bless, break, give, share and be fed upon the bread of His Body and the wine of his Blood. In that action, they knew and experienced their Lord and Savior; in that action, they signified and strengthened their union with Christ and with one another (the Church) in Him. No longer bread and wine, though seen as such, but the Divine Presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Himself.

Twenty centuries after Jesus, the Church continues to confirm its unity, communion and life in Christ through the Eucharist. To affirm the vital importance of these sacred moments of encounter with Christ and His sisters and brothers, the Church, in the Second Vatican Council, declared: *The celebration of the Eucharist, as an action of Christ and the people of God ... is the center of the whole Christian life, for the universal Church, the local church, and for each and everyone of the faithful ... The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all its power flows ... All who are made children of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of the Church, to take part in the sacrifice and to eat the supper of the Lord.* (Const. On the Sacred Liturgy, #2, 10, 41)

For many of those who believe, however, this declaration of the importance and centrality of the Eucharist is less than what they experience, and the original significance of the gifts of the Body and Blood of Jesus seems to have been allowed to be clouded over by a veil of monotony and boredom. A well-known theologian of the last century, Karl Rahner, offered the following statement regarding this: *Alas, we Christians. In this sacrament, we receive the pure blessedness from Heaven in the hard shell of custom, but nonetheless in all truth. And we receive it as though nothing were happening.* How many of our **devout** and **practicing** Catholics truly believe in the Real and Divine Presence? This is not a rhetorical question! What do you believe of the Real Presence? And, if you truly believe Jesus is present, Body-Blood-Soul-Divinity in the Sacrament of the Altar, how do you express that belief in your composure and actions when you are in the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament of the Divine Prisoner Who remains in the Tabernacle?! It is very easy to speak of matters vaguely, but integrity demands we look at ourselves first, before we seek to convince others! *Weary and lazy we take the same heart back home from the table of God into the narrow room of our lives where we are more at home than in the upper room of God. We offer the Son in sacrifice and want to refuse our hearts. We play the divine game of the liturgy, but we are not earnest about it.* (The Great Church Year).

How is it that our celebrations of the Eucharist seem to be so unlike that of the early Church or the ideals expressed at Vatican II? This is not a question of *Novus Ordo* or *Extraordinary Form*. It is a matter of belief! Perhaps it is because we have not retained and maintained a spirituality of hunger for the Bread

of Life. Perhaps other hungers have caused us to seek our source, center and sustenance in activities that excite and thrill and cater to our whims but fail to nourish and satisfy our true needs. Perhaps too many of us approach the weekly encounter with the Body and Blood of the Lord as an obligation rather than as an opportunity, or as a chore rather than as a celebration.

Far from being a “pit stop” for fast food and/or entertainment on the journey of life, the gift of the Body and Blood of Christ is the necessary sustenance for the spiritual survival of each member of the community and for the community as a whole. Perhaps some of us fail to “get something out” of the celebration of the Eucharist because we bring nothing to it. Each week, all that we are, and all that we have been and done, must necessarily come with us to the Eucharist we celebrate as the People of God. There we consciously acknowledge and celebrate the good that God has done through us and within us over the past week. Likewise, we consciously admit our sins and humbly submit them to the healing and forgiveness of God. At each sharing of the Body and Blood of the Lord, we are also expected to consciously remember and affirm our belief that we, who have gathered in the name of the Lord, are also the Body of Christ - His Mystical Body, the Church - taken and blessed by God, broken and given in love and in service for others.

Padre Pio speaks to his spiritual daughter, Raffaolina Cerase, about the gift of the Eucharist: *His immense love, that same love that induced Him to leave the bosom of His eternal Father in order to come on earth and take upon Himself our fragility and our debts and satisfy the divine justice for us, found an admirable means in which He showed us His exceedingly great love for us. What means was this? ... In His own name and in ours He asked Him also: “Give us this day, Father, our daily bread”. But what bread is this? ... the Eucharist ... Oh, the exceeding humility of this Man-God! He is one with the Father, He is the love and delight of the eternal Parent ... What excessive humility is His in asking the Father to allow Him to remain with us until the end of the world! Again, what exceeding love has the Father for us when He has seen Him subjected to such dreadful treatment and still permits this beloved Son of His to remain among us, to be the target of fresh insults every day!* (To Raffaolina Cerase: 23 February 1915)

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, the Eucharist should be the Center of our lives. **There should be no compromise in our hearts that dares to equate the awesome Sacrament of the Extravagant Love of God in the Eucharist to some pious devotion or practice to which we have become accustomed.** We cannot emphasize enough the importance of the Eucharist in the life of all Catholics, and especially in the life of the affiliates of the Prayer Groups of Padre Pio. We venerate and seek encouragement and direction from the words and example of Padre Pio. The center of His life, as we all know, was the celebration of the Mass and the hours he spent in silent prayer before the “Prisoner of the Tabernacle”. It seems that a commendable and even essential goal for all the Prayer Groups would be to spend at least an hour of “quality time” with Jesus, whether solemnly exposed in the monstrance or hidden behind the door of the Tabernacle often. It is from the Divine Radiance that emanates from the Eucharist that hearts are transformed and/or strengthened and lives lived more deeply the life of God in grace, and thus become holy. Everything else will necessarily flow from the grace-filled gifts God will bestow upon us. Our prayers, reflections, charitable personal or communal acts, relationships among ourselves as members of the Prayer Groups as well as with anyone we meet on the way, will all be a radiant expression of the One Great Love we have possessed by being possessed by Him.

O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine! We adore You, most holy Lord Jesus Christ, in all Your Churches throughout the world, and we praise You, because by Your holy Cross You have redeemed the world. Take time to repeat these simple aspirations often, even when you are not near a Church. Place yourself mentally/spiritually before the Tabernacle of some church or chapel; recognize the Lord Who waits for you; adore Him in your heart; thank Him for His love; receive Him spiritually until you can receive Him sacramentally. Be grateful for Jesus in the Eucharist. Be at peace and in joy because of a Love the world cannot give that you possess and of whom no one can deprive you, except you yourself.

As Mary became a living Tabernacle when the Word was made flesh within Her womb, may you be living tabernacles when you receive the Lord into your hearts in Holy Communion. As Mary was the first Monstrance who gave Jesus for all the world to see and adore, may you be living monstrances who, carrying Jesus within you, show Him to the world by your very lives. They will know you by your fruits. With Jesus, everything we do is fruitful and holy.

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.