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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord grant you peace!

The Spiritual Children who entrusted themselves to the guidance of Padre Pio did so because of their desire to lead a fuller life in the Spirit. Padre Pio was not a “pushover”. Nor did Padre Pio accept hysterics or fanatics who came to him for “direction”, but only wanted approval of their own methods, rather than be challenged to grow. His sole purpose in accepting souls and leading them was so that they, with his assistance, could become saints. Those who have read biographies of Padre Pio or who may have known him, know well that unless one was sincerely committed to the journey to holiness he would not have any meaningful relationship with that person. Holiness is not a “popular thing” for people “to do”. It is not a question of being with the “in crowd” of some church society. **Sanctity is the consequence of a personal decision one makes to be fully directed by the Spirit of God through a process of daily conversion.** While many use the usual means, - Eucharist, Reconciliation, Prayer, Sacrifice, and so on - a Spiritual Child of Padre Pio seeks to deepen that experience. They may even seek out a priest who is willing to assist them in the process.

A spiritual and apostolic guide is one who can see both sides of the coin of holiness. **Unless our prayer is enfolded in our lives, and our lives resound in our prayer,** our spiritual life is stunted. True holiness can never be achieved fully until we enter the everlasting embrace of the Eternal Father. This is achieved through the blood of God’s Son Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we should add, because of Her eminent place in the economy of salvation, this holiness is facilitated through the almighty intercession of Our Heavenly Mother, Mediatrix of All Graces. The intercession of the saints, angels and souls to whom we pray also fulfill their role in the wholeness of our journey. The process is not impossible, nor is it difficult. Remember that the hand will never reach for what the heart does not desire. What we truly desire, we will seek to move heaven and the netherworld to obtain. But, it is demanding! It demands that we desire this holiness, seeking spiritual wholeness, holistically. Following the prompting of the Holy Spirit and using the graces God entrusts to us, every bit of creation serves to strengthen the inner being that drives us to be in this world but not of this world.

This month we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus (August 6) and the Assumption of Our Blessed Mother into heaven (August 15). It is interesting to note that both deal with the divine and the human, the soul and the body, the invisible and the visible, the immortal and the mortal, the perfect and the flawed. One is seen as the fruit of the process of the other. The Transfiguration that dazzles the apostles is the transformation of the body that the Apostles walked and talked with during their years with Jesus. The Assumption of Mary’s physical body into the realm of the spirit is the celebration of the transformation of the material body of Mary that grew old and was subjected to life’s many changes into

a fully glorified spiritual being. No person can be truly holy without being truly human - human as God intended at the beginning of time and not as we have become through the abuse and misuse of our free will. These two feasts should be an encouragement for us to continue our endeavors to grow in the spirit, regardless of our weaknesses, faults, and even sins. They should encourage us to strive more intensely to live the spirit of the Association every day of our lives rather than just once monthly.

Vigilance over one's self at all times, without scrupulosity or undue exaggeration, is essential. Nourished by the Eucharist, daily if possible, we begin to see ourselves and others with the eyes of Jesus. He speaks to our heart with compassion. He helps us to see the world with the practicality of one who lives in the world but is not of the world.

Our Prayer Groups are active cells of enthusiastic men and women who love and desire to honor Padre Pio. Through him they hope to be able to experience God's loving presence in their lives. The Eucharist, devotion to Our Lady, and the sharing of our Catholic values brings us together in prayer and reflection. From the experience of our monthly meeting it is hoped that the desire for prayer and reflection will grow ever stronger. As people not bound by vows or public promises, but solely by our personal love and devotion for St. Pio of Pietrelcina, you are an example of what the everyday Catholic can be and do: find time to pray, reflect, and allow the experience of God to flow over from our personal lives into acts of charity and service within our respective communities.

How Padre Pio desired to see his Spiritual Children glow like beacons of light in a world that was growing dim in its spiritual fervor! How Padre Pio demanded that his Spiritual Children not compromise their Baptismal promises, so they could be examples and guides for others! How Padre Pio rejoiced to know and hear that his Spiritual Children touched the lives of others and led them closer to Jesus and Mary! How Padre Pio wanted to see his Spiritual Children take up the **challenge to be Christ to the world!** This is the responsibility of mature committed Catholic Christians, and more so for those accepting to be Spiritual Children of Padre Pio.

All of this may seem like too much. It may seem impossible. It may seem unattainable. If that were the case, then we would have to say that the Gospel is impossible to live. St. Francis of Assisi faced the same predicament himself when he presented his original Rule of Life for the first followers to the Pope. He was told it was impossible to live the Gospel as literally as he stated. A Cardinal of the Papal Court who was present at the event counseled the Pope that to say such a thing was to say living the Gospel is impossible. That would be blasphemy and heresy. Needless to say, Francis was given the permission he asked. All things are possible when we believe in God and trust in his grace that can transform those who place their lives in His hands. Unlike our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi or even our beloved Padre Pio, Prayer Groups you are not required to profess vows in a religious community of brothers or sisters, but to be a leaven in the world and a light to encourage others with hope, because of a faith that teaches us all to believe in love that far surpasses the merely material.

We note the power of this transforming grace in the words of Padre Pio in a Letter to Padre Benedetto, September 8, 1911: *When I am close to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament my heart throbs so violently that it seems to me at times that it must burst out of my chest...Sometimes at the altar my whole body burns in an indescribable manner. My face in particular seems to go on fire.* Again, he writes in another Letter to Padre Benedetto, July 27, 1918: *During my Mass in the morning I was touched by a living breath...I felt completely shaken, filled with extreme terror and I almost passed away. This was followed by a total calm such as I had never before experienced, ...caused ... by something which I felt touching me in the deepest recesses of my soul.*

True, these words were written by a mystic privileged with the Stigmata of Jesus. He was unique as far as most of us are concerned. His experience though follows the same "process" of which we have reflected. To be able to be the person he was for thousands over the years, he had to be transformed from within, to be the transforming presence and instrument of God without.

Psychologists, even those of faith, would and actually do have comments regarding expressions and experiences such as those of Padre Pio related above. Most times they are not laudatory, or at the least extremely cautious. Some psychologists might say that these are words of some religious neurotic. Perhaps words of a spiritual psychotic who has begun to live in an illusionary world, enhanced by his delusions. How true is the old adage: *For those with faith, no explanation is necessary; for those without faith, no explanation is possible!* This is the judgmental and skeptical world in which we live today. We have closed our eyes to the miracles around us and so cannot understand the mystery of God's presence. Spiritual Children of Padre Pio seek to see clearly and help others to do the same, not by pressure but by presence, not by leveling rules and regulations but by living life simply and trustingly, not by crying out but by the soft whisper of a soul enamored of God in the daily routine of living.

For fifty years those who assisted at the Mass of Padre Pio were spiritually transported to Calvary in an unforgettable mystical experience. Hearts were filled with awe. Lives were indelibly marked with a memory, almost a presence, which stayed with them forever. At Mass Padre Pio became victim with the Eternal Victim. With the Eternal High Priest, Padre Pio became the visible instrument that re-kindled the awareness of God's love for humanity for all people and all the ages. The consecrated bread and wine were signs of a life totally consecrated to and with Jesus the Savior offered to the Father in the Holy Spirit for the Church and the whole world.

Padre Pio was God's *Good News* that God had not abandoned His People. In Padre Pio - as in so many holy ones through the centuries - the Eternal God was making His Love felt for all who were willing to open their eyes and their hearts to recognize a personal call to holiness. Oh! How many hear the ringing in the heart and head, and fail or refuse to answer the call!

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, we are called to continue his unique vocation, not of sacramental priesthood but of Christian Victimhood, which is a concretizing of that baptismal priesthood in Christ we have all received. It is a hard word to say and even more difficult to want to accept as a *vocation*. Actually, it is the *call* of every baptized Christian to be Jesus in this world. Jesus became a victim on the cross. We accept a share by living fully the responsibilities of life, even accepting extraordinary “crucial” moments with serenity and trust. No need to create the “crucifixion” we would like, just accept the share in the sufferings of Christ we are given that God wills, and we have it made.

Most Prayer Group members are not ordained to the ministerial priesthood, but all are incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ, His Church. All share in the priesthood of the faithful conferred on us through Baptism. While the priest offers the bread that becomes the Body of the Savior, all of us raise our hands in offering the daily responsibilities of life. Our work, our relationships, our hopes, our dreams, all we are, created in God’s image, we offer each day. While the priest offers the wine in the chalice that becomes the Blood of Christ, we offer our sufferings, our fears, our hardships. With the priest we offer not only the gifts he consecrates but the very gift of ourselves together with the Victim of Calvary re-presented at the altar of Sacrifice and the Table of the Lord. We slowly enter the process to become holy with the Holy of holies, JESUS!

The Sacred Chrism of Baptism anointed us to be members of Christ the priest, prophet and king. Like Padre Pio, Father and Founder of the Prayer Groups, we are called to offer sacrifice, be a sacrifice, and share the benefits of the sacrifice. Sacrifice means *to make sacred* or *to make holy*. We are “con(s)crated” in Jesus, as He Himself prayed the night before He died: *Father, I pray for them...consecrate them in truth...who would be my disciple must follow in my footsteps.*

The remembrance of Padre Pio’s ordination in Benevento Cathedral, August 10, 1910, is a vivid reminder of the *Sacrifice* of the Mass we are called to offer becoming victim with the Victim that we may be victors with the Victor. It is a reminder of the Sacrament of the *Eucharist* we are called to receive often becoming a living sign of thanksgiving to God ever present among and within us. It is a reminder of the *Communion* we are called to share with all God’s children, beginning with our family in Christ and extending our disarmed hands and hearts out to the whole world.

Like Mary, the beloved “mamma” of Padre Pio, allow the Holy Spirit to anoint you with His presence. Allow the Holy Spirit to enter the recesses of your hearts. Thus the image of Christ may be born within us so that we can offer Him in and with our lives, as Mary did at Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capharnaum,...CALVARY, to the whole world. Like Mary, we are called to be Tabernacles and Monstrances of the one Saving Lord, Whose Holy Spirit has anointed us to continue the wonderful mystery of our salvation with our priests in, with, and for the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. We form that Body!

The Mass is Christ; the Church is Christ; we are the Church, therefore, we must become the Mass we celebrate and offer our lives each day in union with the Sacrifice of Jesus, the Christ. **Here is the holistic means of human wholeness that leads to holiness in God's loving grace.**

May the Lord bless you and your loved ones; Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you; and Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator