

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you peace!

Today me, tomorrow you. (This is a loose translation of the Latin inscription: *Hodie mihi, cras tibi*). This famous saying can often be seen sculpted or painted at the entrances of many cemeteries in Europe. It is a rather stark and macabre reminder that earthly life, as long as it can be, will eventually experience its transforming moment. The point of convergence of all life's experiences - good, bad, and indifferent - will come together awaiting our call to timelessness. Death calls and eternity awaits. It is not the end of everything, as too many people feel and believe. It is the moment of the ultimate transformation of who we are into who we were created to be.

We celebrate November, the month dedicated to the Holy Souls in Purgatory. They await that transformation by God's love and mercy. The Church asks us to pray for those who have gone before us into eternity and who still await the fullness of Life. The Church also reminds us that we ought to pray for ourselves who, still on journey, are subject to many challenges that can either threaten or strengthen our resolve to be faithful to the Gospel and live in the light of Eternal Life. The journey of life is so wonderful because of the many challenges God offers us to grow in His love. Nevertheless, it is also very dangerous because of the many allurements and seductions that can entice us to deviate from the path marked out for us. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. If we follow His Way, listen to His Word of Truth, we can expect ultimately to share in the fullness of His Life. He Himself says: *I came that they may have Life and have it in abundance* (John 10: 10).

Jesus gained that Life for us, once for all, on the Cross of Calvary. Life and the Cross! There it is again, the Paradox of the Cross! the Paradox of Christianity! We are always facing these choices, these opposites: positive-negative, good-bad, light-darkness, grace-sin, heaven-hell. We always have that responsible and awesome option placed before us. Adam and Eve were offered a test as a requisite to continue living in Eden. In the Old Testament, before the People of Israel entered the Promised Land, Joshua read the Law of the Covenant God made with His People and told them to choose *between life and death...I for my part will serve the Lord*

(Deuteronomy 30: 19). The people responded in unison that they would serve the Lord. However, history for them, and also for us who have opted to follow Jesus, tells us how fickle our commitments can be. Perhaps this is why we have difficulty in reflecting on that most solemn moment in life when we are called to encounter the Source of all Life and see ourselves in His Light.

Our Christian Faith is nourished by the Sacramental Life of the Church, redeemed in the Blood of Christ, Who constantly challenges us to *follow me* (Matthew 16: 24 among others). In this life of faith we are always speaking of positive values while focusing in on what at first glance seems 'negative'. We speak about Life, but refer to it through the Death of Jesus. We speak about Love, but recognize it through the symbol of hatred, torture, and death, The Cross. We hope in Heaven, but experience its beginnings through the challenges and pitfalls of life's earthly journey. Our humanity, so prone to the changing attitudes of nature, has learned how to 'see' beyond the barriers that daily seek to impede our forward steps. It is with a faith-filled heart and a hope-filled life that we can securely live life to the fullest, seeing every moment and experience as another opportunity to Live Life and Love It.

Our Seraphic Father Saint Francis of Assisi was a unique and inspired prophet for all times. His approach to life and all creation has earned for him the title of *Universal Brother*. He instilled in the hearts of his spiritual children an attitude of joy and gratitude for every facet of life. He was a man imbued with a spirit of wonder that made him rejoice even during the most challenging times of his own life. Several years before his brief life ended - he died at 44 years of age - his body began to succumb to all the effects of the penances he had imposed upon himself. He even apologized to 'Brother Ass', as he called his body, for treating one who was so faithful to him in such an unappreciative manner. With the knowledge of his terminal condition and the pains of the Stigmata of Jesus he had received two years before, informed that he was soon to pass from this life to the next, he asked that a new stanza be added to the Canticle of the Creatures, and that it be sung for him. *Praise be You, my Lord, for Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm. Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility.* When he was told that Death was imminent, he called out *Welcome, Sister Death!* When we see life as the gift it is, and live life and love it, then even death cannot disturb our inner joy and serenity. Only then are we able to live each moment as a gift and know how to 'let go'.

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, the faith of Israel was severely tested. Conquering armies and foreign rule were the fate of the Children of Abraham. Among the many restrictions, the most difficult was that of the prohibition for Israel to practice the faith of their ancestors. All the people were required, under penalty of death, to practice the religion of the conquering government. The Law of Moses was proscribed. Needless to say, many faithful Jews refused and were savagely tortured and executed. Among these was a mother and her seven sons. The testimony she gives, immortalized by the sacred writer, merits our reflection. All her sons were brought before the king and required to apostatize. Each refused, and, one by one, each son was cruelly tortured and killed before the eyes of the remaining brothers and their mother.

Finally, the last son, young and full of life, with a promising future before him and gifts promised by the king should he accept the new religion, came forth. The mother leaned over and spoke to her son: *Son, have pity on me, who carried you in my womb for nine months ... look to the heavens and the earth and see all that is in them; then you will know that God did not make them out of existing things; and in the same way the human race came into existence. Do not be afraid of this executioner, but be worthy of your brothers and accept death, so that in the time of mercy I may receive you again with them* (2 Maccabees 7: 1-31) The young boy refused the king's offers and rebuked him for his arrogance toward the God of Israel. In the course of the comment the young boy made before being more cruelly treated than the others, he said: *My brothers, after enduring brief pain, have drunk of never-failing life, under God's covenant...* (cfr. 2 Maccabees, 7). He loved life so much that he would not compromise its fullness offered him by his Creator. Again we see how living life fully, at whatever stage and age we are, makes death not the frightening 'reaper of doom', but the 'Doorway to Life'.

Already centuries before the Messiah, the Spirit of God had instilled in the hearts of His People the awareness that all life, from the moment of conception, is destined to live forever. Because of God's Eternal Love, we share in His very Life. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit through grace in those who live in God's Will opens the heart to see God in all things and to recognize the reality of heaven as the Father's gift to His children. Yet, the process to achieve 'perfection' travels through many and varied experiences. The experiences of life teach us many things about God, ourselves, others, the world in which we live, the universe around us ... and the Life that awaits us all. How we will enter that Life is determined by the decisions we make during our journey on earth.

Death is a terrible word for most people. They avoid even saying it for fear it might 'catch up with them' sooner than expected. It always seems unexpected when Death finally does come to call us home. Notice how, when we hear of the death of someone, often people will ask *How old were they?* As though age had anything to do with it! Death is the natural conclusion of time so that someone can enter eternity. Fear of it is the result of humanity's disobedience in Eden. The passage from time to eternity - in whatever way God would have accomplished it had not Original Sin happened - would still have occurred, but in loving anticipation and yearning, rather than fear and sadness. Sin causes the fear and the uncertainty of our moral strengths. To this, all I say is: Trust God's Word! God loves you! Believe in God's love, and love Him back by living in God's Most Holy Will!

Padre Pio faced the mystery of death often in his long life. Family, friars, friends and devotees eventually shared his concern for their souls and his spiritual friendship. He felt their loss when those close to him died. He wept bitterly at the death of his mother. Writing about the death of Zi` Peppa (Padre Pio's mother), Francesco Morcaldi writes: *The depth of the Padre's pain was immense ... We did not expect to see him suffer so deeply. It seemed that at any time his strength would give way totally. He could be heard repeating tenderly 'Mamma mia, mamma mia' ... When we returned from the cemetery and I visited Padre Pio in his room, I questioned him on his weeping that penetrated the hearts of all who heard him. His response was: 'But this*

weeping is tears of love, and nothing else than love'... his mother's death and Pio's response was a veritable triumph of affection...

Even his father, Zi` Orazio, desired to die near his son. This man had given all he had and could give for his family. A beautiful photo shows Padre Pio assisting his father in his last days. Love, sadness, presence and inner serenity and peace ... all these Pio brought with him to whomever he assisted. Living in the light of God's Presence does not take away our human nature but ennobles it to rise above what the eyes of the body see, and to look at life with the eyes of the heart that we may look forward to the fullness of Life with all our being.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, how do we live our lives? What is our attitude to the challenges God permits that remind us of our vulnerability and mortality? Do we live in the spirit of the letter to the Hebrews that states: *'We do not have here a permanent dwelling, but we await another* (Hebrews 3: 14)? Do we take time to reflect on death as one more step, the ultimate, in getting us to God? Do we avoid even thinking of the Paschal Mystery that each one will be called to celebrate in his or her personal life? Are we joy-filled in life and encourage others to be so, even in the midst of difficulties? Are we one of those who fall into that amusing, but true saying: *'Everyone talks about heaven, but no one seems to be in a hurry to get there' ?*

Padre Pio taught us all to recognize God's Presence among us in the Eucharist, God's love for us in the Cross and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and God's Providence for us in the love and concern of our sisters and brothers. If we live the spirit of our Spiritual Guide and Founder, life will be the wonderful experience God intended it to be for us all, and death will truly be that 'Welcome Sister' that leads us to the fullness of Life. Let's pray for the Holy Souls this month, as they await the loving call to heaven. They were where we are, and we will be - hopefully - where they are. The Church Militant and the Church Suffering assist each other that together one day, we may celebrate God's Eternal Life in the Love of the Church Triumphant.

This month we celebrate our national Day of Thanksgiving for all the blessings God bestows on us. Let us be grateful for life. Let us be grateful for the Life we are being called to each day of our journey through time. As we celebrate the blessings of God on each one of us, let us strive to be a sign of God's blessings to any and all whom we encounter. **Happy Thanksgiving to all of you and your loved ones!**

May God bless you. May Our Lady guide, guard, and protect you. May 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