

# Padre Pio Prayer Groups

National Office

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

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The Lord give you his peace!

In 1906, Lucia Fiorentini, a young woman from San Giovanni Rotondo, witnessed to the following experience: *I saw in the vision a gigantic tree in the atrium of our Capuchin friary. And I heard a voice that said to me: 'This is the symbol of a soul who is now far away, but who will come here. He will do a great deal of good in this town ... He will be strong, and he will have firm roots like this tree. And all the souls who come from near or far will be freed from evil if they have refuge in the shade of this tree (or, whoever comes to this worthy priest for light and forgiveness, and help for their sins). If they humble themselves before this worthy priest, they will receive advice and fruits of eternal life. And woe to those who despise his advice, his way of acting ... His mission will extend all over the world, and many will come to take refuge in the shade of this mystical tree to have fruits of grace and pardon.'* I was daydreaming and asked myself 'Who is this worthy priest?'... But later I did not think of it anymore, and I left to the Lord the fulfillment of these things in his own good time. After seventeen years and precisely on August 19, 1923, the Lord himself asked Lucia Fiorentini if she remembered that vision. She answered that she did, and then she added: *And thus (Jesus) now explains to me that the tree is Padre Pio.* (Cf. Maria della Concezione, "Lucia Fiorentini, figlia spirituale di Padre Pio", 'Sapienza di Vita' Series, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1964, pp. 19ff; 141ff).

When Lucia Fiorentini saw the vision of the tree and later found out that the image symbolized Padre Pio, she had no difficulty making the connection. By that time she had not only seen but also known Padre Pio. His life seemed an open book to all the people of San Giovanni Rotondo and surroundings. For five years already he had borne the visible signs of the Passion of Jesus on his body. People attending his Mass in the early hours of the morning knew they were participants in an experience that allowed their little portion ('portiuncula') of the earth to be raised to the highest realms of heaven when that saintly friar offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Their town was truly "holy ground". When Padre Pio celebrated Mass everyone knew he was immersed in the mystery of humanity's redemption in the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus. They knew he had them all with him before the Lord. He forgot no one for whom he promised to pray. All who sincerely sought his prayers and counsel were indelibly impressed in his heart and mind. They were with him at Mass, in his rosary, at his prayers, during his meditations. They were his "Spiritual Children" and he, as Spiritual Father, would always be there to encourage, advise, correct, forgive, ... to love them. He would help them to "Live Jesus" so that each one could say with St. Paul: *I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me* (Galatians 2:20).

The graces the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio received by faithfully adhering to his counsels, and their willingness to live more God-centered lives, pledged them to one another in Padre Pio and gave birth to a new family in the Church. This Capuchin friar was a true son of our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi. His total unquestioning obedience to the Church and deep love for the Eucharist and our Lady were the hallmarks of his life. How could it be otherwise?! Anyone who wished to be considered his Spiritual Child was expected to follow the same road as that of St. Francis who wrote to all the faithful: *We must...be Catholic* (Letter to the Faithful, 2<sup>nd</sup> version): faithfulness to God and His Word and Sacraments, to the Traditions of our Faith, and to the Magisterium of the Church whose visible Head and Chief Shepherd on earth is the Holy Father, the Bishop of Rome and Successor to St. Peter.

The tree that Lucia Fiorentini saw is an image we, the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, should keep very well in mind and heart. The visible attraction, resilience and richness of a tree is noticed by what it produces. The beauty, strength and fruitfulness depend on the depths of unseen roots and the regular nourishment they receive. As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, we share in the wonderful gifts and graces the Lord bestowed upon Padre Pio, who is ever ready to share and shower them upon us. We share in those gifts not in the miraculous way that Padre Pio received them and often exercised them, but in a more subtle, but no less effective manner. When we allow the graces that flow from God through the intercession of Padre Pio to enter our lives, our souls are invigorated, and our minds and hearts are strengthened to know and to do joyfully and wholeheartedly what God wills.

Maria Pompilio, a contemporary of Padre Pio, tells us that from the outset of Padre Pio's presence in San Giovanni Rotondo (1917), those who sought his spiritual guidance already began living a certain lifestyle. Padre Pio was given permission by his Provincial Minister, Padre Benedetto, *to guide many souls at San Giovanni Rotondo, who aspire to perfection, through spiritual conferences* (Paolino da Casacalenda and Rachelina Russo). *The conferences were conducted regularly* ("regularly means 'weekly' at that time") *on Thursday and Sunday. Padre Pio spoke about the virtues to practice, the vices to avoid, the weaknesses to attack, the good to do. He expounded on the Gospel parables. He exhorted all to practice daily meditation. He gave meditations on the Passion of Jesus* (Maria Pompilia, Nina Campanile, M. Preziosi). According to Nina Campanile, Padre Pio was simple in his speech, practical, full of experience, got to the core of the matter. He was generous, encouraging, and led everyone by his own example. After the general conferences he held with the groups, Padre Pio would meet privately with each spiritual child, and respond to each sometimes gently and sometimes firmly as the good of the soul demanded. He was also interested not only in the spiritual matters of the person's soul but in the everyday life and responsibilities, and how each was able to live the Gospel cheerfully and effectively.

As the group of his spiritual children grew Padre Pio stated, *Many, many, many will come still, but my arms will extend far enough to embrace the whole world* (Maria Pompilia, M. Preziosi). To anyone expressing a desire to be among "one of his own", Padre Pio would say: *I will accept you willingly as my spiritual child, on the condition that you always do what is right, that you do not*

*make me look bad before God and people, that you be an example of Christian living. Otherwise I know how to use the strap (La Casa 3, 1952).*

We can see from these few testimonies and quotes how important Padre Pio considered his Spiritual Children to be, and with what commitment he accepted someone as his “spiritual child”. He expected no less from them. He expected a serious commitment and not just a pious desire to say that one was the “child of the saint” or the “child of the stigmatist”. Padre Pio was well aware that kind of an attitude meant absolutely nothing for one’s eternal salvation and the betterment of one’s life. Each had to work daily at growing in the spirit, especially in and through their normal daily activities.

The members of the Association today do not follow the more intense weekly schedule of those first spiritual children. The basic requirement of the group is only the official monthly meeting with its spiritual practices. The meetings serve as the united experience of the membership called together: first, to pray in the Eucharist as we hear God’s saving Word and receive His Most Precious Body and Blood as our food for the journey of life; second, to share the common bond of our Catholic Faith and love for Padre Pio under the guidance of the Spiritual Assistant; third, to entrust ourselves, as did Padre Pio his entire life, to the loving intercession of our Heavenly Mother and journey through the mysteries of the Rosary as we *Live Jesus* through the eyes and heart of Mary; fourth, to bring what we have learned and experienced into our daily lives as we open our hearts to others; and finally, to let this bond of unity in *spirit and life* to transform our daily lives in prayer and action. Padre Pio’s goal was to help people become the saints we are created to be.

Vatican Council II speaks of the Universal Vocation to Holiness. If that is not our goal, then how can we call ourselves Spiritual Children of Padre Pio? His purpose in accepting his Spiritual Children and establishing the Prayer Groups was specifically to lead more people to a deeper relationship with Jesus our Lord and Savior, in the Church, for the salvation of souls and the world. Mary’s loving presence in our life makes the journey through life to eternity easier. Our Mother helps us to be more focused on Jesus, Her Son. Mary makes that so clear when She tells us *do whatever He tells you* (John 2: 5). Let us remember that the spiritual growth we seek cannot be relegated to one monthly meeting of several hours. The meeting is intended to strengthen and encourage each one and all together to strive to live our Catholic Christian life intensely and with determined commitment every day.

Padre Pio, our Founder and Spiritual Father, is not some pious little friar lost in the mountains of southern Italy whose words were intended to make people *feel good*. His life and counsels were and still are God’s gift for those who accept them to *be good*, and *become always better*, until they achieve the *best they can become* and enter the Eternal Father’s loving embrace. The autonomy of each Group should create a certain healthy challenge among the members to find ways to grow in the spirit of Padre Pio, to grow in living the Gospel, to have St. Francis of Assisi and St. Pio of Pietrelcina (men who reached the farthest corners of the world with their charism) as our guides. There are no effective middle roads. Jesus must be the sole purpose for our lives and actions. In Jesus, once we truly trust Him enough to believe His words and live them *without*

*gloss*, life becomes worthwhile and even the most insignificant activities take on a deeper and more incisive meaning in our lives. (The expression *without gloss* St. Francis of Assisi wrote to encourage the friars to live the Gospel and the Rule of the Order clearly, simply, and without “clarifications” intended to mitigate the will of God and responsibilities promised by those who accept the challenge both of Baptism and life in the Order)

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, do we believe ourselves to be branches of that great tree that Lucia Fiorentini saw so many year ago? Do we, through our devotion to Padre Pio, really seek to live the counsels he sought to instill in his Spiritual Children? Are we Spiritual Children enough to take our growth in holiness seriously? Have we made the Eucharist the center of our lives, and Mary a daily companion on our journey? Have we let Padre Pio be only a reminder of past holiness, or are we, as his Spiritual Children, continuing to live his spirit of faithfulness, sacrifice, prayer, charity? Are our days so busy that the only time we think of our souls is when we gather for the monthly meeting and assist at Mass on Sundays and Holydays? You can see what I am getting at. What we are required to do, now, is minimal, but what Padre Pio expected of those he accepted as Spiritual Children in his day was a daily affair, accepted with a personal commitment. It is not excessive nor is it difficult in any way. Love makes all things possible. It is really quite simple for those whose love for Padre Pio goes beyond the lips. May we grow in holiness, and not just learn how to talk about it. Holiness does not come by osmosis - that is how plants are nourished. We are nourished by the Word of God and the Sacrament of His Love, through our free will giving and acceptance in total availability to the prompting of the Spirit.

May God bless you: Our Lady and good St. Joseph 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