

# 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!

The journey to Christmas has begun. God's Word for the first Sunday in Advent speaks of the Lord's unexpected return to close the experience of time and open for us the reality of eternity. The Scripture passages for this Sunday may have different effects on those who read them. Some may feel that the words are only figurative, intended to convey the need for people to change their lives or be responsible for the consequences of their choices in this life. Others may read the words and see in them a warning about a real event to take place in the immediate future, thus instilling a sense of fear, trembling and a "forced" changed of heart... (Can any heart be changed by force!?)...Then there are those who read the words as they have been read for centuries. These read them as a reminder and a loving warning of what will come about for all human beings created to share in eternal life. This is a reminder and a warning to be heeded but not feared for those who have striven to be faithful to God.

How many people and organized religions live in and preach fear of a God Who comes to judge and condemn His creation, His children! While the possibility of an eternal loss of God is within the will of all human beings, often we forget some very basic and necessary truths that we should always keep in our hearts. Have we forgotten - or at least placed in the back of our minds - the fact that Jesus is the sign of the Father's compassion and love for a wayward and sinful humanity? Jesus is the tangible expression of the Father's love, mercy and providence. Have we forgotten that the Father sent His only begotten Son so that all who believe in Him may have life and have it more abundantly? Have we forgotten that Jesus said all that the Father has given me I will to have where I am? Have we all forgotten that Jesus said in my Father's house there are many dwelling places...I will come back to take you with me so that where I am you may also be? The coming of the Lord at the end of time is something to be anticipated with joyful hope. It is the coming of the Lord we celebrate in Advent: His coming as a human being, His coming at the end of time, and His coming among us and within us at every Eucharist we celebrate and every Communion we receive.

The birth of Jesus in human history took place at a moment that changed even the measurement of the passing of the generations. There are those who have argued against making Jesus the turning point of our calculation of time. Yet argue as they may, Jesus is the point of demarcation for all of history. Non-Christian and even non-believing nations have been compelled on the global scene to calculate time from the Birth of Jesus the Christ. There is a point in history when

time makes a drastic change. That Point is Jesus! The little rock that was hewn from the mountain and struck the foot of the great statue making it crumble, as we are told in the Book of Daniel, is the Infant of Bethlehem Who is Mighty God and Savior come to re-establish the Kingdom of God in place of the kingdoms of the world. The presence of Jesus urges change. Jesus comes on the scene and the world begins to move in another direction. Those who accept Jesus, live their lives fully and meaningfully with their hearts profoundly focused on the image of God hidden in all those with whom they share life's journey. The invisible God manifested in the Incarnate Son gives a whole new vision to the world. Humanity is no longer on a journey through the darkness of spiritual confusion and anxious anticipation.

The ancients who accepted the prophets' and patriarchs' words interpreted God's Word according to their own wants based on their social needs or personal desires. Thus, when the Promised One finally arrived, Israel failed to recognize Him. Luke tells us this so beautifully and succinctly in his account of the Birth of the Savior: *While they were there (Bethlehem)...She (Mary) gave birth...and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the place where travelers lodged.* No room! The Creator of the universe finds no room in His own creation! The God of all creation is refused a welcome by those from Whom they received life! Almighty God is made to be born in a hovel for animals, Whose throne is a manger and Whose adoring court are a humble couple and poor shepherds from the hillside who were tending sheep! What mystery of love! Here is a total emptying! How can we question that God understands our human condition? It all begins with Mary's "yes" to the Father's request for her availability to allow God to be born in human history. The birth of Jesus takes place in Bethlehem, whose name itself speaks of the Little One born there.

It is interesting that the word Bethlehem means either house of bread or house of flesh. Centuries before the birth of the Savior, the name of this little town, birthplace of David the King of Israel and of Jesus the Incarnate Son of God, prophetically spoke of nourishment and life. This little town of Bethlehem was to offer a place for the Word to become flesh and to dwell among us so that He could nourish us with His own Body and Blood in the Eucharist so that His presence could be enfleshed in our lives down through the ages. We are called to become other bethlehems through whom Jesus can be spiritually enfleshed in our lives. Through Him and in Him, we can offer Jesus a way to be enfleshed in our world and to be nourishment for others through our active concern for our sisters and brothers. God gave us the Gift of Himself and we are called and encouraged to do the same - give of ourselves freely and joyfully.

Advent prepares us for the Lord's arrival in Word, Sacrament, each other, and at the end of time. We look forward to His coming and we journey through the season with the prophets who foretold that magnificent moment. We hear the words of the Baptist spoken during Jesus' adult life. The Baptist was a prophetic voice and reminder for all who today forget or fail to recognize Jesus' Divine Eucharistic Presence in His Church and in the people around them. During the last week of Advent we relive, through Scripture, the events leading up to the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem. This holy Season introduces us to the new Liturgical Year that reaches its central and greatest moment in the celebration of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of the One Whose life from the Crib to the Cross was prophesied, anticipated, and fulfilled. Jesus' triumph in fulfilling

the Father's Will begins with His humble birth in the obscurity of Bethlehem. He is rejected by a world grown indifferent to the plight of the stranger and the poor. The House of Bread would not nourish, and the House of Flesh would not open its doors to the Word made Flesh.

In the midst of this humiliation, heaven sings Glory to God in the highest and peace to all on whom His favor rests. When others cry out, march, fight back, raise issues, criticize, judge, condemn, and so on, the Savior is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in an animal's trough because there was no place for Him in the inn. He begins to live in the obscurity intended, until he is exalted on the Cross to attract all people to Himself.

We can never separate the Cross from the Crib, and Christ from the Cross. These three are so intimately connected that to forget one is to misunderstand the totality of the emptying of Christ even to death and death on a Cross. Joy at the birth celebrated so elaborately at Christmas, is a prelude of the infinite joy that we are called to share when we are born to eternity. Jesus' birth and willingness to share our human condition is an encouragement for all of us. We too are born in this world and called to be a counter cultural presence, to be other Christs whose lives speak volumes to a society that still refuses to allow the Lord to enter. Our society is still indifferent - and now in many areas of the world - hostile in many ways to the Savior. We still rationalize our refusal to open our hearts to one another. We still try to buy our way out of being responsible for uplifting our sisters and brothers who suffer. We still, in many ways, use the exercise of religion as a mask to hide our fear, prejudice or indifference to others. Jesus comes in our midst, often hidden as He was in the womb of Mary. He knocks at the door of our hearts. How many times have we refused Him entry?!

In his letter to the Ventrella Sisters, Padre Pio writes: *Remember that one thing only is necessary, to be close to Jesus. You know well that at the birth of our Lord, the shepherds heard the divine and angelic singing of the heavenly spirits. Scripture tells us this, but it does not say that the Virgin, his Mother, and Saint Joseph, who were closest to the Infant, heard the voices of the angles or saw the miraculous splendors. On the contrary, instead of hearing the angels singing, they heard the Child crying, and saw by the light of the poor lamp, the eyes of the Divine Infant all wet with tears and trembling with cold. Now, I ask you, wouldn't you have chosen to be in that dark stable filled with the cries of the little Child, rather than beside yourselves with joy, with the shepherds...? Undoubtedly!*

Undoubtedly?! I hope that we as Spiritual Children of Padre Pio can also say: Undoubtedly. We are not seeking the consolations of God but the God of all consolation. As Mary and Joseph, may we be able to look "down to heaven" instead of up. What do I mean? I pray that we may not be looking up for God to respond to our desires always in a special way, but that we may recognize God in our midst as we walk through life. If heaven cannot be recognized within our hearts, if we cannot hear the voice of the Savior in the depths of our soul, if we refuse to let go of our inflated egos, how can we ever expect to recognize the Lord Who comes every moment into our lives and asks us to let Him in?! Mary and Joseph did not need the heavenly music because they possessed the Divine Composer Whose Presence was music to their hearts. Are we satisfied with knowing Jesus is with us? Is Jesus' birth at Bethlehem a time for us to bow in humble adoration of the

great mystery and miracle that took place and continues in our lives, or is it just a time for glitz and gift-giving, with no real thought of the reason for the season? As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, always remember that Jesus' birth gives us courage and certitude in a world that often offers tempting allurements and captivating seductions. We are called to be beacons of faith-filled light indicating the way to the Lord. We prepare for His coming at the end of the age, as we recognize His coming each day in the great gift of the Eucharist where he offers Himself as the Bread of Life and enfleshes Himself in our lives in Holy Communion. Thus, it is that we too become a welcoming Bethlehem, where the mystery of Christmas is perpetuated every day in our lives.

We live in a world of growing uncertainties. Our lives are bombarded with news of wars and increasing national and international tensions and violence, global warming, economic inflation, job uncertainty, confused moral values that disregard the dignity of the person and human life itself, religious ambiguity, and so much more that can totally distress and depress anyone, even the most self-assured. In one way or another these things have been happening since Adam and Ever decided to "do it their way". But....

Christ is born for us. A Savior is given to us. He is the Promised One of the ages. He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. He is the Promise fulfilled. He is the true Cause of our joy and Hope that leads us along life's journey with renewed enthusiasm and joyful anticipation of all His birth means to us today. Christmas awakens us from our lethargy and tells us to look with the eyes of our hearts and recognize Emmanuel, "God with us". The Liturgical Year we entered only a few weeks ago will lead us through the experience of living and journeying with Jesus in Word and Sacrament. An active Faith leads to a certain Hope that recognizes Jesus, Love enfleshed in time, Who leads us to an Eternal Life with Its Author. Rejoice and be glad in the Incarnate God, Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life we all desire.

May the eternal Father bless you. May the Christ Child, with His loving parents, Our Blessed Mother and good Saint Joseph, fill your hearts and homes with peace and blessings of all kinds at Christmas and always. May Padre Pio, whose love for this feast of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem can be seen in the many pictures of him carrying the image of the Infant Jesus in the Christmas procession, 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

**Blessed and Merry Christmas  
and Happy New Year 2023  
filled with every blessing from above with  
openness to the Will of the Father in all things and  
holiness, happiness, and good health.**