

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

National Office

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

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The Lord grant you his abundant peace

We may not be indifferent to God, or squanderers of God's gifts, or indifferent to the needy around us. Nevertheless, we still have a responsibility to God, to ourselves, and to each other to always be a grateful people whose lives give God the first place. We know the times in which we live. We strive to respond in God-centered-selfless faith, hope, and love. Quite often people will seek the easy options available rather than the best way to live as a child of God. How many "options" today's society offers us!? They may not be "evil" in themselves, but can often lead to an attitude and actions that may distance us from a God-centered life.

Advertising might be a good example. Just think of how advertising entices people to take now, enjoy now ... and pay later. The message is an enticing and seemingly good one, but it is also an insidious one. When such an attitude gradually enters the fiber of our life and society, the consequences can be disastrous. Putting responsibility off until later for the sake of the 'here-and-now' enjoyment or 'quick fix' can ultimately keep some in the illusion that they need not be accountable for anything, at least not "now". What if 'put off until tomorrow' rarely gets taken care of. 'Tomorrow' never comes!

To follow such a foolish philosophy of life is to live a lie, albeit without realizing it. Living a lie is destructive. We lose sight of the growth process to which all creation is bound. Even more so because we humans are connected spiritually. The better choice is to let go of false securities, immobilizing comforts, hypocritical compromises and let God 'call the shots'. We strive to go from bad to good, from good to better. By turning mediocrity into excellence, we can be transformed into that *new person come to full stature in Christ* (Ephesians 4: 13). The Lenten pilgrimage from Ashes to the Empty Tomb and the *Alleluia* of Resurrection Sunday helps us achieve this vital goal.

Lent is the annual opportunity the Church offers all Her children. As faith rekindles our minds and hearts, hope empowers us to move forward into the forgiving and transforming Love God manifests through the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus the Christ. Lent is the time for us to tone down our self-centered pride that seeks comfort-convenience-compromise and the world's applause. We tone up for the struggle before us with the transforming strength of the grace of Jesus' Passion-Death-Resurrection. Redeemed in the Blood of Jesus we realize we are truly children of the Father in whose image and likeness we are created (cfr. Genesis 1:26-28).

Let's consider the advertising we are bombarded with each day on the various media for anything anyone can imagine and/or desire. Advertising often promises huge discounts over the listed price of an item as an inducement to buy. Rather than vouching for the product's quality as an incentive, huge discounts, "two for's", long lay-away-plans, and the like are offered. This almost implies - or does it state as fact (?) - that the original price advertised was exorbitant and that earlier buyers did not get value for their money. The intended underlying message, however, is that it would be senseless to "let an opportunity like this pass by". Advertising is rarely what it seems to be at first sight. There is usually more than meets the eye.

This is true of Lent, but in a vastly different way. The reminder that accompanies the ashes placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday is *Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return* (cfr. Genesis 3: 19). It is a reality check and an eye-opening reminder to encourage our Lenten journey. Beyond the obvious reason for these words to be pronounced over us, there is another purpose. There is more to Lent than heroics and self-denial, important though these may be. Lent is an emphatic invitation in the midst of the whirlwind of our daily lives. Lent invites us to re-live the mystery of the Cross of Calvary more intensely. It is the 'advertisement' of God's love for us. Calvary and Cross confirms the fact that 'life is worth living'. Nevertheless, there are no discounts. The gift is eternal and the price is total...total giving of one's self, just as Jesus gave Himself totally for us. We are "dust", true, but "dust" that the Creator "breathed into" making us to His image and likeness" (cfr. Genesis 1: 26-28).

Another possible challenge that may be spoken to those who receive ashes on that day is *Repent and believe the Good News* (Mark 1: 15). It is a more positive sounding, but no less demanding reminder and goal for the season. We are reminded as Lent begins to *Repent, and believe the Gospel* (Mark 1: 15) ...'be-lieve' meaning to "be", to "live", and 'live' meaning to 'be Christ'. Thus we are invited once again, as each year, to be transformed into the image of Christ we were created to be. There are no shortcuts, or 'reasonable facsimiles' accepted. It is a total giving of ourselves, and of "being given Christ" in word and sacrament, that we may be one with Him as He is with the Father, that we may be one in them (cfr. John 17: 23). What a mystery! What a gift! What LOVE! God's gift of love is total, universal, and forever. There is a "condition", however, to experience the fullness of all this. We must trust God enough to do what we have come to know, and all that is necessary to achieve the goal.

Lent is an ongoing reminder of God's offer of himself. We are invited to receive and accept this love and to make it present daily in our world through justice, truth, generosity and forgiveness. Only the foolish or the unbeliever could pass up such an opportunity.

We will enter the holy and joyful season of Lent the last few days of this month. It is offered each year for us to re-evaluate and renew our lives in relationship to God, to ourselves, and to each other. Even the stranger to us is created by God. They are created as are we, through the human nature all of us possess as men or women. Thus, we are sister and brother, even to those we will never meet until we see each other in eternity. We can never accomplish this

oneness as family of God if our lives are rooted in the idolatry of senseless materialism that enslaves us spiritually, and then affects us, leaving its effects in our lives and relationships.

Lent is a time for us to rise from our spiritual lethargy. We are called to make an honest review our lives in the light of God's word and our Christian calling. We are expected to open our hearts to God's transforming grace through an active acceptance of the challenges His Word and the Church offer. We must be consciously and actively aware and responsive to those around us, especially those whose lives may be burdened in any way, spiritually or materially. Let us remember that often, through our own participation in an exaggerated self-centered and self-gratifying materialism, we can forget and/or be indifferent to those with whom we share life's journey, whether we know them in this life or will never meet them until the next.

The responses Jesus made to the seductions of Satan in the desert are a powerful reminder of the essential elements needed for a fruitful Lenten Season: - *Not on bread alone does one live but on every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4). - *You shall worship the Lord, your God, and Him alone shall you serve* (Matthew 4: 10). *You shall not put the Lord your God to the test* (Matthew 4: 7). Jesus responds simply and succinctly to our false 'need' for unbridled pleasure, limitless power, and 'suffocating' possessions. The desert challenges Jesus confronted under Satan's instigation offer us the certitude of conquering our own if we, as He, serve the Lord, our God, and Him alone.

Ash Wednesday offers us the opportunity to confront our challenges and conquer them in Christ. We begin the season of Lent receiving the ashes with humble acknowledgment of our human frailty. Palm Sunday introduces us to the Great Holy Week that shows how fickle our relationship with Jesus can be (*Hosanna!/Crucify Him!*). Good Friday places us before the Cross-road when we, as Jesus, are asked to die, He for us, we to our egos. We are thus led to Easter Sunday.

Sunday of the Resurrection is the experience of the transforming eruption of the Father's love through His Spirit. The Spirit of God breaks the shackles binding our human nature affected by sin, rolls back the barriers, lifts us up, and renews us into a new way of living the Baptismal gift of our adoption as children of God.

During Lent we may recite extra prayers, drop extra money into the Sunday collection, or maybe give up (sacrifice, that is, 'to make sacred') something we are in the habit of doing or eating. These are all commendable actions/practices and wonderful opportunities we offer ourselves to celebrate this holy season. But, how often are the extra prayers just words we say rather than heartfelt expressions we pray? They definitely reflect on the strength of our relationship with God. How often is the extra we may place either in the Sunday collection or give as a handout to the needy, no more than fulfilling what we should do to support the Church, or our way of "buying the trouble away" of saying a kind word to someone truly in need or suffering? How often are our physical sacrifices (no meat, no ice cream, no candy, no smoking, and the like) either acts we should do for our own health's sake, thus are expected

always, not just at Lent, or an easy way not to focus on the purpose of Lenten sacrifices - to rid ourselves of what distances us from God?

In several letters addressed to his spiritual daughter, Anna Rodote, Padre Pio writes: *Let our entire lives, our every action and all our aspirations be completely directed towards making reparation for the offences which (we and) our ungrateful brothers and sisters continually commit against Him.* (8 March 1915) *In the course of life, mortifications will not be lacking for us. Let us love them; let us embrace them with a cheerful soul, and let us always bless the good God in everything.* (15 March 1915) *It is true that the spirit is ready to do the will of God whereas the flesh is weak ... In His fully accepted agony in the Garden, ... if this repugnance was overcome, it was due to His prayer ... The humanity of Jesus also felt human nature's repugnance for suffering* (10 June 1915)

Lent strengthens our relationship with God through a deeper spirit of prayer that goes beyond just the words we multiply. We are offered the opportunity to work at ridding ourselves of whatever may lead us away from God's will. This type of sacrifice is meaningful before God and more beneficial to the person who accepts it. Lent is an everyday experience through God's word and our personal reflection of it. This holy season is a more intense period for us to be actively and prayerfully concerned about our lives lived in the grace of God and how we respond to the spiritual and material good of those around us. Lent can be nothing more than an external show of traditional prayers or practices unless we have the correct spirit underlying all we are inspired to do. At times our "Lenten practices" can be an easy cop out for not doing what really is being asked and truly matters. What we know in our innermost being is necessary. When we seriously participate in this holy season, our Lenten practices affect our lives. The effect can transform our life, by truly transforming our hearts and souls

In his many letters to his spiritual children Padre Pio often indicates the way we are called to live our relationship with God as His children in Jesus. Speaking to Anna Rodote in the letters quoted above, as well as in the many letters to his other spiritual children, Padre Pio also speaks to us and offers a "program" for our Lenten journey.

- Reparation that recognizes evil committed against the love of God and the need to compensate (with, in, and through the spirit of Jesus) in ourselves *what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ* (Colossians 1: 24). This by no means indicates that the sacrifice of Jesus was deficient. What it means is that we must continue to be the Mystical Body of Christ as His Church in the world and continue to expiate in Him and through His grace working within us, by the offering we make of ourselves for our own spiritual good and that of others.

- Mortification by 'dying' to the self-centeredness of our lives and also to the legitimate moments and elements of our lives. We strive to willingly keep the things we possess from possessing us, or the legitimate experiences of life from controlling us, or the unlawful desires from overcoming us, and so on. 'Giving up' something has little or no value in itself. The value of the act is determined by the reason for which we do or not do it. Even insignificant matters can have eternal value.

- Resignation to God's will in all things. Resignation is not a stoic acceptance of what we cannot do anything about. Fruitful spiritual resignation consists in seeing all things from the perspective of grace and God's will. We accept with unconditional trust all that God, indirectly through the circumstances of our lives or directly as an act of His will, asks us to experience. We accept as He wills, when He wills, how He wills, because He wills it.

On Ash Wednesday we will receive the ashes that signal the beginning of our forty-day journey to Easter. Many opportunities will be offered to re-evaluate, renew, and rekindle that Spirit of the Lord who has anointed us in Baptism to be a living image of Christ to each other and an Apostle of the Resurrection. As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us enter this grace-filled Lenten season with joyful anticipation. May it be a Season of Joy that helps us come closer to God and each other.

May God bless you; Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and our beloved Padre Pio look over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, and your loved ones, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator