

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!

Last month we began the Franciscan Jubilee Year of the 800th Anniversary of the Reception of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. As Christians we know that the universality of the Cross is essential to all Christian history. We cannot profess Jesus the Christ as Lord and Savior without accepting the Paschal Mystery of His Passion-Death-Resurrection. The Cross of Jesus leads to His Resurrection and is the ultimate goal in life to Life for all Christians. The Paschal Mystery “re-establishes”, in the Blood of Jesus, the at-one-ness with God which was ours before the Fall.

Our objective in life is to become one with the One in Whose image and likeness we were created. The Incarnation tells us of the humility of God willing to become an integral member of humanity as a human so that humanity, through-with-in Him might become one with Him more intimately. We achieve, with God’s grace and our collaboration, a “conformity” (formed in His likeness) or the divine privilege of the “Mystical Union” we read so often in the spiritual writings of many saints. The mystical union, a unique and totally divine gift of God alone, transforms the person in various ways. For St. Francis of Assisi, the reception of the Stigmata of Jesus was the ultimate sign of his union.

The spirit and counsels of the great stigmatist of the twentieth century, St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, faithful son of the Poverello of Assisi, encourage us to remember the words of St. Paul VI, *Per Crucem ad Lucem (From the Cross to the Light)*. St. Pio bore the visible marks of the cross of Jesus and its effects on his body and in his soul for fifty years to the day. He encouraged others by his own life to remember the words of Jesus: *Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me*. The darkness of the reality of the crosses in our life can also be a source of illuminating clarity of Christ and through Him of our relationship with the Father, through Jesus the Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

When we abandon ourselves to the Will of God with an open heart, we often recognize the hidden God more vividly present. The light of His presence may reveal areas of ourselves we may have forgotten, or purposely “misplaced”. We begin see and know where we are in our spiritual life. If we are faithful and respond to those moments, they introduce us to an intimacy with Jesus never imagined before. It only takes a lifetime to achieve this goal, and once achieved, eternal life. The joy also is in the journey leading to the ecstasy of the eternal encounter. And what a trip it is.

The conformity of St. Francis with Jesus, confirmed by the stigmata, took an entire life. The mystical union and visible signs occurred only two years before his death. What began in his heart at San Damiano (*Go Francis rebuild my Church, for as you can see it is falling into ruin*) was visibly imprinted on his body for the world to see and reflect upon years later on Mount La Verna. The experience is granted some people in varied and extraordinary ways. The “gift” might be granted us ever so minimally. Even sharing a ray of the brightness of the moment can brighten our hearts, our souls and our lives. For this, all we have to do is read the signs and follow the indications. The signs occur through life, often gradually, through persons, places, things, occurrences, and so much more. We move forward from light into light reading and heeding the signs,

The stages of this process/journey are traditionally referred to as the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. Terminology may differ, but the gradual transformation follows the same order. St. Augustine reminds us, when speaking to God in his *Confessions: You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*. The “restlessness” initiates a dialogue with God that leads to a more profound awareness of our relationship with Him. God’s word penetrates *more deeply than a two-edged sword*. A difficulty often encountered is recognizing and understanding God Who speaks to our hearts. Our response is vital. It determines whether we continue along the road or seek another path. God breathed us into life and created us *to the image and likeness* of Himself. The image remains alive and develops as we cooperate with grace.

Thus: *A journey of a thousand miles begins with a small step*. Immeasurably more than a thousand miles is life’s journey from time to eternity. We must set priorities, overcome obstacles, and trust enough to let go of fear. *Fear is useless. What is needed is faith*. Do we understand the gift of being alive as God’s gift to Himself and to us? Have we ever considered the fact that if we are that “gift”, then we share our gifts with others who themselves are “gifts”.

The Cross, always seen as a symbol of hatred and death, is also a sign of love, hope and challenging transformation. The cross indicates, embraces, determines, explains, challenges, nourishes, fills, fulfills, calls, distances, and much more. Thus, the cross elevates and presents to the whole world the depth of God’s love in Jesus, His Incarnate Son. Viewing and accepting the events and encounters of our lives from the perspective of the cross of Christ leads us to a greater conformity with Christ. The “one-ness” we desire, according to our collaboration with grace, conditions us to be prepared for God to enter a mystical union with us, should God so will. This is for any and/or all to see, but definitely for the one blessed with the charism (gift) to live in witness with to all.

The beginning of St. Francis’ life journey spoke so candidly of the power riches wield over others. He realized how easily we are possessed and controlled by our wealth and possessions. He realized how often society distances and rejects its own who have fallen into dire straits of any kind. He realized how his own fear of lepers haunted him until he embraced the leper on

the road, thus overcoming the last hurdle he needed to overcome in order to let go and let God fulfill His Will in him. Realizing, understanding, accepting and responding to the challenge of “being Jesus” - that is, being a “living Gospel” - St. Francis took the road of conformity to Christ more decidedly.

Didn't Jesus, as *He set his sights on Jerusalem* realize that He had touched many lives but not all with the Gospel of the Father's love for His people? He continued preaching, teaching, and healing, even to non-Jews. His kindness and mercy were criticized, and He was condemned by the “powers-that-be” of the time. The decision arrived at in the desert, the miracles begun “ahead of time” at Cana, the calling out of Jesus as “Lamb of God” by John the Baptist, all indicated the road now chosen. It was the road to Calvary, *The Way of the Cross*. Jesus *became sin for us, a worm and no man, one hung on a tree*. He was the only one St. Francis accepted as his sole true Sovereign, Lord and Master. Thus Francis became the Universal Brother to all. He embodied the image of a Christ Whose cross as a symbol of total giving for the sake of the other, was the support of his life. The cross of the naked crucified Jesus was a vivid reminder to him of those people “crucified” each day by civil and even religious society. They, like the image of the Byzantine Christ of San Damiano, were nailed to their personal cross in their daily “deaths” while still fully alive. The contradiction of the cross: image of hatred indicates love, image of death indicates life.

Francis whom is it better to serve the master or the servant? The Master, Lord. Then why do you run after the servant. Return home. This “dialogue” with the God within his very soul encouraged him to face humiliation, criticism, parental punishment and public ridicule of being a coward. Until we break with what keeps us bound, we are still a slave. The Seraphic Mother, St. Theresa of Avila, tells us that *whether it be with a cord or a thread as long as a bird does not break the bond that keeps it from flying away, the bird is still bound.*

Until we recognize what it is that keeps us from letting go, we are still tied to our old self. The “old self” is not necessarily bad. It is however a sign of a complacency that keeps us from becoming better or even the best we can be. That is what “perfection” is. It is achieving the purpose for which we were created. For believers, it is oneness with God on earth that God may shine through our every moment, good, less good, challenging. The experiences of St. Francis' early life and the individuals who opened his eyes and heart to the Christ within them - beggar, knight, leper, and others – encouraged detachment, selflessness, and unconditional love beyond his greatest fear. *Father if it is possible, let this chalice pass from me. However, not my will but Yours be done.* The dialogue within us may be deep or even superficial, but if we listen to our heart we will eventually understand that we must go beyond our fears and trustingly abandon ourselves to the Father's Will.

In a letter dated 25 April 1914. to Raffaelina Cerase, St Pio of Pietrelcina writes: *Beloved in Jesus, Place your unlimited trust in the divine goodness. Our enemy (satan) who plots against us wants to persuade you...despise him in the name of Jesus and laugh heartily at him. You may fear, if you like, but it must be that holy fear, I mean to say the fear that is never separated from love. When fear and love are united, they help each other. Love makes us hasten with rapid*

strides, while fear makes us watch prudently where we place our feet and guides us so that we may never stumble on the road leading to heaven. I know that the cross is painful and that for those who love, a thing is almost unbearable when it exposes them to the danger of offending the One they love and adore. But Jesus tempted in the desert and hanging on the Cross is clear, obvious and very consoling proof (of His love) Courage then and go ahead. God is with you, and hell, the world, and the flesh will one day, to their confusion, have to relinquish their weapons and admit once more that they are powerless against a soul that possesses and is possessed by God. Calm yourself because it is the Lord who is acting within you, so let Him guide you on the difficult journey of this life.

The fears of letting go may have entered the heart of St. Francis. The feelings that he had when still running through the streets of Assisi with his friends were there. The secret love he was beginning to feel within himself for the “love of his life” he told his friends he was thinking of, would eventually blossom into a response that made him a new creation.

He prayed before the Byzantine Crucifix of San Damiano and heard a voice addressed to him: *Francis, go and repair my Church, which, as you can see, is falling into ruin.* The message was clear enough. How was he to do this? There were still hurdles to overcome. Growing requires moving forward and leaving things of the past in the past. We break with the “way it was” and go forward to “the way it must be”. All seen and decided in the light of the “voice of God” he heard and he was beginning to understand his heart’s yearning.

St. Francis knew and believed God was leading him. Nonetheless, he needed strength and decisiveness to go beyond the “line of demarcation”. We could even call it the “red line” because it would place him at odds with so many, especially his own father Pietro Bernardone. The first move in the direction of conformity is a wrestling match, not with God but within ourselves, before we take that first big step into the “wholeness of perfection”.

It was on the feast of the Apostles, when Mass was being celebrated in the Portiuncula Chapel. The celebrant read the Gospel. The words struck Francis so deeply that he requested the priest explain them to him. Francis’ reply was *This is what I want. This is what I desire with all my heart.* The goal of his heart now empowered his desires to will with all his heart and strength to walk the walk of intimacy with God.

Keep focused on the Crucified. In His love we are enlightened to see more clearly who we really are. We are impassioned to love Him more dearly. We are empowered to follow Him unreservedly more nearly. What greater basis for our Lenten journey and daily practices can there be than to make a conscious intention every day to accept all things and everyone as a gift of God’s love. Prayer, penance, almsgiving, faith-filled response to rules and regulations, as necessary as they are, profit us little if they are not expressions of a *love that continues loving*. Totally surrendering ourselves to the One Who surrendered Himself for us on the Cross leads to a growth in the spirit and a conversion of heart that makes Easter a true Resurrection Day.

We fail so often to surrender ourselves to God Who speaks to us in and through His Word and His Church. Love is expressed fully in the total surrender of the one who loves and the one loved as they surrender to each other without counting the cost.. Total surrender allows us to investigate and question, without doubting. Total surrender strengthens us when we are suffering or burdened, so that we persevere in trust. Total surrender gives us courage in the face of persecution of any kind and even death, with serenity, peace and joy. There is so much that we could enumerate, but the basic truth that makes the rest meaningful is as the Apostle John states in his letter: *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him* (1 John 4: 16). Isn't that what conformity and mystical union is? We become, as it were, the Other.

As Spiritual Children of St. Pio of Pietrelcina, let us surrender ourselves to God. We never lose when we give everything over to the One Who gives everything, especially Himself, to us. There is always such fear in saying 'I surrender'. When we say it to God, why be afraid? God knows what we are capable of and where we are headed, long before we do. Abandoning ourselves to His Will, truly trusting in Him, and living every moment as a deliberate act of surrender to the Divine Will, we cannot help but experience an inner peace, serenity and joy. We will discover and live a more balanced and cheerful life, even in the midst of difficulties.

When God is in control, we are always headed in the right direction. Just as a husband and wife surrender themselves in love and the two become one, let us become one with God as we surrender to His Divine Will. Emptying ourselves of our own material and earthly desires, false ambitions, self-centeredness, pride, will allow the joy of new life and rebirth to be so palpable that our Easter celebration will be as though it were that first Easter Sunday. Jesus is alive! He is Risen! He precedes us on the way! Let Jesus come alive in your hearts and lives so powerfully that, like the first followers, you will be, as Saint Augustine calls the People of God redeemed in the Blood of the Lamb, 'an Alleluia People'.

May we praise Him with our lives! May the light of Christ's Resurrection shine in us that we might have life, and have it in abundance. May the Risen Lord Jesus shower you and your loved ones with peace, joy and abundant blessings for a Happy Easter; may Mary, Mother of the Redeemer and our Mother, help you to live with Jesus in the light of the New Life His Resurrection offers us; and may our holy Father and Founder Padre Pio of Pietrelcina watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care.

With a promise to keep all of you affectionately in my Easter Masses and Liturgies, I wish you and your loved ones a very Happy and Joy-filled Easter. Christ is Risen! He is truly risen! Alleluia!

Peace and Blessings
Fr. Francis A. Sario, OFM Cap
National Coordinator

PS – You will note that there are ;links practically every month at the beginning of the monthly letter. Please link in to them. They are the Catechesis sent from San Giovanni Rotondo for all Prayer Groups. This month another lionk is thae Way of the Cross with Padre Pio that has come from San Giovanni also. Both International and I have noticed that most do not seem to link into anything else. Thus we are putting the circulars, catechesis, and extras from International Headquarters as links on the Monthly Letter. PLEASE LINK IN TO READ WHAT PPPG INTER. OR OTHER IMPORTANT COMMUNICATIONS ARE POSTED.

Thank You

Fr. Francis
