



*"Indulge in reading holy books...
they are like pasture to the soul and a great support on the way to perfection"*

7th MONTH: APRIL

WALK TOWARDS OUR BLESSED HOMELAND

From the Gospel according to Matthew (6:25-34)

Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, nor about your body, what you will wear; is not life worth more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the air: they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth more than they are? And which of you, however much they care, can lengthen their life even a little? And for the dress, why do you worry? See how the lilies of the field grow: they toil not and spin not.

Yet I tell you that not even Solomon, with all his glory, dressed like one of them. Now if God clothes the grass of the field, which today is there and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not do much more for you, people of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?' Only pagans worry about these things. For your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you in addition. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Let us consider how important each one of us is before God: every page of the Sacred Scriptures speaks of the merciful and thoughtful love of the Father for every man, starting from creation, through to the story of Abraham, of the people of Israel, up to the gift of his Son. Jesus' invitation to seek first and foremost the Kingdom of God comes in a religious environment often marked by formalism and focused on the need to have a God who answers all of men's questions, rather than being obedient to his teachings. This often happens because aim is no longer the Kingdom of God and its fulfilment in heaven, but a smaller goal, restricted to our needs of the moment, which may indeed be justifiable as well as worthy.

The Word of God is given to us to support us in our sincere and constant path towards our goal; among the advice for a good Christian life that Padre Pio wrote to Antonietta Vona, one said: 'The fourth point is that of eternity. Little should it matter to the children of God to live these very brief moments that will soon be over, as long as they live eternally in glory with God. My child, consider that you are already on your way to eternity, you have already set a foot in it; as long as eternity is going to be happy for you, what does it matter that these transient moments are unhappy?' (Epist. III, p. 826).

From a letter by Padre Pio to Raffaolina Cerase

Pietrelcina, 14th July 1914, Epist. II, p. 144

Saint Gregory states the same, when he speaks about the allegory of the mirror: "Spiritual books are like a mirror that God places before us so that by looking at ourselves in them we may correct our errors and embellish ourselves with every virtue. And just as vain women frequently look in the mirror, and there they cleanse every blemish from their faces, correct the errors of their hair and adorn themselves in a thousand ways to appear vague in the eyes of others, so Christians must often place the holy books before their eyes to discern in them the faults of which they must correct themselves and the virtues with which they must embellish themselves to please the eyes of their God.



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The celebration of the paschal mystery brings us into an immediate contact with the holiness of God; the Lord Jesus manifests himself in his glory, with great power, not to humiliate us, but so that we may mirror ourselves in his holiness, which lives in us through baptism. Through Christ's death and resurrection we participate in God's holiness, so our bodies, our lives have changed points of reference. The Sacred Scriptures aid us to look at the image of God and to highlight our limitations, not to denigrate us, rather to highlight our possibility of correcting and embellishing ourselves with our virtues.

Padre Pio wanted his penitents to be aware of the beauty of God written in their hearts.

Padre Pellegrino pointed out to him that while his penitents come out of confession showing deep emotions and others are full of joy, some noticed that Padre Pio looked rather detached from it all, almost like a stranger. Padre Pio replied: "I too feel such joy in my heart and I thank God in my heart. I do not manifest this joy, but I cannot believe that it is less than that of my penitents". He later explained that only genuine and lasting changes gave him true joy.

For Padre Pio, penitents had to acquire a new self-esteem, not based on their qualities or virtues, but on how God had changed them inside.

Every Christian should know their dignity

We shall begin our reflections with the subject of self-esteem. It is a very fashionable word; people often hope to resolve personal and relational conflicts with the expression "lack of self-esteem". As usual, we have to say that the starting point is real, indeed a lack of self-esteem leads to negative situations; think of the inability to manage the practical things in life on one's own (from cooking to driving a car), or interpersonal relationships in which dependence on the other (even on one's parents) can be caused by this.

With the aid of a psychological support, excellent results are often achieved, but one must be careful not to overdo it. Sometimes a lack of self-esteem can be an alibi to hide other situations, in other cases the remedy is an exaggerated will to assert oneself, and an inability to accept one's own limits.

Our reflections on the Word of God lead us to consider the concept of self-esteem more broadly, starting with the truth about ourselves, which cannot be separated from our sin and the salvation that Jesus comes to bring us. To believe is to push the limits of human knowledge, to enter into a way that appears unknown and mysterious; but we cannot celebrate the Risen Lord, live the sacramental reality, without looking at ourselves in our entirety.

Awaiting his coming

In a letter written to Raffaolina Cerase, we realise how the Word of God that Padre Pio would muse over, can become an opportunity to discover the richness within us. Let us consider this point of reference, in a passage by st Paul: "Let us listen to what the Lord says to us on this subject through the mouth of his holy Apostle Paul: "we do not contemplate those things which are seen, but we contemplate those things which are not seen" (2 Cor 4:18). And it is only right that we contemplate heavenly things, not caring about earthly things, for the former are eternal, while the latter are transient".

He then gave an example: it would be an absurd claim to want to stare at a fixed point in a river flowing at full speed: the water passes by so quickly that we cannot catch anything with our gaze. And he concluded: 'Such then is the state of him who stops his gaze on visible goods. For what are they in their reality? Are they perhaps dissimilar to a swift river, over whose waters the eye has not yet rested, that they already escape our sight never to be seen again?'

It may sound like a contradiction, but if our pursuit of our self-esteem steers us away from who we really are and from the meaning of our existence, it may be more a bad thing rather than a good thing. Meditating on the Word of God should help us become aware that we really are heavenly citizens, that all our inner wealth and our desire to fulfil ourselves are mortified if we affirm ourselves with power,



PADRE PIO OF PIETRELCINA PRAYER GROUPS

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with money, with passion, but they are exalted if we look at the greater beauty within ourselves, that which makes us a mirror of the beauty of God.

Food for eternal life

On the subject of self-esteem, we would like to point out that meditating on his own existence helped Padre Pio look at himself in truth, and this fact filled him with great dismay. He looked at the beauty and splendour of God and considered himself as a miserable creature; he contemplated the works that God had done in him and for him and wondered how on earth He had chosen such a sinner as his servant. If we consider things at first sight, it would be easy to speak of self-hatred or at any rate of an excessive form of humility, and it cannot be denied that this idea also occurred to those around him. Padre Pio was aware of this and often gave the following explanation. He would invite people to look at the freshly dusted table in his room; it looked shiny and clean. When he would then turn on the light, one could see scratches, a few stains, and by bringing the light closer one could also see his fingerprints. In this way, he explained his state of mind: the closer one gets to God, the more one sees one's weaknesses.

According to Padre Pio, this distance between the creature and its Creator is bridged in the sacrament of the Eucharist. He wrote Giuseppina Morgera, 'The Holy Eucharist is not only a compendium of his other gifts, but it is a new and unique gift out of his immense charity for us. By giving himself as food and drink to us, Jesus identifies himself with us through the most perfect union that can take place between the creatures and their Creator. Together with His most holy humanity, he gives us the infinite merits acquired on this earth; he gives us his divinity with the immense treasures of his Wisdom, of his Omnipotence, of his Goodness'.

Meditation on the Word of God leads one to live the Eucharist profoundly, to the extent that a true desire develops in us to possess heaven, to overcome the distance between us and God and to enter into communion with him. The passage continues: "Josephine! The Most Holy Eucharist is the greatest of miracles; it is the ultimate and greatest sign of Jesus' love for us and He has done all this to give us a full, abundant, perfect life. "I came," He says, "so that men might have life and have it in abundance - and this in fact He gave us through His Incarnation" and this too is what He is giving us even more in Holy Communion every day" (Epist M, p. 90).

PADRE PIO'S HIDDEN TREASURE

Franco Lotti, Happiness and coloured marbles, in "La Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza", year 2008

In the brief moments of recreation that the Father allowed himself before retiring to his room at the end of the day, it could happen that some of those present, brethren or visitors, took advantage of the occasion to ask him questions or queries of various kinds, often aimed at probing his knowledge of the celestial realities, in the common belief that he could have access to them.

So, that evening too, someone tested him.

"Father, will you be angry if I tell you something?"

I am not sure if I will be comfortable in Heaven, assuming I can get in. I'm afraid I might get bored in the long run."

The speaker was a lawyer from Rome, a friend of the friar's for several years. It is not the first time he had used the technique of provocation to get him to talk. But Padre Pio did not take the bait, he remained absorbed in himself, did not seem willing to react, and the lawyer then continued.

"Because, Father, I know what I am like. There has never been a thing in the world that has interested me for a long time. Now, eternity is long, you teach me, and as fascinating as the contemplation of God is, how will it be possible, after a certain time, perhaps centuries and centuries, not to desire something else, something different?"

Padre Pio's tolerance level had been tested to the maximum and his reaction, predictable for those who knew him, did arrive in the end.



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"Ah, poor you, poor you, what a head you've got! But what idea have you got of the Lord God? Can it be that you are such a dummy that I have to explain it to you with earthly examples, as one does with kids?"

So, think of an object with many faces, but so many that you would never be able to count them. Each one of these represents one of the beauties, the wonders of God.

And when you stand contemplating one face and you are pervaded by an overflowing happiness, a moment before the desire is extinguished and satiety arrives, there appears another face, splendid and superior to the previous one by the intensity of the joy it gives rise in you. And so on and on forever, for infinite is the number of God's perfections. You had better worry about how you are to get up there!"

There was a pause, then Father added: "I would have expected another question, which is this: in the soul of a God-fearing person who for love of Him has renounced earthly pleasures and who is thus received into Paradise, might there not remain a shadow of regret for what he could not know and experience in life? If so, certainly her happiness would not be perfect ... but I think the explanation is not difficult. Imagine a group of children playing with coloured glass balls by the roadside and a gentleman walking by and stopping to watch. Of course if he wanted to he could join them and play the same way.... But that fun is no longer for him, he no longer feels that stimulation and complacency that attracts those little ones so strongly. Other are his thoughts, quite different are his desires, and so he passes on without any regrets whatsoever."

Padre's Roman friend could not find the words to reply, and silence fell upon us all. For the picture that Father had described had awakened our awareness on how much our hearts were still drawn to the world's callings, and the metaphor of the small stained-glass spheres had been as appropriate as ever. Perhaps we could have asked him one last question:

"Father, have you seen the face of the Lord, since you feel no attraction any more towards worldly things?" In fact we did not ask him, and in any case, I doubt that Padre Pio would have given us an answer.

PRAYER OF JOHN PAUL II

Humble and beloved Padre Pio
we pray, teach us humility of heart
so that we may be counted among the little ones of the Gospel
to whom the Father has promised to reveal
the mysteries of his Kingdom.
Help us to pray without ceasing,
certain that God knows what we need,
even before we ask Him.
Obtain for us the eyes of faith,
That will be able to readily recognise the face of Jesus
in the poor and the suffering.
Support us in the hour of battle and trial and,
if we fall, let us experience the joy of the
sacrament of forgiveness.
Grant us your tender devotion to Mary,
Mother of Jesus and our Mother.
Accompany us on our earthly pilgrimage
towards the blessed homeland, where we hope to arrive
to contemplate the
Glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in eternity.
Amen