

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

Padre Pio began the Prayer Groups when Pope Pius XII saw the need for Catholic people to unite in groups to pray for peace in a world heading in the wrong direction. We know the story. Any life of Padre Pio will speak of the Prayer Groups and their origin. We are a "Militia of Prayer – Prayer Warriors". We believe in the power of faith and prayer. We believe that Faith the size of a mustard seed can grow into whatever is necessary for peace to thrive in our world. However, Faith without action is useless! Where does Faith lead us? How does Faith lead us? What does Faith lead us to do?

The sinful, useless, and terrible loss of life and destruction occurring in the world, especially in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, as well as in the other less-spoken-of persecutions in every other continent of our world, have prompted me to write this personal and lengthy reflection. Though rarely spoken of, thousands are being persecuted, abused and/or killed for their thoughts, comments and even for their religious Faith. We are re-living the era of the martyrs that so glorified the Church with their Faith "usque ad mortem" ("to the death"). Who speaks of peace through negotiations, who speaks of peace through armed combat, who speaks of peace through economic sanctions, who is waiting (dangerously without collaborating with God) and wants God to take care of everything in His own time, and so on. Everyone has his/her idea what God must do, and through whom, for the peace we pray. We are Jesus' backup plan for the world after His Ascension. Let's begin to really be that. The question is: How?

The following is a personal reflection. There are really no right or wrong answers - most times - to the questions posed. Peace is God's gift promised and offered. How we achieve it depends on how we read and understand His words and His actions when He walked among us.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give it to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14: 27).

Peace is a very elusive gift that everyone desires. However, the way we attempt to achieve this peace often contradicts the gift itself. Jesus said: *Do not assume that I have come to bring peace*

to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. This saying is confusing for many. It appears in the context of Jesus sending out His disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God (Matthew 10:1-42). A similar remark states: *Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but division* (Luke 12:51). These two Gospel quotes make it clear that Jesus predicted conflict as a result of His message. What 'peace' is Jesus offering us?

Peace is not always and necessarily the absence of armed combat or the right to possess and use weapons. The peace Jesus speaks of is more fundamental. The peace of Jesus concerns the soul of a person, both in the spiritual and the psychological sense. "Shalom", the scriptural word for "peace" indicates, fundamentally, being at harmony with God, one self, and others. This "peace" can even be present in the midst of armed combat. Contradiction? No, not at all!

Franciscans have always been noted as bearers of *Peace and Blessings*. In good times and bad, the children of St. Francis of Assisi have been there in the midst of it all. When you "smell like the sheep" you have to be with the sheep, even when they are contending with wolves, or perhaps when they might be the wolves. It is all in the perspective!

Franciscans, of whatever branch and affiliation, are brother and sister to all people at all stages of life's journey. Franciscans encourage, support, and care for any who defend their God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, while at the same time respecting the dignity, talents, and rights of "the other".

It might be good to remember President Abraham Lincoln who was criticized by his staff for putting some of his political enemies in prominent positions in his government. They too were expected to offer counsel as well as to promote the policies proposed by the President. He was reminded that he was supposed to eliminate his enemies completely. His response was: *I thought I did that when I made them my friends.* Yes, it is usually a little more complicated than that, but it does mean, as Pope St. John XXIII stated: *We must seek what binds us together and not what keeps us apart.* "Nice" stories and words, but how does it work "practically" on a political or "religious" level. Is it possible? Yes! However, we must honestly desire what we say we seek. Then will we be able to find the means to achieve the goal. This is true for anything we say we desire.

There is so much happening in our world today. People are tense when they read, see, and hear about conflicts around the world. Humanity's inhumanity to its own kind is devastating, obscene, and foolishness! To spite one's self is rather stupid! No other word besides 'demonic' could fit the bill. It is either one or the other extreme. There really seems to be no middle ground. Seeking peace through conflict has and will claim and destroy thousands of human lives, raze cities to the ground, and obliterate millennial cultures. Armed conflict renders the world tense and unstable. "We pray for peace and prepare for war". This is the modern fulfillment of a 4th or 5th century AD Roman author, Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, 'Concerning Military Matters': *Therefore, if you desire peace, prepare for war* (?!).

Every year at this time, the nation remembers dropping the Atomic Bomb (the “new great deterrent to war” of the time!) on two cities in Japan, Hiroshima (6 August 1945) and Nagasaki (9 August 1945). The bomb destroyed thousands of lives, two magnificent cities, and left many people horribly mutilated, rendering others disfigured or terminally ill. This act ended a war. But it also encouraged “developed” nations to produce greater weapons of mass destruction “for protection” or as a “deterrent to war”(?!). Even religious communities of consecrated men and women have strong and quite expressive opinions and convictions regarding the matter. Everyone in good faith is seeking what they believe is needed to end war forever. Seek peace at any price!? The end justifies the means!?

How can there be peace through violence? How does one stop another determined on destroying a person physically or even morally so that the “problem” no longer exists? These questions and many more are not easy questions to answer with absolute certitude. They do however raise the question: Is war or physical combat that might destroy a life ever justified? Traditions of differing groups respond in varied ways.

The Franciscans of any branch and tradition consider themselves true children of the Seraphic Father of Assisi, ambassadors of peace. St. Francis himself greeted the people with *Peace and Blessings (All Good)*. Is this “peace” sought through mere presence, or conscientious objection, or active confrontation, or solely political lobbying, or active military participation against the enemy, or whatever means is deemed just or 'justified' and right?

So visible in today’s world are the issues of war, violence, disregard for human life from conception to natural death, exploitation of minorities for the sake of material gain and/or social, political, economic prominence and power. These have existed, unfortunately, since the beginning of human history. It began with “the apple”, caused the fratricide of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain, and the future we will inherit took off from there...unless we do something about it. Humanity’s inhumanity to its own kind has escalated and has been “perfected” down through the millennia.

It seems the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have really had no true peace, only truce(s). These war-less periods extended long enough for warring parties to rebuild weapons with more resistant materials, regroup their military forces, and continue the “onslaught” at a later date. It is a reality of which we are all aware since the second world conflict and all the other “military actions” up to the present in the Middle-East, Eastern Europe, and other “minor” but no less global military actions.

As Franciscans, we are considered people of peace. We are pacifists, or are we? “Pacifist” can be an enigmatic word that has various meanings for those who use it to explain, excuse, justify, criticize, condone, condemn, and so on, belligerent and hostile activity among contending parties, regardless of any “collateral damage”. Who is the true pacifist and what does that mean? Theoretically we know the answer. We also know that we have a responsibility to defend and protect the *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* that all people, according to the type of governing process they choose, have a right to enjoy. No one must impose

themselves on peoples or even individuals, in a manner that would deprive them the freedom to choose their own destiny. (Every nation's history should hang its head on this matter.) As they accept the effects of their honest choice in self-determination, they must in turn respect the dignity of others and their freedom of self-determination.

At a gathering of Italian Bishops over twenty years ago St. Francis of Assisi was named the "Man with a Disarmed Heart". His heart was disarmed to all, still he went into the thick of battle: in the West before his conversion he fought for Assisi, loyal to the Emperor and seeking the glory of knighthood; after his conversion, he went East, through the lines of the Crusaders who were fighting the Moslems "for the sake of the Holy Land and the Sacred Places"; and he also breached "no man's land" to meet the Sultan, and he did. Neither Francis nor the Sultan converted the other, but their encounter made history. They agreed to disagree but became friends who respected the other, and the common bond in the One Great God of Abraham. It was a starting point that lasted eight centuries of respect for those who adore the One Great God of Abraham, Whom both sides adore. Difficulties? Yes! We have been seeing this in the present age for the past seventy years. Nonetheless, the desire to achieve the "goal" is an eight centuries old dream, still dreamed by those who dare to hope in the Gospel.

The pacifists went into battle either raising their arms with sword in hand to strike, or with arms outstretched to embrace an "enemy" that he might become a "friend". In both cases it took extreme courage. The reasons for armed conflict were preached in God's Name and justified for God's Glory. Which was it? Was it just? Was it expedient?

Sometimes conflict, even armed conflict, might be inevitable and even necessary to save the integrity of a people, or individuals. Even when objecting to bear arms, friars of "military religious groups" nonetheless could be seen as chaplains, and among them also Franciscans, in the thick of battle. They were there to be "Christ present" fulfilling one need or another for the sake of those in the heat of battle, as were they themselves. They often were seen ministering, when possible, even to the wounded and dying of the "enemy".

Our brother St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina had his own military experience. He was called, as were numerous seminarians and priests in Italy, to answer the call of the country in the First World War. In a letter dated 31 May 1915 sent to his Spiritual Director, Padre Agostino, Padre Pio writes:

Jesus wants things this way and desires to prolong our agony and may he be blessed forever. We are passing through a solemn hour. Up to the present we have not been involved in this grievous war which has now gone on for a year. We are called to fulfill the painful duty which the war entails, called by those who in these difficult moments represent constituted authority and to whom the fate of our country depends. All of us must do our duty according to our strength and we must accept cheerfully and courageously the orders we receive from those in authority.

If our country calls upon us, we must obey her voice; if this call imposes painful trials on us, let us accept them with resignation and courage. We may shed tears for the sorrow which rends us, but let them be tears of resignation.

This is a heavy trial for everyone but for ourselves in a special way. However, let us lift up our hearts to God from whom we will receive strength, tranquility and consolation. We must all cooperate for the common good and make God's mercy propitious to us in this difficult time, by humble and fervent prayer and the amendment of our lives. We must not be downhearted, dear Father, or lack the filial confidence we owe God just because he appears to be angry with us ... let us fully understand that God still loves us, he is still merciful towards us...

The greatest mercy of God is that he does not leave at peace with themselves those nations that are not at peace with him...

Courage, my dear Father! All will work out for the triumph of God's glory.

Some but really few matters are always really cut-and-dry. The issue of peace rather than war and violence, has always been a matter for us as Franciscans to consider and "preach" with our lives. Even within the Family of St. Francis' opinions are varied, and at times discussions can become rather heated. Fraternity prevails, but different opinions remain.

In our own Capuchin Province of the Stigmata, the friars all remember a delightful lay brother who, before becoming a Capuchin, was among the thousands of allied soldiers serving under General George S. Patton. Brother was part of the Normandy Landing in northern France on D-Day. Years later, when friars asked him about his military experiences, he was always hesitant to speak about it. When asked if he ever killed a person in battle, his look became very solemn and sad. His response to the brother who asked was: "Brother, you never ask a soldier that question". He would walk away quietly, and later return as his old self again. The question made him "re-live" what most soldiers would rather forget but cannot.

As you take the time to read this, please keep in mind that this is not intended to sway anyone's opinion or sincere belief on the matter of war or not. We are Heralds of the Great King, Pilgrims of Hope, and Apostles of the Gospel of God's love in Jesus for people. Following the spirit of St. Padre Pio in the Prayer Groups we follow through him the spirit of St. Francis. Nonetheless, in an imperfect world of imperfect people, peace is often sought through the most imperfect, confusing, and contradictory ways. There are many Saints who bore arms in the thick of armed conflicts. They were pacifists who placed their lives in danger for the sake of peace at the call of their nation.

This month's letter is not intended to be a "work" on the questions of "just war", "pacifism", "bearing weapons", "killing an 'aggressor' in war", or "protecting one's family and property in self-defense", and so on. Opinions vary and no general consensus is ever really achieved, or can be. Any physical action to produce harm or even abuse of any kind for the sake of abuse or killing is wrong and also sinful. Nonetheless, protecting one's just rights and dignity is a right, duty, and responsibility, while respecting the same of others. Delicate balance! But not impossible!

Most “moral issues” are not always clear, though they seem very clear in theory. Remember a famous phrase from many years ago: *Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition*. It is not as amusing as it seems. Remember also that there were many military saints, not martyrs, who went into battle for the empire or their nation. Capuchin friars went as soldiers or chaplains and were in the thick of the battle with crucifix, or bandages or helpful ‘military’ assistance. There are many ways to be people of peace while still answering the call to serve. Even St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina went into the military in answer to the call of his country. And let’s not forget our Catholic women like St. Joan of Arc, Queen St. Isabelle of Portugal and many other women who stood with armies either fighting for peace or courageously present in the midst of combatants encouraging peace, and assisting where and when possible, the wounded and dying, often on both sides of the battle.

Keep the question in perspective. It’s not a question of “hawk” or “dove”. It is an ongoing question to ponder in the light of the Gospel and open to the Holy Spirit, whatever the response in good conscience might be.

We are all waging our own spiritual battles as men and women called to stand before the powers of evil so rampant in our world. We fight with weapons that never lose their effectiveness, but may take time to achieve the desired conclusion: prayer, hope, courage and total trust in God’s protection and power, while “doing what is ours to do” (As St. Francis told the friars as he lay dying. And in the spirit of Padre Pio's saying *Pray Hope, and Don't Worry*). Whatever our response in mind and heart to the question posed in this mailing, may we never forget: *Our help is in the Name of the Lord Who made heaven and earth* (Psalm 124: 8). Because: *Greater is the One within than the one who is in the world* (1 John 4: 4). As St. Peter answered Jesus when so many left him: *Master we believe and are convinced you are the Christ, Son of the living God* (Matthew 16:16) *Preach what you believe. Believe what you preach. LIVE WHAT YOU BELIEVE* (ordination admonition to Bishops, Priests, and Deacons).

Peace and Blessings
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