

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

National Office

St. Francis of Assisi Friary

1901 Prior Road, Wilmington, Delaware 19809

tel: (302) 798-1454 fax: (302) 798-3360 website: pppg.org email: pppgusa@gmail.com

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Lord give you his peace!

Significant events can powerfully affect the life of each one of us. It was no different for Padre Pio. He too experienced beautiful, sad, awesome, funny, mystical, and totally transforming incidents in his life. These were moments he would always remember until the day he entered eternal life.

There are three very momentous occasions connected with the month of September and Padre Pio. Two of them we know quite well. One of them, however, was not widely known at the time. Nonetheless, that too was rather significant and quite revealing. The dates are 20 September 1918, (?) September 1968, and 23 September 23 1968.

The Spiritual Children of Padre Pio remember with humble recognition and gratitude to God that September 20, 1918 was the day on which the Stigmata of the Crucified Savior were visibly impressed on the body of Padre Pio. For several years before this day, Padre Pio had been experiencing strange feelings and seeing disconcerting and unexplainable signs on his hands, feet and side.

He was embarrassed to speak of these markings and sensations. He said as much to Padre Agostino in a letter dated August 26, 1912: Yesterday evening something happened to me. In the center of the palms of my hands a red patch appeared, about the size of a cent and accompanied by acute pain. I also feel some pain in the soles of my feet. This phenomenon has been repeated several times for almost a year now. I was overcome by abominable shame. When I am close to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament my heart throbs so violently that it seems at times it must burst out of my chest. The experience of the marks and the invisible wounds with the pain continued until 1918. His personal confusion and correspondence regarding these phenomena became a regular concern for him in his letters to his spiritual director.

Padre Pio was being prepared. He did not realize what was in store for him until several years later. What was revealed to him then visibly marked his body for the next fifty years.

On September 20, 1918, Padre Pio, while praying in the choir area of the friary, received the visible signs of the Passion of Jesus. This time they were not just blotches, or unnoticeable yet

painful reminders of the Passion. Now they were the open wounds of the hands, feet and side that “branded” Padre Pio of Pietrelcina for the rest of his life. He was now the living image of the Crucified Jesus. To him, these marks, a sign of privilege and responsibility with an awesome accountability attached, were a constant source of embarrassment, because of the notoriety that came with them. At times, he must have felt like a side show at a circus, even though he knew that God had a purpose.

Padre Pio received a wonderful privilege and was entrusted with a mission: to rekindle the fire of Divine Love in the hearts of God’s children. The Stigmata he bore speak volumes for those willing to ‘read’ them in a spirit of faith. To see him was to see the living image of the Crucified. To see him was a challenge to change. To encounter him was to recognize God speaking through him. Padre Pio reminded everyone who met him of God’s limitless love. God was calling everyone to cooperate with grace and become the person each one was created to be: child of the Father, redeemed in the blood of the Son, bound together in the family of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those willing to understand and accept the message of the wounds and the person signed with them, knew they were ‘called to action’. The Stigmata call to action not apathy, loving not loathing, conviction not complacency, determination not doubt, commitment not compromise, life not lethargy.

A little known, out-of-the-way mountain town was soon to become a spiritual magnet calling millions. The open invitation to “come, see, listen”, was for everyone and anyone. Those who did come were in for the surprise of their lives. Oh, not the extraordinary visible signs, the reading of hearts, the possible extraordinary graces or miracles, but the power of God’s grace transforming those who came with faith to encounter the “unseen”. “Believe what you do not see and you will see what you believe” (cfr. Hebrews 11: 1)

- People came to an unknown person who soon knew them better than they ever and would ever know themselves. He helped them open their hearts to God and God opened His Heart to them. The experience was repeated by many over and over again. His penetrating glance and grace-filled words of encouragement and forgiveness, or reprimand and challenge, could never be forgotten. These words and his presence were the empowering needed to lead many to a life graced with God’s blessings.

- People came to look at the poor “friar who prays”. They saw in him the image of the Lamb of God martyred for love of humanity. Padre Pio bore the wounds of the Crucified Criminal’ judged by the Jewish Sanhedrin “better that one die than all the people die” (cfr. John 11: 50). Those who looked with faith saw the image of the Lamb of God sacrificed once for all. Padre Pio had now become the servant. He made the image of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53: 3) spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah regarding the Messiah a tangible reality. The image was now more present, more real. Love was rekindled in the hearts of people of a modern/nuclear world that needed so much to regain a love for God that it had begun to lose. Ego, license, self indulgence cooled the warmth of God’s love in hearts. The image they saw began to remind, rekindle and renew hearts.

- The message they heard was clear. Now it was their responsibility to listen to the message they heard and saw, take it to heart and live it. The people not only heard Pio's rather gruff sounding voice, but also experienced a messenger of God's love, mercy, forgiveness. God's ministry for Padre Pio was to make the image of His Crucified Son tangible once again. He spoke what he believed, believed what he spoke, and lived what he believed. Spirit, Word, and Life were all one with/in/for him and others. Not to listen to the obvious was to reject an opportunity of and for a Lifetime.

How could anyone, even non-believers, when they arrived in San Giovanni Rotondo, not leave without being challenged to wonder, question, respond? The old adage holds well here: For those with faith no explanation is necessary; for those without faith, no explanation is possible (St. Thomas Aquinas). As the father of the epileptic son said to Jesus: I do believe, Lord. Help my unbelief (Mark 9: 24).

Nothing happens by chance! Nor could Padre Pio ever even think that a gift so awesome as the Stigmata should be so personal and not meant for the world. Padre Pio's ministry with his Capuchin brothers and among the people began many years before this privileged occurrence. Now it took a turn from which there was no turning back without offending the Giver of the Gift Himself.

The Gift was Padre Pio's call to become one with Jesus by participation as a living expression of the Eucharist he celebrated. The Gift of the Stigmata was a call to become an image of the Victim of Calvary for the world to be reminded of the depths of the Giver's Love. The Gift of the brokenness of one body - that of Padre Pio and the constant pain and bleeding - was the sign of the Giver's desire to heal the wounds of those who would look upon the man of sorrows (cf. Isaiah 53) Padre Pio had become. Through all this Padre Pio never lost his fraternal spirit with his Capuchin brothers, his sense of humor, and his affability with everyone. Even those who experienced a more direct and "harsh" momentary expression of the Padre's ministry realized and stated that it helped them come to grips with their need to be transparent before God with themselves and others. Only in humbling ourselves can we hope to be exalted. (Luke 14: 11)

The physical and spiritual pain Padre Pio experienced was so that others might learn to accept, offer, rise above their challenging moments of pain, sorrow, tragedy, illness. It was to help others open up to God and go beyond the embarrassment of their sinfulness. Anyone concealing or disguising the truth with Padre Pio was often "expelled" from the confessional until they were ready to allow the mercy and love of God to restore them to His grace. God's mercy and forgiveness are worth all the "embarrassment" one might feel to receive forgiveness, accept grace, and cooperate with God's will in avoiding what leads away from the Giver of all good gifts. It was a reminder of Israel's journey in the desert; how the children of Israel were made to look upon the bronze serpent in order to be healed from the serpents' venom. How many souls saw the wounded friar and had their hearts healed of confusion, doubt, skepticism, indifference...sin! How many were reconciled to God! Unless we accept the fact that we are ill, how can we ever expect the doctor to whom we go to heal us?

September 20, 1918, was very significant. Padre Pio himself told a friend that they both would be around for a long time. In fact, he told his friend that he would have to bear the wounds and all that entailed for fifty years and that his friend would be there with him. This layman was a close and indispensable collaborator with Padre Pio. People came with faith, some were curiosity seekers, some were well-intentioned, or not, but no less fanatics, whose antics would affect the life of Padre Pio his entire life. He knew well that a new chapter had begun in his life. The little hilltop town of San Giovanni Rotondo became a destination for millions. This poor friar who prayed, became a spectacle to the world! (1 Corinthians 4: 9)

Years later, the American soldiers, waiting to return home to the United States of America after the Second World War, went to see Padre Pio. Curiosity yes, but several remembered the strange things they witnessed in the skies over San Giovanni Rotondo when they were impeded from bombing the town as ordered. Their sincerity, even in their curiosity, made them become the great promoters of this “monk of the mountain” who received them warmly with Capuchin courtesy and joy. Through them many in the USA got acquainted with this unusual friar “more directly”. Lives were changed. God was alive! Padre Pio was God’s ambassador. As the saying goes, “you can’t just make it up”! It’s too strange not to be true. Let go; let God, and let loose the graces God gives you!

September 23, 1968 is also a date we are all familiar with. On this day, early in the morning, saying the names Jesus, Mary, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina ended his earthly journey. He bore the cross to which he was nailed for fifty years with surrender, courage, and Franciscan Joy. Padre Pio preached most eloquently from his daily bearing of the signs of the Passion-Death of the Savior. As Jesus our Savior two thousand years before from the pulpit of His Cross, the love of a God Who knows no limits in making Himself known, offered the world the image of His Son in Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. Our God is a God Who performs miracles for our eyes that we might enter the mystery of His Love with our heart. Our God calls women and men like Padre Pio, whose hearts are totally surrendered to His Will, to become living prophetic reflections for others to see the magnificence of an awesome and loving God.

Thousands were present on the day Padre Pio died and thousands were present at Padre Pio’s funeral. We all have probably read at least one biography of Padre Pio, so there is no need to go into detail about those days. Many of his Spiritual Children were present in San Giovanni Rotondo to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Padre Pio’s receiving the Stigmata. His death was a triumph! He knew how to call his own! They were there to encourage him in his illness and they were there to accompany him to his rest. Rest? As he said, he would do a lot more after his death than during his life. How true that is! How many speak of special graces that border on the miracle! God is so generous with His gifts! If only we would open our eyes and hearts to recognize them!

But what about the date I put as September (?), 1968? That date, most knew nothing about until after the funeral. As Padre Pio’s life ebbed away, so did the Stigmata begin to cease being as bloody and as visible. Almost as though Jesus were offering Padre Pio a little relief from fifty years of faithful service in carrying the burden of his unique cross. By the time Padre Pio

rendered his soul to God, the Stigmata were completely gone with no marks or scars indicating there had been any wound at all on the hands, feet or side. His martyrdom was complete. He had consummated to the ultimate the vocation he was called to be: Jesus Crucified for the world to see. Raised up He called all people to Himself (John 12: 32). Living on the heights of San Giovanni Rotondo, now become a small metropolis, he attracted millions to the Christ they believed they saw in him. Only Jesus the Christ bears the signs of our salvation before the Father in heaven. Others bore the signs for life's journey emulating and/or imitating the Lord. Only Jesus brings the trophy of the one and only act of Redemption with Him before the Father. Only Jesus is the source and sign of our salvation. All others, even Padre Pio, are willing but nonetheless human instruments of that Tremendous Lover. Jesus, this Tremendous Lover, speaks in so many emphatic and clear ways. He speaks through his faithful disciples, who continue to listen, learn and live His message of peace and goodness. He calls and sends His faithful apostles to preach his message, as they become and empower others to become the message that He spoke so powerfully from the pulpit of the Cross.

The disappearance of the Stigmata before the death of Padre Pio, I believe, was a preparation for him. It announced that his long, arduous, fruitful ministry was coming to an end. It was also, once others were informed, a reminder that the greatness of the person lies in who the person is, how he/she lived God's Will, and how his/her life touched others. The outward signs, regardless how extraordinary they may be, mean nothing for the person privileged to bear them without first surrendering in all things to the Giver of the Gift. Humbly acknowledging God's "trust" in us, we are reminded that Humility is recognizing the smallness of our greatness when we stand before the greatness of the source of all that is. Even Padre Pio, whose fame knew no boundaries for so many years, when Sister Death came to call him home, looked like just one of the friars. The people knew different. The body of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina reminded us all that we must seek beyond the miracle of the moment and strive to enter the mystery of the eternal.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, the month of September is very meaningful. Celebrate his Stigmata with gratitude to God for having given to the world for so long a time an image that was a constant reminder of God's love for humanity and our need to come to the Cross of our salvation. Celebrate his birth into eternal life with joy and thanksgiving, because our Spiritual Father and Founder intercedes for us as he promised. Celebrate the disappearance of his Stigmata on any day between the two (September 20 - 23), as you reflect deeply and personally on the importance of who you are before God and how God has called you to live His Will, rather than seeking after passing attractions for the world to see. The attractions and applause mean nothing unless we can lose them all in God (cf Romans 11: 32). Even the greatest of all spiritual gifts means nothing, St. Paul tells us, unless in our hearts there is love - a disinterested love that lives for God and does not seek its own publicity.

There is so much Padre Pio tells us this month from silent lips. He preaches a powerful sermon from the quiet of his resting place on earth. He speaks to our hearts from his place with God. Whether we bear visible signs of our vulnerability in our bodies, or invisible wounds in our souls, let Padre Pio remind us that our vulnerability, our broken nature, our wounds last only a

lifetime; after all this, there is Heaven! As the time approaches for us to enter the Father's embrace, we will have understood, through our own wounds, God's tremendous love. The great Giver of Life our Eternal Father will gently lead us into His embrace. All the wounds will heal and no scars will remain because we will have been made whole by becoming one with the Wounded Healer, as was our Father, Padre Pio.

Before concluding this reflection with you, let us not forget that St. Pio of Pietrelcina, true Capuchin son of St. Francis of Assisi, followed in the footsteps of our Seraphic Father who bore the Stigmata of Jesus that he received on Mount La Verna (17 September, 1224) centuries before. The wounds imprinted on St. Francis' heart at San Damiano at the beginning of his response to God's call to follow me, were eventually imprinted on his body at La Verna two years before his passage into eternity. Seraphic Father Francis of Assisi and Good Father Padre Pio of Pietrelcina pray for us all that we may accept with joy the cross prepared for us so that we may go From the Cross to the Light (Pope St. Paul VI). Thus, we will be assured that one day we will share the fullness of the Resurrected Life with you and all the holy ones with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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

Peace and Blessings
Fr. Francis A. Sariego, O.F.M. Cap.
National Coordinator