

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

Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

December 2023

May the Infant Jesus grant your heart the Peace you desire.

May His Star enlighten your mind with the splendor of His Truth.

May His Love consume your heart so that it beats solely for Him. (P. Pio)

(Saint Francis) highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest intention was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace His footsteps completely ... We should note then ... what he did ... at the town of Greccio, on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ ... There was a certain man ... named John who had a good reputation but an even better manner of life. Blessed Francis (said to him) 'If you desire to celebrate the coming feast of the Lord together at Greccio, hurry before me and carefully make ready the things I tell you. For I wish to re-enact the memory of that babe who was born in Bethlehem: to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with ox and ass standing by, he rested on hay' ... Finally, the holy man of God comes and, finding all things prepared, he saw them and was glad ... There simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem ... Over the manger the solemnities of the Mass are celebrated. (1Celano, bk.1, chpt. 30)

St. Francis' simplicity and desire for 'concreteness' in touching with his senses the great Mystery of the Incarnation gave rise to the tradition of the Nativity Scene most Christian Families set up over the Christmas Season. St. Francis was not seeking to be innovative, or create something curious that would attract people. He sought to make the Birth of the Savior "relevant" in the lives of everyone. He wanted that "Christ be real and come alive" in the hearts of all.

St. Francis wanted to rekindle the spark of the Spirit's fire and enthusiasm in the hearts of the faithful. Through the senses, St. Francis desired that people more easily could arrive more incisively at the very soul of God's love for creation. Grace builds on nature. The ability to allow the senses to take over and enliven the heart and soul makes the experience with God even more exciting. Not just the intellect, but the whole person enters an intimate relationship with God. Thus, God enters a relationship with humanity taking on every aspect of human life except sin.

In the story as recounted by Celano, St. Francis' biographer, it is even stated: *Moreover, burning with excessive love, (Francis) often calls Christ the 'babe from Bethlehem' whenever he means to call Him Jesus. Saying the word 'Bethlehem' in the manner of a bleating sheep.* (1Celano, bk.1, chpt. 30)

St. Francis was not one to be held in check by public opinion. Christmas is the birthday of the Christ Child and he was not concerned sounding like a child, or acting childlike, even if to some it seemed childish. *(When) people were bringing there little children to Jesus ... (Jesus) said to (His disciples) who were trying to stop them: Let the children come to me and do not hinder them. It is to just such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.* (Mark 10: 13-16) Christmas is a time for us to think of the Christ Child. The season and the celebrated Christ Child help us remember the child that we once were. More so, they remind us of the child we must become spiritually, *for to such as these is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 19: 14).

Our Seraphic Father let love let loose. His great example was King David who danced with abandon before the Ark and all the people of Israel. David's response to a rebuke he received for exposing himself as a commoner (cfr. 2 Samuel: 7: 20) could easily be placed on the lips of St. Francis: *As the Lord lives, who preferred me ... not only will I make merry before the Lord, but I will demean myself even more ... I will be lowly in your esteem ... but I will be honored.* (2 Samuel 7: 21-23)

Pride seduced freedom at the very beginning of human history when our first parents opted to seek self interest rather than the will of their Father Creator. From that moment, human history became a quest to regain what was lost: harmony, serenity, peace. Harmony became enmeshed in the mechanism of compromise, connivance, convenience, and all that cloud our vision of the road traced out for us by the One Who creates us and calls us to Himself. Serenity was shaken by the inner struggles of insecurity, indifference, indolence and all that keep our hopes from encouraging us to move forward that we might grow in the gifts bestowed on us by our Creator. Peace became the unfulfilled dream of those who were challenged daily by fearful anxiety, dominant arrogance, blind ambition.

The world has not been the same ever since that fateful moment of humanity's arrogant response to the Creator's love and trust. Thus began the quest to regain what was lost! The arrogance of pride is overcome by humility. Humility lives in truth. Truth offers the liberating experience of being transparent. Transparency allows us to trust and to see others as pilgrims with us on the same journey. Thus, opening our heart to the other, we find the Eternal Other in our life as well.

Life begins as the quest of the child for the (adult), and ends as the quest of the (adult) for the child ... (Laurens Van der Post). It is the voice of the childlike person hidden within us crying out to be set free. We search for the Child Who alone can help us find what we 'misaid along the road': harmony with God, ourselves and all creation; serenity before the challenges we face in the certitude that all works out for those who trust in God; and peace of heart and love, that see the image of the Child we seek in all people. Serenity (peace), integrity (transparency) and

love (acceptance/surrender) ultimately lead to Joy - the Joy of Christmas, the Joy of the newborn Child.

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, the people of Israel heard the prophet Isaiah promise: *Many peoples shall come...they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again* (Isaiah 2: 1-5). We must not allow our hearts to be overwhelmed by the tragedies of life. St. Francis teaches us to disarm our hearts, whatever the price. Like His faithful son Padre Pio, whom we revere, we too are called to *bear the stigmata of our Lord in our body for the sake of His body the Church* (Galatians 6: 17). *In His wounds we are redeemed* (cf Ephesians 1: 7), that by God's grace and our faithfulness and example others may recognize and live the graces God affords all who are open to His loving embrace.

Where there is life there is hope, and where there is hope there is peace, even in the midst of confusion and pain. Life is still the journey worth living. And it is beautiful! How can it not be is...*God so loved the world that he sent us his only Son so that whoever believes in Him would have life and have it in abundance* (John 3:16). *Who (or what) can separate us from the love of God* (Romans 8:35) ... *In Him we are more than conquerors* (Romans 8:37). We must search for the answer in the responses given at Jesus' Birth to heaven's call: *the shepherds went in haste to see what had been told them* (Luke 2: 1); *the Magi followed the star* (see Matthew 2: 1- 12).

Padre Pio, a true and worthy son of the Poverello of Assisi, loved Christmas. Remember the famous photo of Padre Pio carrying the statue of the Infant Jesus in the Christmas Eve Mass procession. You could see in his eyes that he felt as though the Child was truly in his arms. The Infant Jesus of Christmas spoke to his heart of the humility and love of God. His was definitely the ecstatic praise that St. Francis of Assisi once said when he reflected upon the Mystery of the Incarnation: *O sublime humility, O humble sublimity!* Our God has shown us in Jesus that He is not ashamed of the creation He brought into being. Becoming one with us, God offers us the challenge to become one with Him in, with, and through Jesus and the power of His Holy Spirit. Nazareth of Mary's "yes", and Bethlehem of the Jesus' birth offer us proofs of this wonderful truth of our faith.

The spiritual children of Padre Pio lovingly live the legacy of joyful trust at all times in the Father. The Father loves His children passionately. The Father's extravagant Love became tangible by the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit in Mary's "yes" to the impossible allowing The Word to become flesh, Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Mary. The Child born in the dark of night is God's 'Star of Truth'. The Word-made-flesh indicates the way for us to fulfill our basic desire to rediscover the simplicity, trust, love of the child within us we were created to be, that we *come to the full stature of Christ*. (Ephesians 4: 13) With the simplicity of the shepherds we hurry to the manger in Faith that blossoms into Hope. Thus, we see Love Incarnate, believe in The Presence that will envelop us, and enter the experience of His eternal Love. We have seen and touched the Holy One of God. His Presence assures us that , *greater is the One within than he who is in the world*. (1 John 4: 4)

The newborn King, Whose birth we prepare for and celebrate in faith, can be found alive in the hearts of everyone. During the Advent Season, in the silence of faith, we journey with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. In the joy of great expectations we hurry to the stable with the Shepherds. In undaunted hope we persevere in our quest with the Wise Men. We bear the gifts of ourselves assured of finding the One we seek. Remember the famous saying: *Who I am is God's gift to me. Who I become is my gift to God.* The longer the journey the greater the gift becomes.

Let all fears be dispelled, all hope rekindled, all love blossom new in our hearts. The Child of Bethlehem blessed our history becoming one with us that we might again be one with God. It was at His birth that heaven sang *Glory to God in high heaven, peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests* (Luke 2: 1-14) The world into which the God of creation chose to enflesh Himself is still the stage of the greatest act of His Tremendous Love, the "Theater of Redemption". Life to be, Freedom in responsibility, and Redemption to eternal life in Jesus are still God's loving and impartial gifts to all. We are invested with the awesome trust of the Father as stewards of creation. His presence and providence are a reality that transform our world grown cold and indifferent to what really matters - Love!

At Bethlehem that first Christmas night God's promise is fulfilled and humanity's hope rekindled for all who believe. We become earthly messengers of the eternal love that not even human tragedy can destroy. Goodness is still alive in the hearts of God's children, and this love is celebrated each year at Christmas. Christmas is a time for us to look with the childlike eyes of wonder at the mystery fulfilled. We enjoy the love made present in the poverty of Bethlehem. We bask in the light of a treasure greater than any we could imagine. To see the Infant Jesus and recognize the God of Creation, the Savior of humanity, the King of kings and Lord of lords is to allow the tepidity and even the coldness of life's demands and burdens to be dispelled by the warmth of love of the Child of Bethlehem.

The Lord hidden in His Word and Sacrament is made visible in so many ways. The child within is reborn and we experience the newness and joy of life. At Christmas we celebrate this wonderful re-discovery and joy. Each day is a new experience of that eternal unfolding love prepared for by the prophets, and made visible at Bethlehem and Calvary. All this will continue until history's time becomes eternity's fullness in God. Each day we re-present the mysteries of salvation in the Eucharist, and each year we celebrate the unfolding of that One Solitary Life that is the focal point of human history - Jesus. Life is our journey. The vigor of childhood and youth is tested through middle age as often we lose the "spring in our step" as time leads to eternity. Faith, like that of Mary and Joseph who believed the mystery as they experienced the miracle of His birth, offers us to each moment as a wonderful endowment that makes the journey itself the gift, and the destination that much more desirable.

The wooden manger that held the Infant Jesus at Bethlehem prepared for the wood of the Cross that held Him up on Calvary. The Crib and the Cross can never be separated. He totally emptied Himself as God at Bethlehem and totally emptied Himself as Man on Calvary. The Birth

of Jesus at Bethlehem is the story of the Living One Who was born to die so that we who are born to die might share eternal life with the One Who lives forever.

As spiritual Children of Padre Pio, have we allowed the precious Body and Blood of the Savior to flow through and take over every fiber of our being? Have we allowed the Lord to be 'enfleshed' in our lives so that each Christmas we celebrate the Savior present and alive within and among us, and not just as some past historical event? Do we say with Mary, Jesus' Mother, and with Jesus, *Your Will and not mine be done?* (Luke 22: 42; cfr. Luke 1: 38) Have we sought to rekindle the vision that Padre Pio had for his Prayer Groups of a people united in prayer, sacrifice and service? Have we worked to make the vision grow into a fresh and vibrant presence of Jesus Who makes Himself seen and known through us? Do we recognize our own incompleteness, vulnerability, and susceptibility so that we can share, support and encourage one another? Are we as enthused about our being Spiritual Children of Padre Pio - and all that entails - as children are when Christmas comes around? Do we see the gift that we are to each other if we allow the spirit of our Padre Pio to lead us closer to Jesus and Mary?

Our Father and Founder, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, encourages us on our journey. In the spirit of the one who so visibly helped others see Jesus in his life and words, let us bring Jesus' Light, Joy, Hope, and Love to all whom we encounter on life's journey. Warmed by the love and humility of the Christ Child, may we find that child within who helps us see the beauty of this world in all its wonder and majesty, and the love of its Creator in all His humility. Come, let us adore Him in His Eucharistic presence. With Mary and Joseph let us bask in the light of his splendor and trust in Him.

May the Peace, Joy, Blessings, and Love of this Season fill your hearts and those of your loved ones. You and your loved ones will be remembered especially in my prayers and Christmas Masses. Please keep me in your prayers and Masses that I fulfill my ministry among you as God wills. God bless you; Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and our beloved Padre Pio watch over you, his spiritual children, and all your dear ones, with loving care.

Blessed and Merry Christmas to all and a very Happy, Healthy, and Holy New Year 2024.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator