

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,

January 2024

The Lord grant you the precious gift of His peace!

Together with the Prophet Isaiah and Mary the Mother of God, John the Baptist completes the liturgical triptych of Advent. The new calendar year begins with Mary in Her Divine Motherhood offering Her Son to everyone, and with John the Baptist indicating the Savior to follow as he himself recedes into the shadows.

John the Baptist is the central figure in the Gospels of the first days of January. His response to those who question him as to his own identity offers us a profound reflection. He reminds us to seek to know ourselves more truthfully in the light of God's will. We are to focus more intently on our lives and our hopes and dreams, that we might better discover God's Will for us.

The new calendar year creates an illusion that the past is behind us and now all is new. Nevertheless, we can never really expect not to be affected by the past - good, bad, indifferent. We build on the experiences we have had and how and what we have learned from them. Time prepares us for eternity. Nothing is "disconnected", but all can be transformed, at any time, with God's help and our collaboration.

Though the religious year for Christians begins with Advent, globally most are more attuned to the common calculation of time. Beginning with January many reflect on the past. We take inventory of our life and what brought us to where we are. We reflect on who we are, for what or for whom we are searching. The response challenges us to consider what we are willing to do once we have found the object of our search.

The Gospels say, *When the Jerusalem Jews sent men to ask John, Who are you? he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, I am not the Messiah* (John 1: 19-29). They were searching for the One Who would fulfill the ancient prophecies and bring them into a "golden era" (of wealth and prestige? of political sovereignty and dominance of others? of spiritual growth and dominance of self? or something else). The response John gave demanded that he be detached from personal popularity and prestige among the people. To accept John's preaching would inevitably lead to a change of view and understanding of the prophecies regarding the Messiah. John's response indicated a willingness to be relegated to oblivion for the sake of *One greater than I* (cfr Mark 1: 7). There is no false humility here, but a stark reality and truth that impelled John the Baptist throughout his whole life and ministry.

The Baptist is a captivating figure. His message was strong and non-condescending to anyone: rich or poor, influential or common, Jew or Gentile, religious or secular. The people saw in him *The Prophet* they had desired for centuries, though he confessed quite openly *I am not the prophet* (John 1: 19).

The children of Abraham had been deprived for several centuries of the voice of one who spoke with the authority and power of God. The voice of the Prophets had ceased and the people had fallen into a rather stale formalism that made their religion a matter of rules and regulations that burdened rather than liberated them. The leaders of the people no longer expected the *one-who-is-to-come* (cfr Matthew 11: 3; John 11: 3)) of whom Isaiah spoke in the Scriptures, as the prophets had presented him: a *Suffering Servant* (cfr Isaiah 53) who would lead people back to God. Isaiah had spoken clearly of the Messiah and how he could be recognized. He also spoke of the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. The People of the Promise, after so many years without a prophet, eventually formulated their own concept of who the Messiah would be. Thus, they were not able to recognize him when he finally arrived.

The story never seems to change. God's delay is not denial. Nevertheless, we grow impatient with God's "delay" and so begin to create our own image based on our wants rather than God's word. How confusing we make our lives when a little more trust in and patience with God would resolve all our questioning and concern!

John the Baptist came on the scene to help people recognize the Savior. His unique appearance and forceful style could not be easily disregarded. His message was direct and to the point. The people who heard him were challenged to accept or to reject, and ultimately to reap the consequences of their decisions. We know how John's life ended and why. His commitment to transparency of life would not accept to be politically correct and condone the scandalous lifestyle of king Herod, even when his life depended on it. The death of John only confirmed the credibility of his mission and testimony. He opened the way for Jesus to begin His ministry of salvation. This ministry was based not on the retribution of the Law but on the love, compassion, and mercy of a God Who would stop at nothing to lead His children back to Him. The compulsion of love is stronger and more!

The life of John was one of preparation and relinquishment. He prepared the hearts of the people to encounter and acknowledge the Messiah in their midst. He challenged Israel to look into their hearts and souls and honestly acknowledge their need to change their lives. We could call him the *Saint of New Beginnings*. With the abruptness of expression, and the disdain for the normal amenities of life of the ancient prophets, John the Baptist was a living sign of decisiveness and commitment to the God of Israel and His Law. Selfless and detached from all the fame and following he had, he indicated the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1: 29) to his disciples so that they might know and follow Jesus. John stated emphatically: *He must increase and I must decrease* (John 3: 30). He needed no pats on the back or constant affirming compliments from the people. He was *A voice crying out in the desert, Make straight the way of the Lord* (cfr John 40: 3-5) and that is all that mattered to him. Jesus lauded John when he asked, *What did you go out in the desert to see? a reed shaken by*

the wind?....a man dressed in fine robes?...Or did you go out to see a prophet?...Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet...(Matthew 11: 7-11)

The new year encourages people to dream and hope for a better life, more successful enterprises, improved health, serene and peaceful existence, a world without war and violence of any kind, and more. New Year's Eve celebrations televised from around the world show how other countries and time belts prepare for New Year's Day and the beginning of a new calendar year. It may seem after the fact that the previous year accomplished less than we had expected. Just like the People of Ancient Israel, we too may have been waiting for something or someone that would make everything what we desired. We can see that the hopes and fears of people are the same no matter when they lived. The wilderness of our cacophonous society still seeks to stifle the Voice of God that speaks to us through the Liturgy, in Sacred Scripture, through the Magisterium of the Church, and through the events of our lives.

Once the glitz of Christmas celebrations is finished, the Ordinary Time of the Church begins. And it is anything but ordinary. With the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, Jesus and John both challenge us to take the plunge into the waters of repentance. Our 'Jordan River' is the daily experiences that invite us to change our negative attitudes, uncharitable behavior, self-centered lives, materialistic hopes, lukewarm or even cold sentiments for the Church and our responsibilities as part of the Faithful People of God, and anything else that might come to mind. When Jesus entered the Jordan River, He had formally decided and indicated to the people that He was one with them, from them, and for them *in all things but sin* (Hebrews 4: 15).

Our Sacramental Baptism makes us redeemed children of God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, just as the children of Abraham became true children of God through the acceptance of the Covenant. Each day we are invited to plunge into our daily lives with eyes open and aware of all that is happening. Our ears are attentive to all that is said. Our minds are receptive to the challenge to seek what unites rather than what divides us. We seek to understand and reflect before speaking out. We choose to open and disarm our hearts to everyone we meet regardless of what differences may exist and what consequences may result from doing as Jesus would do. The last mentioned - *hearts disarmed and doing as Jesus would* - is probably the most difficult challenge since it ultimately concretizes in action what we say we believe in our hearts. In a world that seeks to appeal and appease saying what is desired and not necessarily what is true will only keep us lodged in the present without any possibility of free access to go beyond our fears and prejudices.

In a letter to Antonietta Vona (January 2, 1918), Padre Pio writes: *Take care to render them (your hearts) more pleasing to our Master day by day, and see to it that this coming year is more fertile in good works than the one just gone by, given that at the same pace with which the years pass by and eternity approaches, we must redouble our courage and raise our spirits to God, serving Him with greater diligence in everything that our vocation or Christian professions obliges us. Only this can render us pleasing to God. It can free us from the big world that is not of God, and from all our other enemies. This alone can bring us to the port of eternal*

salvation...Let us face the present trials to which divine Providence subjects us, but let us not lose heart or become discouraged. Let us fight valiantly and we will obtain the prize of strong souls. Remember the words of the divine Master one day said to His apostles and which He says to us today: Let not your hearts be troubled...Jesus is with us...Jesus fighting for us and with us. Let us have recourse to Him...Live tranquilly, follow the path on which the Lord has placed you and in a holy manner...

Padre Pio offers suggestions to Antonietta more than a century ago that are still valid for all of us today. As we enter 2024, we are definitely aware of all the problems that confront our world: wars, threats of wars, nuclear threats, diseases for which there are still no cures, financial instability that affects the security of families, natural disasters that have left millions affected and thousands homeless. No need to continue what we hear and see every day! But we must enter this year with the hope-filled faith of a people who know that God is still in control and we, as the Baptist, as Padre Pio, are called to help prepare the hearts of others to recognize and welcome the Lord in our midst. How?!

Is our heart and mind focused on the Lord everyday? Do we make an effort to have a better frame of mind, soul, and spirit because we trust in God? Do we face our responsibilities without allowing them to control us? Do we try to understand and learn from the past, especially from our mistakes, to avoid what leads us to fall into them again in the future? Will we strive to please the Lord every day, rather than compromise the values and principles of our faith? Have we learned the truth and spiritual value as well to 'hurry up slowly' – festina lente - and pace ourselves? Are the material endeavors and successes and material gains we seek intended to better ourselves and help others? Do we still allow anxieties, useless worries and undue pressures to affect us that we bear the effects in our minds and souls, and ultimately even in our bodies? Have we finally, or not, truly arrived at the conviction of belief that God is in control and can help us?!!

Wisdom is knowledge and correct understanding. Prudence is the correct way of making use of the knowledge we have acquired. Let us be prudent and set our priorities, and trust in Divine Providence not just in this coming year but for our entire lives. I know that this all seems like an awful lot and not that easy, but a better year filled with inner peace and serenity can be a fact if we do one important and essential thing - TRUST IN GOD WHO LOVES US AND WANTS US TO LIVE LIFE FULLY.

With Our Heavenly Mother leading us into 2024, May She be a living presence in your hearts. Mary is the tabernacle that held Him in Her womb and the Monstrance that presented Him to the world. She presents us Her Son. Mary gives us Jesus and Jesus leads us to the Father. May that Father of Life and Love bless you; our Mother Mary and Her beloved and loving husband St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and may our beloved Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, and all your loved ones with loving care.

Blessed, Peaceful, and Happy New Year everyone. My blessing and prayer for all of you and your loved ones this year 2024 is the Blessing of our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi, that he

made his own, from the blessings God gave to Moses that he might give it to Aaron the High Priest as a blessing for all God's People:

**May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May He show His face to you and have mercy on you.
May He look on you with kindness and grant you peace.
(May He live with you. May you always live with Him.)**

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator