

# Padre Pio Prayer Groups

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

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The Lord give you peace!

***The Universality of the Cross*** cannot be denied. Besides the Cross of Jesus, there is the cross each one of us has to bear. Seen in the light of Jesus' words, the Mystery of the Cross, accepted in faith, can help us have a perspective on life that encourages us to confidently accept the challenge to change. Unless we die to ourselves, we can never hope to really live. We want to live, and live fully, but there is something that holds us back from making strides that forge ahead.

An expression often used by Jesus in the Gospels, repeated by Pope John Paul II innumerable times, and taken up by his successor Pope Benedict XVI is: ***Do not be afraid***. We need to remember these words and take them to heart. Fear seems to be the universal common denominator that seeks to control the lives of so many.

The ultimate fear for most people is the fear of death. There are also the 'minor-yet-no-less crippling' fears: fear of uselessness, fear of failure, fear of being forgotten, fear of being a 'no one'. These, and many others, are all valid for those who have not yet been able to believe and take Jesus at His word. Among these are many Catholic Christians who have reduced their faith to mere practices that no longer offer any significance to their life. Even the wonderful Gift of the Eucharist becomes for many just 'another pious devotional tool' rather than the Real Presence. How tragic it would be had there not been a way out of this devastating situation that many people camouflage so well.

The Church offers us a wonderful opportunity each year to review, reflect and renew our lives: Lent. We are called to deepen our relationship with God, Who in turn strengthens and enables us to live our lives more fully. Lent is a time for us to look at ourselves and the world in a powerful light - the Light of the Cross. This is not just any cross, but the Cross of Christ. The Drama of the Cross of Jesus is the Greatest Act of Love humanity could ever imagine. This Act of Love began with the wooden Crib at Bethlehem that we just celebrated at Christmas and that the Franciscan Family celebrated in its 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Greccio Nativity scene setup by St. Francis of Assisi. The "Drama of the Cross" reached its climax on the wooden Cross of Calvary. The Crib embraced the Infant for all to see, and the Cross lifted up the Man for all to approach. The Crib offered the Infant for all to embrace; the Cross extended the arms of the Man and opened His heart for all to be embraced and enter into the Love of the Father. ***Do not***

**be afraid.** This loving reminder, “Do Not Be Afraid”, is repeated over 300 times in Sacred Scripture. Why be afraid, what do we fear, if He shares life with each one of us at every moment?

Since it was first hoisted into place on the *Hill of the Skull*, the Cross has accentuated the *Sign of Contradiction* first seen at Bethlehem and then throughout Israel two thousand years ago. Myriads of peoples have heard of and responded to the Cross of Christ. Some have accepted and proclaimed the message. Others have rejected and sought to eliminate its impact on the world in a variety of ways. Open acts of physical violence have given the Church Her holy martyrs, who are outstanding witnesses of uncompromising faith and love. Then there are those who with subtle allurements and enticements, have sought to mislead souls from the values and principles of our faith, thus jeopardizing the very core of the person and the strength of the believing community. This is the more devious, insidious, and devastating of the two. **Do not be afraid.** Jesus has conquered the world.

The Cross is the answer. The **Universality of the Cross** makes it the determining Instrument of Success and Fulfillment for all who lovingly and confidently accept the challenge to *take up your cross and follow in My footsteps* (cfr. Matthew 16: 24-26).

The eight hundredth anniversary celebration of the Crib at Greccio (1223-2023), and the possibility to gain the Plenary Indulgence of Greccio, ends on the Feast of the Presentation-Purification on February 2<sup>nd</sup>. Following Greccio’s celebration, we prepare to celebrate the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reception of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi on Mount La Verna. We go from the mountain of Greccio celebrating the humility of God’s birth as a human, to the “sublimity” of God’s exaltation in sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary. The journey of the Christian is always *From the Crib to the Cross...and beyond*. Jesus is born to die that we may be re-born to live. Jesus becomes mortal and shares time with humanity so that we may become immortal and co-eternal with Christ in His eternity.

The next months we will attempt to share reflections on the Cross of Jesus, the stigmata of St. Francis and the gifted share in the Passion of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina through the fifty years he bore the wounds of the Savior on his body. He became a *spectacle to the world* (cfr. 1Corinthians 4: 9) so that the world could once again find its way to Christ.

What do we see and hear from the Cross? From the Cross of Jesus we see the anguish of the sick, the tears of the frustrated. We hear the laments of those struggling as they climb the winding road of their Golgotha. From the Cross of Jesus we see the nations of the ‘fourth’ world condemned to die of hunger, as a large crowd carries its insignia of concern for the fundamental rights of all human beings, but keeps silent when faced with the ultimate challenge to act. From the Cross of Jesus can be seen those nations considered marginal and destined for extinction by the great powers of the world. Their only concern is their own economic growth at the expense of others. Most of the peoples that are the object of their concerns are either patronized in a variety of “global” ways as needed, or else they are considered ‘expendable’ and victims of the political whims of the nations.

From the height of the Cross of Jesus, looking out to the world beyond Jerusalem, Jesus could see the newly-forming nations still struggling to be 'free', those massacred in the various hotbeds of war throughout the world. From the Cross of Christ we also recognize the stranger in search of a homeland, those longing to make a difference in a troubled world, the segregated and oppressed of society. *Do not be afraid, for I am with you* (Isaiah 41: 10), *in this sign (of the Cross) you will conquer* (vision to the Emperor Constantine at the battle of the Milvian Bridge that led to the end of the persecution of Christians and freedom for the Christian Church)

What about the cross of those condemned by a distorted materialism and/or capitalism that deprives those who work hard to make a life for themselves of the basic necessities they have already earned? The slavery and humiliation they sought to avoid is now the ditch into which they see themselves falling.

Please don't think that I am talking politics. Some may even comment that I should 'stick to spiritual things'. Our Faith must be concretized. Unless we make our faith visible in our lives, we are nothing more than plastic images, not to say 'hypocrites'. Our faith is not a *Policy*, it is a *Person*. Faith must be concretized if it is to go beyond mere 'lip service'. Until our faith can be translated into an awareness of those 'crucified' around us and in the world, we are walking with our eyes closed and are in danger of falling ourselves into the very ditches we refuse to acknowledge and fill in.

It is true that every Christian must accept his/her own cross, but it is also true that each one of us must seek to unfasten all those who have been hung on the cross. One cross is our challenge in life; another is the cross that is placed upon us by others. In both cases, however, the cross becomes the challenge that says: ***Do not be afraid***. Now is the time for us to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: *This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own* (Isaiah 58: 6). We have a tendency to speak about and look for extraordinary mystical experiences, but hesitate or even refuse to come to the aide of our brother or sister who groans under the weight of their personal cross. It is Christ Who suffers in them. Not only must we seek to alleviate their burdens, but we must also begin to identify those who construct the crosses for others to bear, and attempt to eradicate their hurtful influence in the life of others. We don't have to go far. The opportunities to be Christ to others are all around us. Open your eyes and your heart. ***Do not be afraid*** at what you see and whom you invite into your love.

Faithfulness to the Cross of Jesus demands much from us. It expects us to see in the Cross the instrument of our salvation. It presumes we recognize the Cross as a sign that redemption is near. It urges us to lift our hands and not just our hearts to help make a burden bearable if we cannot eliminate it. It is the only way - the Way of the Cross - that leads us with and through Jesus, to a more complete life. Why? Because the Way of the Cross does not lead to death, but to a total commitment and surrender to the One Who Alone is the Source of New Life for ourselves and all with whom we share the Journey to the Hill of Redemption. In so many areas

of the world new hope begins to dawn because of those who have met Christ on the way and have heeded His words: **Do not be afraid.**

In his letter to Padre Agostino, Padre Pio writes: *I do not know what will happen to me; I only know one thing for certain, that the Lord will never fall short of his promises. 'Do not fear, I will make you suffer, but I will also give you the strength to suffer', Jesus tells me continually. 'I want your soul to be purified and tried by a daily hidden martyrdom; do not be frightened if I allow the devil to torment you, the world to disgust you and your nearest and dearest to afflict you, for nothing will prevail against those who groan beneath the Cross for love of me and whom I have taken care to protect'... Beneath the Cross one learns to love and I do not grant this to everyone, but only to those souls who are dearest to me'. (February 3, 1913)...May the same Cross always be our bed of rest, our school of perfection, our beloved heritage...the surest sign of love is the capacity to suffer for the beloved...We must keep our eyes fixed on the noble, majestic and holy company of those who follow Jesus to Golgotha. Each one of them without exception bears the profession of the true faith on his countenance, self-denial in his heart, and the cross on his shoulders. (July 1, 1915).*

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, the Cross is our insignia, our sign of victory, our pledge of unity with the Master, our remedy for the ills of humanity, our hope for eternity, our certitude of God's inimitable and eternal Love for us in Jesus. As we prepare for the holy season of Lent, let us find ways to make the Cross of Jesus an essential part of our daily lives, not just in our liturgical and devotional practices, but also more deeply in our own personal lives. Let us recognize how the Cross must be a sign of encouragement, and seek ways of assisting others who are burdened with their crosses. Of the many Lenten practices we can propose, the Cross accepted with love, and our surrender to the Cross in assisting others in their needs, will help us advance swiftly and effectively on our Lenten journey.

Have a blessed and spiritually fruitful beginning to Lent. Let go of your hesitancy. Go beyond yourself to others. Take up the daily challenge of your cross. Look beyond the difficulties of the moment. Trust in the One Who gave Himself for us all. **Do not be afraid** to deepen your relationship with God (Prayer), to distance yourself from all you allow to possess you (Penance), and to open your heart and surrender to the Christ Who suffers in others and awaits your love (Almsgiving). These three elements help make for a fruitful Lent. Have confidence and courage. **Do not be afraid!**

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

Peace and Blessings  
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