

Padre Pio Prayer Groups

National Office

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

February 2026

The Lord give you His peace!

We are a *people peculiarly God's own* (Deuteronomy 7: 6-11; Isaiah 9; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter:2:9, and more) because we are created by God *in His own image and likeness* (Genesis 1: 26). When we forget, dismiss, or otherwise shelve this fundamental truth, it is understandable why our wants can turn into our needs, and our hearts can become indifferent to the lives and needs of the sisters and brothers, all children of God, around us. While we may not be indifferent to God, or squanderers of God's gifts, or indifferent to the needy around us, we still have a responsibility to God, ourselves, and each other to always be a grateful people who give God the first place in our hearts and lives. We must be aware of the times in which we live. We are challenged daily to respond to the unexpected circumstances of life in God-centered ways.

Quite often people will seek the easy options available rather than the best way to live as a child of God. Just think of how advertising entices people to take now, enjoy now, and pay later. The message is an enticing and seemingly good one, but it is also an insidious one. When such an attitude gradually enters the fiber of our life and society, the consequences can be disastrous. Putting responsibility off until later for the sake of the 'here-and-now' enjoyment or 'quick fix' can ultimately keep some people in the illusion that they need not be accountable for anything. What is 'put off until tomorrow' rarely gets taken care of tomorrow. 'Tomorrow' never comes! Tomorrow becomes today and we just keep waiting for tomorrow. To follow such a foolish philosophy of life is to live a lie. Living a lie is destructive. We lose sight of the growth process to which all creation is bound by nature, and human beings are bound by a deeper spiritual process.

The better choice is to let go of false securities, immobilizing comforts, hypocritical compromises, and let God 'call the shots'. With the help of God we strive to go from bad to good and from good to better. We want our mediocrity to turn to excellence. We desire to be transformed into that '*new person come to full stature in Christ*'(Ephesians 4: 13).

The Lenten pilgrimage from Ashes to the Empty Tomb helps us achieve this vital goal. Lent is the annual opportunity the Church offers all Her children to rekindle the flame of faith, and move forward in hope toward God Who awaits to embrace us with His forgiving and transforming Love. Lent is the time for us to tone up for the struggle between settling for comfort, convenience, compromise or for the transforming strength of Jesus that can condition and confirm us to be true children of God redeemed in the Blood of Jesus. Following Jesus brings a peace available to all who walk with Him. Through prayer, sacrifice, and awareness of the needs of others expressed by sincere self-denial and trusting generosity we arrive at an inner freedom and peace of the Easter Message of new life and spiritual wholeness.

As an inducement to buy, product advertising often promises huge discounts over the list price, rather than vouching for the product's quality. This approach indicates, often falsely, that the original price was exorbitant and that earlier buyers did not get value for their money. But the intended message is that only the foolish

would let this new offer pass by without taking advantage of it. Advertising is rarely what it seems to be at first sight. There is usually a hidden agenda, something more than meets the eye. Many see what they want and then pay more than expected for less than desired.

The presentation of Lent tells it like it is! No risk no gain! Trust enough the God you seek, pay the price you are able and willing to give, and you'll be pleasantly surprised at the vast benefits that will be yours. On Ash Wednesday we will hear the words as the ashes are placed on our foreheads: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return or Repent, and Believe the Gospel.* Taken in sequence they tell us where we came from (dust) and where we are headed (dust) if we are not transformed by our acceptance (convinced) of the Good News (teachings) of Jesus the Christ (Promised One/Son of God). The words we hear, one or the other phrase as ashes are signed on our foreheads, are a reality check and stern warning. Forewarned is forearmed! Be attentive. Be receptive. Do not miss the opportunity... for an eternity!

Beyond the obvious reminder of these words, there is a 'hidden agenda'. There is more to Lent than heroics and self-denial, important though these are. Lent is an emphatic invitation in the midst of the whirlwind of our daily lives. Lent invites us to re-live the mystery of the Cross of Calvary more intensely. It is the 'advertisement' of God's love for us. Calvary and the Cross confirm the fact that 'life is worth living'. Nevertheless, there are no discounts. The gift is eternal and the price is total...total giving of one's self. This is just as Jesus gave Himself totally for us. We are also reminded as Lent begins to *Repent, and believe the Gospel* ...'believe' meaning to live, and 'live' meaning to 'be Christ'. Thus we are invited and challenged to be transformed into the image of Christ that we were created to be.

There are no shortcuts, or 'reasonable facsimiles' accepted. It is a total giving of ourselves and being given to Christ, *that we may be one with Him as He is with the Father, that we may be one* (John 17: 21) in them. What a mystery! What a gift! What LOVE! God's gift of love is total, unconditional and forever. What is our response to His Love?

Lent is an ongoing reminder of God's offer of Himself. We are invited to receive and accept this love and to make it present daily in our world through justice, truth, generosity and forgiveness. Only the foolish or the unbeliever could pass up such an opportunity. Lent is a time for us to re-evaluate and renew our lives: in relationship to God, to ourselves, and to each other, even to the stranger who, created by God just as we are, is our sister and brother. We can never accomplish this if our lives are rooted in the idolatry of senseless materialism that enslaves us spiritually, and then affects our lives and relationships.

Lent is a time for us to rise from our spiritual lethargy. We are called to honestly review our lives in the light of God's word and our Christian calling. We are expected to open our hearts to God's transforming grace through an active acceptance of the challenges His word and the Church offer. We must be consciously and actively aware and responsive to those around us, especially those whose lives may be burdened in any way, spiritually or materially. We should never forget that often, through our own participation in an exaggerated self-centered and self-gratifying materialism, we can forget and/or be indifferent to those with whom we share life's journey, whether we know them in this life or will never meet them until the next.

Jesus' response to Satan's seductions in the desert powerfully reminds us of the essential elements needed for a fruitful Lenten Season:

- *Not on bread alone does one live ... but on every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4).
- *You shall worship the Lord, your God, and Him alone shall you serve* (Luke 4: 8).
- *You shall not put the Lord your God to the test* (Matthew 4: 7).

Jesus responds simply and succinctly to our false 'need' for unbridled pleasure, limitless power, and 'suffocating' possessions. The desert 'challenges' Jesus confronted under Satan's instigation offer us the certitude of conquering our own challenges if we, as He, serve the Lord, our God, and Him alone.

Ash Wednesday offers us the opportunity to confront our hurdles and conquer them in Christ. We begin the season of Lent receiving the ashes with humble acknowledgment of our human frailty. Palm Sunday introduces us to the Great Holy Week that shows how fickle our relationship with Jesus can be (Hosanna!/Crucify Him!). Good Friday places us before the Cross-road when we, as Jesus, are asked to die, He for us, we to our egos. Walking that road with Jesus leads us to Easter Sunday. It is then that the transforming eruption of the Father's love through His Spirit breaks the shackles of our human nature affected by sin, rolls back the barriers that blind our eyes to truth and beauty, lifts us up, and renews us into a new way of living the Baptismal gift of our adoption as children of God.

During Lent we may recite extra prayers, drop extra money into the Sunday collection, or maybe give up (sacrifice?) something we are in the habit of doing or eating. These are all commendable actions/practices and wonderful opportunities we offer ourselves to celebrate this holy season. But! How often are the extra prayers just words we say rather than heartfelt expressions we pray? Do they reflect and strengthen our relationship with God? How often is the extra we may place either in the Sunday collection or give as a handout to the needy, no more than fulfilling what we should do to support the Church, or our way of "buying" an embarrassing or annoying trouble away, rather than saying a kind word to someone truly suffering a real need? How often are our physical sacrifices (no meat, no ice cream, no candy, no smoking, and the like) either acts we should do for our own health's sake, thus are expected always, not just at Lent, or an easy way not to focus on the purpose of Lenten sacrifices, and that is to rid ourselves of what distances us from God?

In several letters addressed to his spiritual daughter, Anna Rodote, Padre Pio writes: *Let our entire lives, our every action and all our aspirations be completely directed towards making reparation for the offences which (we and) our ungrateful brothers and sisters continually commit against Him.* (8 March 1915) *In the course of life, mortifications will not be lacking for us. Let us love them; let us embrace them with a cheerful soul, and let us always bless the good God in everything.* (15 March 1915) *It is true that the spirit is ready to do the will of God whereas the flesh is weak ... In His fully accepted agony in the Garden, ... if this repugnance was overcome, it was due to His prayer ... The humanity of Jesus also felt human nature's repugnance for suffering* (10 June 1915)

In Lent we strengthen our relationship with God through a deeper spirit of prayer that goes beyond just the words we multiply. We are offered the opportunity to work at ridding ourselves of whatever may lead us away from God's will. This type of sacrifice is meaningful before God and more beneficial to the person who accepts it. Lent is an everyday experience through God's word and our personal reflection of it. We are called to be actively and prayerfully concerned about our lives lived in the grace of God, and also the spiritual and material good of those around us.

This Holy Season will be nothing more than an external show of traditional prayers or practices unless we have the correct spirit underlying each one. Unless we seriously enter this holy season and allow our Lenten practices to affect our lives and effect a transformation in our life, they can be an easy cop out for not doing what really matters that could truly transform the inner person, our hearts, and souls. In his many letters to his spiritual children Padre Pio often indicates the way we are called to live our relationship with God as His children in Jesus. Speaking to Anna Rodote in the letters we quoted above, as well as in the many letters to his other spiritual children, Padre Pio also speaks to us at the beginning of our Lenten 'Spiritual Exercises'.

Padre Pio speaks of:

- *Reparation* that recognizes evil committed against the love of God and the need to compensate (with, in, and through the spirit of Jesus) in ourselves *what is lacking still in the sufferings of Christ* (Colossians 1: 24). This by no means indicates that the sacrifice of Jesus was deficient. What it means is that we must continue to be the Mystical Body of Christ as His Church in the world and continue to expiate in Him and through His grace working within us, by the offering we make of ourselves for our own spiritual good and that of others.

- *Mortification* by 'dying' to the self-centeredness of our lives and also to the legitimate moments and elements of our lives. We strive to willingly keep the things we possess from possessing us, or the legitimate experiences of life from controlling us, or the unlawful desires from overcoming us, and so on. 'Giving up' something has little or no value in itself. The value of the act is determined by the reason for which we do or not do it. Even insignificant matters can have eternal value.

- *Resignation to God's Will* in all things. Resignation is not a stoic acceptance of what we cannot do anything about. Fruitful spiritual resignation consists in seeing all things from the perspective of grace and God's Will. We accept with unconditional trust all that God, indirectly through the circumstances of our lives or directly as an act of His Will, asks us to experience. We accept as He will, when He wills, how He wills, because He wills it.

On Ash Wednesday we will receive the ashes that signal the beginning of our forty-day journey to Easter. Many opportunities will be offered us to re-evaluate, renew, and rekindle that Spirit of the Lord who has anointed us in Baptism to be a living image of Christ to each other and an Apostle of the Resurrection.

As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio, let us prepare well for Lent that begins this month on February 18th. Value the opportunities offered by the Church, the Parish, or your own personal practices. Remember it is not the amount of things or how demanding or difficult they may be that matters. What matters is that Lent be a time of spiritual renewal and grace-filled growth in our love for God and one another as we see ourselves loved by God. Love God back for loving you, and you will see how all things come together. God loved us to death on Calvary. Love God with your life, and recognize God in all whom you encounter.

May God bless you; Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and may Padre Pio bless each one 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

Happy Lent in God's Grace