

# 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](http://pppg.org) email: [pppgusa@gmail.com](mailto:pppgusa@gmail.com)

Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

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The Lord give you His peace!

The Franciscan Family worldwide has been celebrating the Jubilees of five significant events on the eight hundredth anniversary of each one. The celebrations recall: Approval of the Franciscan Rule of 1223, Christmas Creche at Greccio (1223), Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi (1224), Canticle of the Creatures (1225), and finally the Paschal Mystery of St. Francis of Assisi (1226). These events in the life of St. Francis come at the very end of his life's journey. The last of these celebrates the transition of St. Francis of Assisi from time into eternity – Francis' Easter of New Life to Glory in the Lord.

Early in his conversion, St. Francis desired to conform himself to Jesus in all things and in all the ways available by God's Will to a human being. History, Church, and public acclaim through these eight centuries have made it apparent that God heard and granted his prayer. The prayer of St. Francis was not that he be seen as Jesus the Christ, but that his life be so conformed to Jesus that he would not contradict in any way the image of Christ he, and all baptized Christians, are expected to make visible in their lives. Of course, St. Francis always took things as far as one could go. It was not an attitude of spiritual arrogance. It was a spirit of childlike love for Jesus so much that he desired to emulate and imitate Jesus, even to the point of feeling what Jesus must have felt. Love always desires to be the complement and fulfillment of the beloved so that the one who loves can know that for and in the other he/she is totally fulfilled.

**St. Francis prayed: *My Lord Jesus Christ, I beg you to grant me two graces before my death: first, that for the rest of my life I may experience in my soul and in my body, as much as possible, the same pain that you suffered, O sweet Jesus, during the time of your most cruel Passion; and second, that I may feel in my heart, as much as possible, the same love which inflamed you, the Son of God, and led you to suffer your passion gladly for us sinners.***

"Street corner" spirituality reminds us that the greater the message the simpler it can be conveyed. God's Word is simple and direct: *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart* (Hebrews 4: 12). Jesus is the Word-Made-Flesh. His words were simple, direct, and penetrating. Jesus, the Word-Made-Flesh, was the word one needed to hear and the presence that healed the spirit and the body of those who followed Him in faith.

St. Francis prayer, as that of Jesus, was simple, direct, and from heart-to-Heart. How prone to exaggeration are we in our prayers! We multiply words rather offer a heart overflowing with love and abandonment to the One Who never disappoints those who approach Him with trusting love. Our words should be simple and direct from our heart to the Heart of God. Grace builds on nature. The Breath of God that filled our bodies and instilled our souls with the divine life of grace, reminds us through His inspired Word that: *The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being* (Genesis 2: 7).

Pardon the exaggeration and theologically inappropriate terminology, but we are “dust divinized by grace” by the life-giving breath of God. We were created to be the image and likeness of our Creator. Grace “conforms” us to Jesus and challenges others to see Jesus, God-Made-Man, through us. Let’s strive to make that conformity always fresh and true!

Thus, St. Francis’s prayer is neither prideful nor presumptuous. He is a man in love with God, Who is Love. The Word Incarnate makes the Eternal One visible to those who recognize the Hidden Presence. Then it is that the conformity sought because of a lifetime quest through prayer, sacrifice, and disarmament of heart toward all people, becomes a reality.

Why is this so? Simply stated, it is because:

- Prayer is a relationship with God that leads us to desire what God desires. Prompted by the Holy Spirit we pray to seek and desire only what God wills. God is alive and well and urges us to live in His Presence – Faith.
- Sacrifice is the decision and actions necessary to eliminate what is bad, what is superfluous, and even to control what is legitimate in our life. Sacrifice helps us to be careful that our possessions, whatever they may be spiritual or temporal, do not possess us and thus keep us from recognizing God Who is with us. God provides for all we need and not necessarily for all we want - Hope
- Almsgiving recognizes brother/sister in the other who suffers any need. The disarmament of the heart sees and approaches others with a transparency of friendship and a sincere fraternal acceptance. All people are God’s creation. Thus, in each one, especially those who suffer in any way, we see the face of God calling out. And we respond - Love

A faithful Franciscan to the core, our beloved Padre Pio was a person immersed in the Paschal Mystery. He was a true son of St. Francis of Assisi whose spirit of conformity to Jesus through Mary was the core of his life. The Stigmata of Christ that Padre Pio bore and suffered for fifty years were an external sign of his inner person. He lived Jesus. The Passion-Death-Resurrection of Christ, the Paschal Mystery, was a reality he experienced every day. His celebration of the Eucharist verified for those who assisted at one of the Masses celebrated by Padre Pio how true the following words in a letter addressed to Padre Benedetto are:

*The heavenly Father has not ceased to allow me to share in the sufferings of the Only-Begotten Son, even physically. These pains are so acute as to be absolutely indescribable and inconceivable. I don’t know whether it is a lack of fortitude and a fault that I unwittingly cry like*

*a child when I am placed at this state. It is a very great trial for me not to know whether what I do is pleasing to God or an offence against him. I have received many assurances in this regard, but what do you expect when one has no eyes to see? Moreover, the devil always has to step in to ruin everything. He insinuates that these assurances do not extend to all my actions much less all the time...Don't abandon me, Father; if you see that I am on the wrong road...I still hope that the Lord will show me mercy by putting me back on the right road which leads to him. (6 March 1917)*

These words, as so often articulated in one form or another by Padre Pio, give us only an inkling of a suffering soul asked to enter the Paschal Mystery of Jesus and become one with the Lord. Celebration of the liturgy of the Eucharist was an integral part of Padre Pio's life. Better to say: It was his life! The excruciating spiritual pains and confusion he experienced affected his physical state as well. The body and the soul together, conformed to Christ, made the experience overwhelming for him. Yet, through all this and because of this he was able to affect the lives of others with the graces of the gift. When St. Francis of Assisi desired to live a more contemplative life with God because of all the graces he knew God bestowed on him, both St. Clare and St. Sylvester told St. Francis that God called him to live not for himself alone, but to help be aware of the Presence of God in their lives and to live in God's love.

Grace builds on nature. How often is this repeated? Yet the truth is that the more we enter an experience, whatever it might be, the more our physical self "feels" the effects on our heart and soul. The Paschal Mystery, before being the glorious experience of new life in the Resurrected Jesus, goes through the torment and agony of His Passion and Death. As it was for Padre Pio, his spiritual son in the twentieth century, so was it for our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth. The pain of transformation is not a punishment but a sign. It is a sign that the old is being transformed into the new. When the new is to be conformed to Jesus, then, as St. Francis said when confronted with his infirmities and spiritual struggles: *Such is the good that awaits me, that all pain for me is a delight.*

Lent, our spiritual journey with Jesus to Jerusalem-Golgotha-Empty Tomb, is now fully upon us. On Ash Wednesday we were reminded of our origins: God Creator, dust of the earth, breath of God without which there could be no life. The gift of God's life in grace is the essential element that urges our every thought, word, and action, to be completed in, with, and for God. The habit of prayer means that our lives and souls are focused on our ultimate destiny, life with the Father-Son-Holy Spirit. This 40-day period before Easter is the time when Christians traditionally prepare through simplicity, reflection, and restraint for the Resurrection of Christ three days after his death on the Cross.

Jesus' Resurrection is the assurance of Faith, stability in Hope, of an Eternal Love that seeks only to be one with those who come from Him. May this most holy and joyful (yes, "joyful") season of the Church Year, fill us all with anticipation. The Gospels read at Mass, reflections heard or read, prayers and practices of Lent are our companions who aide us in living a more intense experience these forty days.

The life and words of Padre Pio assist us to understand the value of the Cross. His response, like that of Mary's to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation, was "Yes". Her "yes" to the impossible, reminds us of the "yes" we are asked to say when we enter the cross-road of our Journey Into God. The "cross-road" is a moment in a journey when each must decide what direction they will take. The choice determines more often than not the ultimate destiny to which one is headed.

Choose Wisely! The choices are rather obvious:

- Remaining at the bottom of the Cross we continue with confused crowds who see only the wood, blood, and human anger, confusion, discouragement, and so on;
- Starting the climb to the horizontal beam, many tire and so go to the right or left, it doesn't really matter. They tire of the climb and refuse to go beyond the here and now. They opt for the "status quo" and thus deprive themselves of real meaning and growth;
- Those who struggle continuing the climb up to the face of Christ and beyond themselves are determined, decisive, convinced of mind and heart, with a faith in God and oneself working together. Their gaze looks ever upward to the One Who calls us to Himself.

We find strength and courage to look up as we remember the words of our Mother St. Clare of Assisi, in a letter to St. Agnes of Prague: *Looking at the Face of Christ Crucified is to see one's own face.* The struggle for the top of the Cross is to see Jesus and me together. *If God is for us, who can be against us?* (Romans 8: 41). Together with Christ on the Cross then: *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.* (Glatians 2: 20)

May God in His goodness bless and strengthen us all for a happy and holy Lent. May our Mother Mary and good St. Joseph – especially during the month dedicated to his patronage - guide, guard, and protect us on the journey. And may our beloved Padre Pio encourage us with his example and prayers to strive ever more to be the saints we were created to be. You and your loved ones will be especially remembered in my prayers and Masses during this holy season as I do every day. But, in this reminder I pray that you pray for me.

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator

**Happy Lent**