

# Padre Pio Prayer Groups

National Office

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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

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The Lord give you His peace!

The Franciscan Family celebrated on September 17th the 8th centenary of the reception of the Sacred Stigmata of the Wounds of the Passion of Jesus by our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi. What happened to him then was an extraordinary moment not only in the life of St. Francis but also for the entire Church. This awesome event of such an intense experience of conformity to the person of Jesus Christ was the first such occurrence recorded in the history of the Church. It was also the first time such an unprecedented event was recognized as such by the secular authorities as well. This sign of God's approval for all St. Francis did in obedience to the God's call, happened only two years before St. Francis died. Quite ill and infirm, what does our Seraphic Father do when he realizes what has happened to him? He asks to be brought to the Portiuncula, birthplace of the Order. While there, rather than focus on his obviously failing health, he begins to compose a hymn of wonder and praise at the gift of God's Creation. As the time passed and approaching death was not far away, he asked the friars to add a stanza to his already magnificent Canticle of Brother Sun. He desired to praise God for the last moment in time that accompanies every human being into the beginning of the timelessness of eternity. The poet in Francis personified Death as his "sister" (word for "death" is a feminine noun ['morte'] in the Italian language – who would come to gently accompany him on the last stage of his journey to God.

The brothers were saddened at the thought of his death. Francis, however, joyful that he had *done what was mine to do* (words of St. Francis to the friars), requested the brothers sing these words composed by him as the last stanza of the Canticle: *Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Bodily Death, from whom no-one living can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Blessed are they whom She finds doing Your Will. No second death can do them harm. Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks, and serve Him with great humility.* Even in his last days, not even death could change his boyish wonder, enthusiastic anticipation, and engaging personality. What has remained as one of the poetic literary examples of the Italian language in its beginning is still an object of study and reflection by many.

The reality of our mortality looms over many with a sense of foreboding, caution, and even fear and uncertainty of what to expect. Faith plays a powerful role at this time, but there is so often that "What if?" feeling *from whom no one can escape*. With faith as the strong and sure guide

of a person's life, mortality and the end of time introduce one to a new and everlasting beginning.

Everlasting beginning?! When the achievement of one's life is eternity with God, time ceases and Life begins forever with an unending freshness and excitement. There is no time in eternity. There is only God and the image and likeness of God that has achieved the purpose for its own creation. Now that person exists in the splendor of timelessness, Who is God! Thus the existence is always fresh, always new, always exciting, always magnificently fulfilling. What more can be said? To speak of eternity it must be lived. Once there, it is no longer necessary to question or understand.

We reflect upon the praise of "Sister Death" in November, the month dedicated to the Holy Souls in Purgatory. They are the "holy" souls. Though not yet in the fullness of eternal life, their entrance is assured. The end most definitely opens our hearts and minds to reflect on all that took place in the past, even to the beginning of our brief life. The last stanza of the Canticle St. Francis composed and had sung was an eager anticipation. There was not fear or dread of the encounter with the Creator of all. The Poverello lived the mystery of faith in abandonment to the Father's Will. The inner excitement of hope soon to be fulfilled enveloped him with gratitude and praise for all that had led him to this moment. What he had lived in faith, *believing what he did not see so that he could see what he believed* (cfr. John 20: 29) would soon become the revelation of which no one can ever imagine the magnificence and wonder. Concerned about others, even as he lay in his last weeks, St. Francis sang as part of the Canticle a warning to those who jeopardize the eternal joy offered all God's children by distancing themselves from God and fail to seek reconciliation.

His end was truly the beginning. It was the "springboard" that launched St. Francis into his beautiful poetic hymn of praise. Awareness of the depths of God's creating love, loving mercy and forgiveness, and faithfulness to the Covenant with His People redeemed in the Blood of Jesus must have been overwhelming. Respond in gratitude and love to God's work, and you cannot help but realize we are all called to collaborate with God *to restore all things in Christ* (Ephesians 1: 10). We are God's "backup plan" in keeping everything in order, lovingly protecting and caring for what/who we are, the high-point, but creature nonetheless, of God's creative love.

How we accept the end, will usually determine how we welcome – or not – the "new beginning". Remembrances of the early followers tell us of the last days, words and actions of St. Francis of Assisi and how he "celebrated" his swift approach to the "finish line" of life's journey. The Transitus (Death) of St. Francis from earth to eternity is the focus of the centenary of 2026. The coming months and throughout 2025 the poetic insights the "Troubadour of Christ" sang in the Canticle of Brother Sun. He praised the magnificence of God's Love expressed in myriads of tangible ways. How could St. Francis not sing, even in his physical sufferings, at the thought of leaving the mystery of faith to enter the immense reality of the eternal vision of God?

*Two years before his death, already very sick and suffering especially from his eyes, (St. Francis) was living in a cell made of mats near San Damiano. During his stay blessed Francis could not bear the light of the sun during the day or the light of the fire at night. He constantly remained in darkness in his cell. One night, as he was thinking of all the tribulations he was enduring, he felt sorry for himself and prayed interiorly: ' Lord help me in my infirmities so that I may have the strength to bear them patiently" (A voice spoke to him and said): be glad and joyful in the midst of your infirmities and tribulations; as of now, live in peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom". The next morning on rising, he said to his companions: I should be full of joy in my infirmities and tribulations, seek my consolations in the Lord, and give thanks to God the Father, to His Only Son Our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, for His glory, for my consolation, and the edification of my neighbor, I wish to compose a new "Praises of the Lord," for His creatures. He called these "Praises of the Lord" which opened with the words: "Most high all-powerful, and good Lord, the "Canticle of the Sun". He often intoned this canticle and had his companions take it up; in that way he forgot the intensity of his sufferings and pains by considering the glory of the Lord. He did this until the day of his death. (Legend of Perugia, 42-43).*

St. Francis begins the Canticle praising God through God's works of Creation. Praising *Sister Bodily Death from whom no one can escape*, was the ultimate praise a child of God offers after recognizing the wonder of creation. Death is no longer the dreaded enemy that destroys everything. Death is the long-awaited sister/brother, an intimate member of the family, who accompanies one home. The accompaniment through his life took St. Francis through his history in time, into the awesome mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, to the eventual fulfillment in mystical union with God forever.

The Capuchin friars, noted as "friars of the people" have a true son of St. Francis in St. Pio of Pietrelcina. He dealt with human vulnerability his entire life. One of the persons of note is Raffaolina Cerase. Raffaolina was truly an image of a *suffering servant* (cfr. Isaiah 53). Our brother, Padre Pio, wrote extensively to her assisting her during the spiritual battles she had to bear. She was a strong faith-filled person to whom Padre Pio was appointed as her Cyrene to help her carry her cross. She journeyed to the end, understanding a bit at a time what the events of her life were all about. She will not survive her illness, and Padre Pio assists at a distance – San Giovanni Rotondo and Foggia. Her encounter with God forever was hidden in God's Will. The reality of its approach however, was a constant "friend" that had to be recognized and accepted for its immense spiritual value. Even saints must be encouraged and accompanied at this most solemn moment in one's life. *No one lives alone and no one dies alone* (Romans 14: 7-9). We are surrounded by God's love and myriads of God's holy ones, together with our own Guardian Angel, to lead us in the serenity of our hearts to the great encounter with I AM.

*By repeated blows of the efficacious chisel ... the divine Artist prepares the blocks of stone which are intended to form part of the divine edifice...Every soul intended for eternal glory can very well be considered a stone destined for the building up of the eternal edifice. The soul that is destined to reign with Jesus Christ in eternal glory, then, must be remodeled by the blows of*

*hammer and chisel. But what are these blows...by which the divine Artist prepares the stone, that is to say, the chosen soul? These strokes of the chisel are the shadows, fears, temptations, spiritual torments and agitation, with a dash of desolation and even physical pain. Thank the infinite mercy of the eternal Father, then, for treating your soul in this way, for it is destined to be saved. (Letter to Raffaolina Cerase, 19 May 1914).*

St. Teresa of Avila once jokingly said to God when the cart in which she was traveling overturned and she fell in a creek: *If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few.* Said in love and honesty, the words of this great saint, called “The Seraphic Mother”, remind us that select souls are called to a witness that most might not be able to accept. Companions on the journey, like Padre Pio for Raffaellina, do not “pray the problem away”, unless it is God’s will. They help others to see the *finger of God* (Luke 11: 20; Matthew 11: 28) and assist them to surrender in abandonment to the Holy Will that leads them.

What Padre Pio is talking about to Raffaolina in this letter refers to her own difficulties and particularly her terminal illness. No one really desires pain, hardship, sickness, and the like, for itself. Battling the difficulties, unresolved issues, physical pain, the certainty of death due to illness or just the fear of death so many experience, are spiritual struggles we must contend with and learn to understand, before we can deal with them and learn how to “surrender” not to the circumstance, but to God’s direct or most likely indirect will. No one desires to “lose” to anyone or anything. However, there are times when “surrendering” can actually help. Remember that God is with us, not against us. When difficult times come into our lives, we often plea, barter, promise, increase penances, prayers, and so on. Attempting to “get ourselves together”, we often follow the road most used rather than the one least followed but most effective and rewarding.

God is on our side. God is actually offering us all we need to keep our spiritual balance without losing sight of the goal. Assured of the end/beginning, the journey and all its beauties and difficulties begin to make sense. St. Paul reminds us so simply: *If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him over for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?* (Romans 8:31-32). God is for us. God waits patiently and quietly for us. He is there for us as we struggle through life’s storms. Surrendering to God does not mean giving up. Spiritual surrender is giving over, not giving up. It is our life-line to the One who is already the victor, and with whom we are called to share the victory.

We have *walked through the valley of darkness* (Psalm 23) many times. We may have fallen so deep that we feared never being able to rise up. We sought God through prayer. We may have read God’s Word to find where we were and where we were heading. We may have spent time with the Blessed Sacrament hoping for an inner voice to direct us. We may have prayed to Our Heavenly Mother or some Saint for a “miracle”, and still we felt overwhelmed, perhaps even abandoned. At times such as these, remember the words of St. Paul to the Colossians: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.* (Colossians 3:15-16)

The key to that phrase is in the word “let”. If I will freely “let” Christ take over and give Him my burdens and cares, Christ, who is my peace, will take up the situation for me. Surrendering to Christ produces oneness with Him and enables me to recognize that He is for me, not against me. There was a religious sister who, whenever she was in a difficult situation or would encounter another roadblock on her way, disappointment in her life, failure in an endeavor she had worked so long on, many negative results in health exams, and the like, her response, with a smile, was always “Jesus, take over!” And He did! She never expressed a sadness for herself from what we might consider negatives. Hers was a spirit of trust and gratitude. If only we could be that way!

When we *let go and let God*, our burdens are His and our cares are in His hands. He makes known what we need to know and guides us in the direction we need to go. God knows what is best and right for us, better than we know ourselves. He knows what it will take to accomplish His good and perfect will in our lives. Let go! Let God do what is best and right. The outcome will be beyond your best imagining.

The choice to surrender is an intentional one. It’s the deliberate act of releasing our lives, hearts, and circumstances to God and asking Him to take over all control. Often what we do however is to use the words of surrendering as a bargaining chip when seeking for God’s help. We suggest an outcome and then offer up a temporary version of agreement to God’s purpose. How often have we thought, “God, get me out of this situation and I will do (fill in the blank)”. But this isn’t surrender, and it certainly isn’t a way to experience the freedom of entering into God’s strength and love. It’s a halfhearted negotiation. Real surrender is allowing God to be God on his terms, not ours.

The most powerful picture of surrender is found in Jesus, hanging on the cross. Jesus hangs between heaven and earth, fixed by nails to the wood and crowned with thorns. His eyes are open as he says, *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit* (Luke 23:46). Jesus did not give up when he died on the cross. He gave himself over to the will of the Father. Living in surrender is a continual process. Learning to give our cares and concerns over to God is not a one-time decision that settles things once and for all. Every single day, we have to consciously decide to give the outcomes, choices, and people in our lives over to God.

May we never forget that the “yes” of Mary, the *highest honor of our race*, (cfr. Judith 13) was an acceptance of the impossible. Jesus is the declaration of who God is and what God wants us to know about Him and His great love for us. He is the God of surprises. The Eucharist is His Divine Presence that waits for us so He can strengthen our relationship with Him at Mass, at Adoration, and also at our daily tasks when we remember the Lord who consumes us as we consume Him.

Sister Death of the Canticle reminds us that we must live a constant life of reflection, repentance, renewal. The best way to experience peace and serenity in the various storms of life is to surrender our expectations. Take a second look at them. Willingly lay them down before the Lord. Make it a deliberate act of surrender. The end truly helps us see the beauty

and value of all that has gone before us. Be restored and reformed by the grace of the sacraments, especially Reconciliation and Eucharist. Then we will understand how the end brings us to the beginning that helps us see the past in truth and all its true beauty, and the future in the fullness of God and God's Provident Love. With God always expect a ride you will never forget, one that will give you more than you could ever have hoped for or imagined.

We end our reflection together, with the reminder to not forget the Holy Souls in Purgatory during this month of November especially dedicated to them. Let us remember them every day of our lives. Remember, *they were where we are; we will be* (through the mercy of God) *where they are*. They live in the certainty of glory because they were willing to let go and let God take over. Their end was truly their hope-filled - (hope-filled because they are still not in life's fullness but are assured of it) - beginning in God's Eternal Love.

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

Peace and Blessings

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

National Coordinator

**Happy Thanksgiving in God's continued abundant blessings  
To All the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio's Prayer Groups  
And to all who are devoted to our beloved St. Pio of Pietrelcina  
who happen to read these monthly reflections**