

# 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

This month, the Franciscan Family celebrates the eighth centenary of St. Francis of Assisi receiving the Stigmata of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a crowning moment for Francis' desire to conform himself to Christ. St Francis prayed: *O Lord Jesus Christ, before I die I ask you for two graces; first, that in my lifetime I may feel, as far as possible, both in my soul and body, that pain which you, sweet Lord, endured in the hour of your most bitter Passion; second, that I may feel in my heart as far as possible that excess of love which moved you, O Son of God, to suffer so cruel a Passion for us sinners.* His prayer was answered in a manner he could never have imagined.

We are told St. Francis of Assisi is the first person recorded to have received the Stigmata. These visible signs of the Passion of Jesus imprinted on the body of St. Francis rekindled the hearts of the faithful that had begun to grow cold to the faith (cfr. Opening Prayer for the Mass of the Stigmata of St. Francis). A few years after he received this gift on Mount La Verna Francis rendered his soul to God. He bore these signs of the tremendous love God had for him and the Gospel Life he accepted to initiate in response to the mission entrusted to him by the Cross of San Damiano. The call was not for him alone. His response was available to the working of the Holy Spirit. He was called to live the Gospel Life of Jesus and His apostles. In other words: *To Live Jesus.*

The Cross of Christ Jesus was ever-present in the heart, mind, soul, of St. Francis. Ultimately, conformity to the life of Jesus reached its apex in Francis' body for all to see. For St. Francis, the Stigmata was the "seal of approval" of God for his response to God's call. There are and have been other holy men and women who have experienced a sharing in the Passion of Christ in varied ways. Our own beloved Padre Pio of Pietrelcina received the challenging "gift" of the visible stigmata as well. God prepared Padre Pio over a period of several years in his early youth as a friar. On September 20, 1918, while praying in choir of the little friary-church in San Giovanni Rotondo, Padre Pio received the visible Stigmata. He bore these signs of Christ's Passion imprinted on his body for fifty years. Padre Pio received the ministry as did our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi to be a living image of Christ crucified in a world again grown cold to the brotherhood God intended for all creation to live.

People who heard of Padre Pio and those who were blessed to see and even confess or speak with him were often changed forever. Padre Pio was a living example that God is alive and well. God waits for us to recognize his presence and love for all His children redeemed in the Blood of Jesus

A number of years before being imprinted visibly with the Stigmata, Padre Pio wrote to Fr. Benedetto, his spiritual director at the time: *Yesterday evening something happened to me which I can neither explain nor understand. In the center of the palms of my hands a red patch appeared, about the size of a cent and accompanied by acute pain. I also feel some pain in the soles of my feet. This phenomenon has been repeated several times for almost a year now.* (8 September 1911)

He was embarrassed to speak of these markings and sensations. He said as much to Padre Agostino in a letter dated August 26, 1912, repeating part of what he had written one year before to Padre Benedetto: *Yesterday evening something happened to me. In the center of the palms of my hands a red patch appeared, about the size of a cent and accompanied by acute pain. I also feel some pain in the soles of my feet. This phenomenon has been repeated several times for almost a year now. I was overcome by abominable shame. When I am close to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament my heart throbs so violently that it seems at times it must burst out of my chest.* The experience of the marks and the invisible wounds with the pain continued until 1918. His personal confusion and correspondence regarding these phenomena became a regular concern for him in his letters to his spiritual director.

Padre Pio was being prepared for his “global” ministry. The hearts and lives of millions over the years testify, through their changed lives, to the power of God’s love expressed in the availability of Padre Pio to the will of God. As the world calculates things, Padre Pio was an obscure man living in a poor and seemingly forsaken area of southern Italy. Poor, yes, but never forsaken! He was undoubtedly an image of a divine presence enveloping him with a humble strength capable of confusing and disturbing the proud and mighty, and of encouraging and raising up the humble and powerless of society.

When Padre Pio eventually received the Stigmata visibly on his body he wanted to hide. God had other intentions. What God imprinted on the body of Padre Pio so unmistakably and indelibly was given for others and not just for him. In a short time this obscure, sickly friar, stationed in an off-the-beaten-path friary, forgotten in a poor town in the mountain area of the Gargano, became a “world celebrity”. Our American soldiers, on their way home at the end of the Second World War on the European Front, were the ones who made Padre Pio more extensively known in the USA.

No one escaped his presence, attraction, and penetrating gaze. He was a humble prayerful friar whose affability was recognizable but whose depth of intimacy with God was unequivocal. Even those who might fear his penetrating glance into their hearts and souls were still pulled into his loving presence if their desires were sincere and repentant, otherwise, beware, there were no half measures. Padre Pio could be extremely blunt, to say the least.

Again the words of Padre Pio to Padre Benedetto are so indicative of what he was feeling: *What can I tell you? My God! What embarrassment and humiliation I suffer in being obliged to explain what you have done to this wretched creature! On the morning of the 20th of last month, in the choir, after I had celebrated Mass absolute silence surrounded and invaded me. I was suddenly filled with great peace and abandonment. All this happened in a flash. I saw before me a mysterious person. His hands and feet and side were dripping blood. This sight terrified me and what I felt at that moment is indescribable. I thought I should die and really should have died if the Lord had not intervened and strengthened my heart which was about to burst out of my chest. The vision disappeared and I became aware that my hands, feet and side were dripping*

*blood. Imagine the agony I experienced and continue to experience almost every day. The heart wound bleeds continually. I will raise my voice and will not stop imploring him (Jesus) until in his mercy he takes away, not the wound or the pain, which is impossible since I wish to be inebriated with pain, but these outward signs which cause me such embarrassment and unbearable humiliation.* (Letter of Padre Pio to Padre Benedetto, 22 October 1918) *Ah, my dear Father, what am I to do? I feel that I am really about to die, for I no longer have strength to go on living. My crucifixion still continues. My agony began some time ago and is becoming more and more heartrending. For how much longer is my "consummatum est" ("It is finished") to be deferred. I'll always pronounce my "fiat" (Let it be) of resignation.* (Letter of Padre Pio to Padre Benedetto, 13 November 1918)

Like the great priest-prophet of the Old Testament, Ezekiel, Padre Pio was prophet to a lethargic world suffering from spiritual dryness. Ezekiel's prophetic words speak of numberless, dry, lifeless, disjointed bones, lying on a vast field, (see Ezekiel 37: 1-14). Ezekiel's prophecy can be compared to Padre Pio's time - in some way even to our own. The prophet proclaims the Word of God to a world where war and its after-effects on society, economic difficulties, contagious illnesses, social restlessness, scandals among consecrated persons in the service of the Church, immorality and amorality take their toll on the spiritual life of God's people. Even those of deep faith feel, as they felt in Padre Pio's day, a dryness and spiritual fatigue. People look for understanding and direction. They seek someone who will accompany them and nourish them with God's Word and healing grace.

The wounds of Jesus came alive in the hearts of those who assisted at Padre Pio's Mass. The healing words of absolution spoken to them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation offered the effects of the Blood of Christ's wounds that washed away their sins and restored them to God's grace. The Stigmata he bore were a visible sign to all who saw those gloved hands. They spoke of a presence that was reassuring, encouraging, life-giving. Isaiah spoke of the wounds of Christ centuries before Christ's Passion and Death - *Through His wounds we are healed* (Isaiah 53: 4-5). Padre Pio accepted to let those wounds come alive once again in his own body. The living image of the Crucified Christ for half a century challenged those who saw and those who merely heard about him to *gaze upon the Lord* in their hearts and *consider, contemplate, imitate the Christ* made visible in a mere human (cfr. Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Prague). How can anyone remain unaffected by the "obvious" image before them? The decisions may vary but a response is made when the "fact" of the wounds faces one so emphatically, as in the unmistakable visible wounds of Padre Pio.

*Our Seraphic Father understood well that without love for the cross, one cannot make much progress in the ways of Christian perfection. He would exclaim: 'The good that awaits me is so great that all suffering is my delight'. Jesus invites us to climb Calvary with him, so let us not refuse. Ascending the painful mount with Jesus will be a joy for us. Mortification(s) will not be lacking either. Let us love them; let us embrace them with a cheerful soul, and let us always bless the good God in everything.* (letter to Annita Rodote, 15 March 1915). These words were written when as yet Padre Pio had not received the visible Stigmata. We can see how his whole life was centered on surrendering in all things to the Father's Will.

The Stigmata of Padre Pio as those of our our Seraphic Father calls us to action. The "action" however must begin with each one of us first, then reach out to others. Ultimately we reach a point where everything is in perspective and even the world is put under our feet. The world is,

as one great orator called it, *The Theater of Redemption*, rather than a stumbling-block of distractions and seductions that destroy fervor and lead to tepidity, indifference, and finally separation from all that is good and all that is God. The Stigmata help us to reflect upon a simple and powerful way to strengthen and deepen our spiritual lives.

1) **Imitate Love** - Ask God for the ability to surrender totally in trust to God's will. Love is total surrender to the One Who surrenders Himself for us on the Cross and to us in the Eucharist.

2) **Meditate on the Sufferings and Love of Jesus** - Keep the image of the Passion-Death of Jesus alive in your heart. We Franciscans are noted for our affective prayer. It touches the heart and makes the reality of what we consider more vivid and impressive. Mother Clare says to us as she wrote to St Agnes of Prague: *Gaze upon the Lord. Consider, contemplate, imitate*. Our meditation should lead to our imitation, as we seek to be conformed to Christ.

3) **Love the Cross** - Do not fear the image of suffering and death. The Cross without Christ is a lie. With Christ, the Cross becomes not a sign of death but Life, not a sign of hatred but Love. Keep the image always alive in your heart and your life, especially in the midst of the heavy burdens that might come your way.

4) **Grow in Christian Perfection** - The spiritual life is not static. Once Christ and the Cross become 'real' and present to the heart, we must proceed forward by 'living Jesus' and His Gospel more intensely always.

5) **Climb Calvary** - Once we grow in our Christian life, we cannot help but desire to 'climb Calvary' to be one with the mystery of our redemption.

6) **Embrace with Cheerful Soul Everything** - Having embraced the Cross and stood with Jesus, all else becomes a gift we can easily embrace with gratitude, trust, and cheerfulness. Yes, 'cheerfulness'. To embrace one thing is not to embrace something else. *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Corinthians 9: 7). When we embrace cheerfully what God permits, we let go of our false securities and comfort zones, and just trust.

7) **Be Faithful** - Nothing can be taken for granted. We must be ever on the watch to remain faithful. Never become complacent thinking that everything happens now automatically. The Spirit's work is kept alive by faith-filled lives that never slacken, that renew the 'process' everyday with greater commitment and intensity.

8) **Place the World Under Your Feet** - Like the famous image of St. Francis embracing the Crucified with the world at his feet, now we are able to use the world as the *Theater of Redemption* it is. We make use of all creation as the gifts that can lead us to the fullness of life, rather than allow the world to control, condition, and ultimately condemn us.

The wounds of Padre Pio challenge us to remember and live the words *Per Crucem ad Lucem - Through the Cross to the Light* (Pope St. Paul VI). The wounds of the Passion speak of a world that refused and rejected the Incarnate God, Who took on human nature that humanity might rise above what was leading it astray. Treachery, betrayal, capture, torture, and death were the 'thanks' offered all the blessings bestowed and received. The wounds we celebrate this month both in Padre Pio and Our Seraphic Father call us to be spiritually impressed with the same 'signs' and respond to the gift as they did.

- The nails in the hands remind us to use our hands to bless and not offend, to give not seek to receive, to embrace rather than push away, to raise up rather than put down, help rather than hinder.
  - The nails in the feet remind us of the Scriptural phrase: *blessed are the feet of the bearer of peace* (Isaiah 52: 7). They lead us to approach all as sisters and brothers, move towards those in need rather than remain stationary in our own comfort and security, take the first step and seek out those estranged rather than wait for the other to take the first step.
  - The heart pierced reminds us that we must disarm our hearts to one another and allow all to enter our loving embrace that they too, as we, may discover the limitless and unconditional love of God through us. In the words of Pope St. John Paul II, *Open the Doors* (of your heart) *to Christ* (to everyone). A heart wounded by its own vulnerability can empathize, sympathize, love *The Other* hidden in those we encounter.
- May God bless you; my Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and may our beloved Padre Pio of Pietrelcina look upon each one of us, their Spiritual Children, with loving care.

Happy Feast Day of the Stigmata to all!  
(St. Francis-September 17th and Padre Pio-September 20th)

Peace and Blessings  
Fr. Francis A. Sariago, OFM Cap  
National Coordinator