

**April 2023****VII****A large number of witnesses: from San Francesco to San Pio****From the Gospel according to Luke (10,17-24)**

*The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."*

*At that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to make him known."*

*Then he turned to the disciples he said to them privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."*

In Luke's story we can perceive all the euphoria of a Christian community that comes to realise how the proclamation of the Gospel is spreading around, while daily touching first hand the power of the Word of God in defeating evil: "I saw satan fall from heaven like lightning". Believers know how to interpret such signs, without thinking they are due to their good conduct, nor expecting ready-made answers. They do not rejoice over a word or power that is not of their own, but intuitively know they are being made part of the coming of the Kingdom: "rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven."

The following prayer of Jesus is full of exultation and joy and it shows exactly this, what being one of Christ's true disciples means. It is all about becoming like one of the little ones. We want to choose to be "little" in all aspects concerning our life, the gifts, the word and the events of our spiritual life. Everything gives us an opportunity to let God's work shine through us fully. Humbling ourselves like a little child requires a strong and wise choice from us and this is equally true for people on all levels of the Ecclesiastical structure.

Let us consider our Groups, and see how this applies to our lives (although this is true for everything, not only our groups). It often happens that rather than choosing to be one of the little ones, we become mean and are eager to have more power, to be in charge, to defend our point of view, and so on. Padre Pio followed the model of his founder St. Francis of Assisi in feeling and placing himself among "the little ones of the Gospel". To San Francesco and San Pio we can add the figure of a 16th century lay saint: San Girolamo Emiliani. They were all little ones for the Gospel, all last among the last ones, and in so doing they endeavoured to reform the Church and make the Kingdom of God triumph on earth.

**From a letter from Padre Pio to Graziella Pannullo**

*I hope that the day is not far when you will enjoy a taste of the joy of paradise, going to Assisi. This town is totally Franciscan as everything in it speaks of the great love and infinite charity of our holy Father St. Francis. Yes, I hope that one day, in the not too distant future, you will be able to prostrate there, in the small church called the Porziuncola (located within the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels). The Porziuncola may have been blackened by the passing of time, having survived seven centuries of religious devotion, its walls smoothed by the kisses of the penitents. Mrs. Henrion is one of the many visitors to the chapel and she tells of the many devout kisses and touches that have changed the initially rough walls into smooth marble and alabaster-looking ones. Oh how the heart of the pilgrim who pauses there to pray fervently beats at the remembrance! Every dark brick tells the story of thousands and thousands of souls, who, in confident abandonment, rested their heads there in the anguish of life.*

*Pilgrims come to kneel there instinctively and in divine silence feel some sort of relief, like a most sweet blessing, and infinite and sweet prayers resound around them, coming from all centuries, still ardent with the love of the saints, the holocausts of pure victims, and the tears of redemption. Oh! how great, how sweet the divine dogma of the Communion of Saints in the Church of Jesus is! This truly is the door to eternal life, as is written on the wall of the little church of the Porziuncola.*

**Last among the last ones**

All those who met Padre Pio agreed that he was as sensitive as a little child. Father Carmelo would say that once – as was the custom at the time on the eve of one's name day – two friars ate on their knees in the refectory. Padre Pio later said to him: «If you have to let me witness these things, please excuse me from coming down to eat in the refectory». The superior explained to him: «But they are our customs». And Padre Pio: "You're right, but when I see friars suffer, my stomach closes up".

Being so sensitive, he never wondered about things. The last one was the last one, but he was not to be kept last, rather his brothers were there to help him, to lift him up in some way. Such behaviour reminds us of the gestures and words of two great people who share the same name as him: Saint Francis and Pope Francis. We must not forget that before becoming a friar Padre Pio's name was Francesco and he followed in the footsteps of its founder by looking into the history of every man, finding in each one the humiliation and loneliness of Christ himself.

The young Francesco, who later became fr. Pio, frequently meditated on the humiliation and sufferings of Jesus. He was his friend, and would often "take up his defense", and let himself be involved to the point that his feeling became compassion, that is, a desire to suffer for him and with him. Looking at Jesus on the cross drove him to tears, to the point that his companions would sometimes make fun of him. When he was praying on his knees, they would sometimes put a handkerchief on the ground, so as to collect those copious tears.

With a special delicacy, the Lord was involving him in something more intimate and profound, in a journey of assimilation that would gradually lead him to suffer together with Jesus. The great test occurred when the young friar was called to put on the clothes of the latter.



In fact, as the date of his priestly ordination approached, he began to feel unwell, he frequently had high temperature, as well as pains and lung problems. On more than one occasion his superiors called his father to take him back to his own village, to let him breathe some native air, as they said at the time. We find him again in Pietrelcina, at the beginning of 1910, when the provincial minister, Father Benedetto da San Marco in Lamis, wrote to him to authorize him to stay as long as his country needed: «Dear Fra Pio, if you experience a notable improvement in your health while breathing your native air, then you should continue to stay there, praying the good Lord to at least make you fit to study a little and do what is necessary for promotion to priesthood, according to the latest prescriptions" .

From that moment on, that friar who had been full of dreams and hopes became an isolated person, relegated to his country by a disease on which he was fully suspected: some thought he was tubercular, others that he was looking for an excuse not to return to the convent. In some letters he confided his discouragement, he followed Jesus, he became last like him. In the words of an ecstasy lived in Venafrò, we capture all of his discomfort: «San Francesco, you might as well throw me out of your order».

An overview of Padre Pio's life helps us to understand that deep down, this experience prepared him to be and feel as the last and least of them, isolated and not understood throughout his life. This was the participation in the life of Jesus, but this was also the style that the Lord gave to his life: always being on the side of the last ones and the little ones, who look after him and with him look like Christ.

### **Sharing in the sentiments of Christ Jesus**

Saint Paul invited Christians to meditate on Christ's generosity, in order to have his same sentiments: «Have in yourselves the same sentiments that were in Christ Jesus. Despite having a divine nature, he did not consider his equality with God as a jealous treasure. Rather he emptied himself of this, becoming like a servant, similar to men; appearing in a human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death and death on a cross" (Phil 2:5-8).

Padre Pio did not make mysterious prayers nor did he use any exceptional formulas. What made him different was the ability to go through his own existence trying to feel what Jesus felt, sharing his same ability to listen to the Father's voice, distinguishing it among the many voices that may lead to discouragement or push towards an alternative and occasional happiness.

At the school of Saint Francis, the disciple repeated with him "My God, my all", and shared with Christ the meaning that he gave to his existence: to give his life for his brothers.

It is not easy to direct life, emotions and desires towards this ideal, for this reason Padre Pio's prayer became a continuous search for fidelity and obedience, which focussed on the meditation of his passion. This is how a total, deep and generous love developed in him, which did not measure times and spaces; his only goal was to have the same sentiments that were Jesus' own: he, too, gave his life for his brothers.

Padre Pio was well aware of how important it was to meditate on Christ's passion, and he would especially spread the pious exercise of the Stations of the Cross. To the fourteen stations someone has recently added that of the Resurrection, while others have changed some of the numbers. Everyone can follow this pious exercise according to his will, what is important is to remain in the atmosphere of compassion with Christ, which is not a sterile cry, but a total involvement in his passion for man. The Pope writes: «... the best way to discern



whether our prayer journey is authentic is to observe the extent to which our life is being transformed in the light of mercy» (GE n 105).

Inserted in its context, the Pope's affirmation is fundamental for our Prayer Groups, because the Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate* gives great importance to social and charitable commitment, while recalling that when Christians "separate these demands of the Gospel from one's personal relationship with the Lord... Christianity is transformed into a sort of NGO, depriving it of that luminous spirituality which Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Teresa of Calcutta and many others lived and manifested so well" (GE n 100). The members of our Prayer Groups are called to be aware that their charism implies the profound complementarity between the com-passion for Christ which stems from prayer and the com-passion for one's brother, which is an evangelical work and fruit of continuous contact with the spirituality of Padre Pio.

The spirituality of the Prayer Groups is exactly that of Padre Pio and is rooted in a great sense of humility. We should probably devote to being witnesses rather than acting, as in this way we might not put so much importance in our personal gain, but rather we would be 'Church', one of the seeds scattered in God's soil, a mustard seed that can become a tree. Padre Pio is waiting for us on this road and will undoubtedly bless us.

### **Holiness as our strenuous endeavour**

Although the young Francesco Forgione had firmly decided to become a Capuchin friar, being far from his family and the rigid discipline of the novitiate were not easy things to endure for a fifteen-year-old boy and his peers. According to the story of Father Raffaele, one of his companions in the novitiate who later became a priest, fr. Anastasio da Roio, at some point decided he would leave and go back home, and confided it to his brother, who replied with that simplicity that accompanied Padre Pio throughout his life: "With the help of Our Lady and Saint Francis we too will slowly get used to it as the others have done. Do you think that all these friars who are in the convent were not like us? No one was born a monk."

### **Brother to each one of us**

His baptismal name was Francesco (Francis), and since he entered the convent, he was a devout follower of the Seraphic founder Saint Francis. Like him he chose to live in poverty, chastity and obedience. He practiced the Capuchin rule in all its rigour, generously embracing the life of penance. He was not pleased with the pain, but he chose it as a way of expiation and purification. Like the Poor Saint from Assisi, Padre Pio aimed at being one with Jesus Christ, desiring only "to love and to suffer", in support of the Lord in the tiring and demanding work of salvation. In "firm, constant and iron-like" obedience his unconditional love for God and the Church found its highest expression.

What a consolation to feel Padre Pio close to us, who simply wanted to be "a poor friar who prays": brother of Christ, brother of Saint Francis, brother of those who are suffering, brother of each of us. May his help guide us on the path of the Gospel and make us ever more generous in following Christ! (*JOHN PAUL II, Speech to the pilgrims gathered for the beatification of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, May 3, 1999*).