



**Sixth step**

**PRAYER GROUPS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

**BIBLICAL COMMENTS**

*"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (Gv 15, 16)*

On the night of Maundy Thursday, when Jesus is in the Upper Room with His apostles, he tells them the secret of how they can keep in His presence: "Love one another, as I have loved you" (Jn 15). This secret has been cherished by the Church during all this time, and it has made it its founding point: we firmly believe in the presence of "Jesus in the midst". All the strength of the Church, all the fruits it has born come from mutual love. Being listened to by God and obtaining his Presence does not depend on being beautiful, good, capable and efficient, but on the ability to be in a mutual acceptance of diversity.

We are part of the Church not because "we choose" to be so, therefore with expectations to be met, but because "we are chosen" by God just as we are, loved by Him and by all our brothers and sisters. Hence the strength and effectiveness of prayer and works of charity. Those who pray with love are certainly heard, and this will enable them to intercede to God's mercy with even more power.

**SPIRITUALITY**

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them". Catholics are encouraged to pray in a group or in a community, and this is not an optional or an extra thing. This kind of prayer makes sense as we are the Church, which is the mystical body of Christ. Our welcoming attitude towards our neighbours so that we can walk part of our path together is the sign that we are living prayer truthfully, and this leads us to a full relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

**From a letter written by Padre Pio to Antonietta Vona (Letters III, p. 846)**

*Pietrelcina, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1918*

*You should love the Lord first and foremost, and after that, I recommend you should love the Church dearly, which is his Bride as well as our tender mother. It is like a sweet dove which can lay her eggs and bear little doves from her Spouse. You should endeavour to thank God a hundred times every day for being a daughter of the Church. Rest your gaze on the Spouse and Bride, and say to her Bridegroom: "Ah, you are the Bridegroom of a beautiful Bride." And say to the Bride: "You are the Bride of a Bridegroom that is totally divine!". Have great compassion for the shepherds and the preachers of this Church and also for all those who care for souls. See, my daughter, how they are scattered on the face of the earth, there being no place on earth where they are not plentiful. Pray to God for them that, by saving themselves, they may fruitfully gain the salvation of many other souls, too. In this regard, I beseech you never to forget me when you are before Jesus, because He gives me a great desire never to forget your soul.*

*Fr Pio*

Love for the Church and veneration of the Supreme Pontiff are the two coordinates within which Padre Pio lives his spirituality and he would like his spiritual sons and daughters to live theirs in the very same way. To go against the teachings of the Church or to disrespect the Supreme Pontiff or one's own bishop meant, for Padre Pio, detaching oneself from him.

Since their inception, the Prayer Groups were followed by a priest, it was the necessary condition that Padre Pio wanted in order for them to be recognized. The presence of the spiritual director guarantees that prayer lived together is a gift and a service for the local church. It is not always possible to have a spiritual director who takes exclusive care of the Group or who celebrates the liturgies exclusively for the Group, but the important thing is that the members of the Group recognize themselves in a specific priest, appointed by the bishop, to help them live their own charisma at the service of the Church.

## GETTING TO KNOW PADRE PIO

- ☐ On September 24th, 1975, the Groups were in Rome for their third International Convention. At the end they attended the general audience given by Pope Paul VI who said, "Padre Pio, among the many good and great things he did, has generated this crowd, this plentiful river of persons dedicated to prayer; following his example and in the hope of his spiritual help, they live their Christian lives sharing in prayers, charity, poverty of spirit and in the energy of the Christian creed".
- ☐ On June 25th, 1978 shortly before his death, Paul VI, during an audience at the sacred College of Cardinals, declared "fervent prayer centers and groups have blossomed. They are small cells of ecclesiastical life, often discreet or even ignored, which diffuse the vitalizing oxygen of spiritual heights into our world".
- ☐ On 1st October 1983, John Paul II met the Prayer Groups in Rome, in the Nervi hall: "you who join the Prayer Groups intend to cooperate in the attainment of the Kingdom of God according to the teaching of Jesus as synthesised in the "Pater Noster": Adveniat regnum tuum! What characterizes your cooperation is the awareness that the first indispensable tool for the expansion of the kingdom of God in souls is continuous, humble and devoted prayer.
- ☐ May 23rd, 1987 John Paul II was on a pastoral visit to Puglia. In San Giovanni Rotondo he met the sick, the doctors of the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza and the Prayer Groups.
- ☐ On 29 September 1990, John Paul II once more met the Prayer Groups: follow the example of Padre Pio; imitate his constant search for intimacy with the Lord, as this is the only secret of spiritual life. Like him, follow the path of authentic conversion, voluntary penance, and trustworthy abandonment in Providence.
- ☐ On May 2nd, 1999, the day of the beatification of Padre Pio, John Paul II states in his homily: by meeting Padre Pio directly or indirectly, many people have rediscovered their faith; Prayer Groups have multiplied in every corner of the world at his school.
- ☐ On June 16th, 2002, the day of Padre Pio's canonization in St. Peter's Square, once again John Paul II stated: "the ultimate reason for the apostolic efficacy of Padre Pio, the profound root of so much spiritual fruitfulness is found in the intimate and constant union with God of which the long hours spent in prayer were eloquent testimonies. [...] This fundamental characteristic of his spirituality continues in the "Prayer Groups" he founded, which offer both the Church and society the formidable contribution of incessant and trusting prayer. Padre Pio united prayer with an intense charitable activity, of which

the "Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza" is an extraordinary expression. Prayer and charity: this is the very concrete synthesis of Padre Pio's teachings, which today everyone is recommended to follow.

- ☒ On June 21st, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI arrived on a pastoral visit to San Giovanni Rotondo. On this occasion he said: "Dear friends, Capuchin Friars Minor, members of the Prayer Groups and all faithful, you are the heirs of Padre Pio and the spiritual legacy he left you is holiness".
- ☒ On 6th February 2016 on the occasion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, the Jubilee of Padre Pio's Prayer Groups, Pope Francis said in St Peter's Square: I thank you for your commitment, I encourage you, so that the Prayer Groups are "Centres of mercy": centres that are always open and active, which with the humble power of prayer provide the light of God to the world and the energy of love for the Church".
- ☒ On March 17th, 2018 Pope Francis, on a pastoral visit to Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo, said: "Prayer is a gesture of love, it is being with God and bringing him the life of the world: it is an indispensable work of spiritual mercy. If we do not entrust our brothers and our situations to the Lord, who will do it? who will intercede, who will knock on God's heart asking Him to open the door of mercy to all humanity in need? This is why Padre Pio bequeathed the Prayer Groups to us.

### **PADRE PIO'S WORLD: *Pray in communion with the Holy Father***

One of the first clear dates relating to all Padre Pio Prayer Groups goes back to 1948. The following year groups of brothers were meeting once or twice a month to pray the Holy Rosary together. When Padre Pio decided to follow Pope Pius XII's recommendations to pray as a community, 'group' was the one word that prevailed over many others, such as "army of prayers and penitents", "religious array", "Fraternal community". Padre Pio was prompt in his reply to the Pontiff's heartfelt appeal, and thought of Prayer Groups as of a sort of 'scaffolding' holding up the whole structure, a constant and continuous support, through prayer, for Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza. They started working on the official constitution of such groups in August 1950; through collective prayer and under the guidance of a priest, with the approval of the bishop, the groups served as a model, whose purpose was to care for the spiritual formation and growth of all the members of the Group, so that they would become role models in Christian life.

### **CLOSE-UP ON PADRE PIO'S PRAYER GROUPS:**

The approval of a new Prayer Group rests with the *Director General of the Prayer Groups, who issues a certificate through the International Centre of Prayer Groups in San Giovanni Rotondo. The conditions for the establishment of a new group are as follows:*

- the presence of a priest as the spiritual assistant of the Group;
- a specific church where the Group meets (a parish church would be preferable);
- an adequate preparation time agreed with the spiritual director and with the regional or diocese coordinator - the approval of the Bishop of the same diocese.

