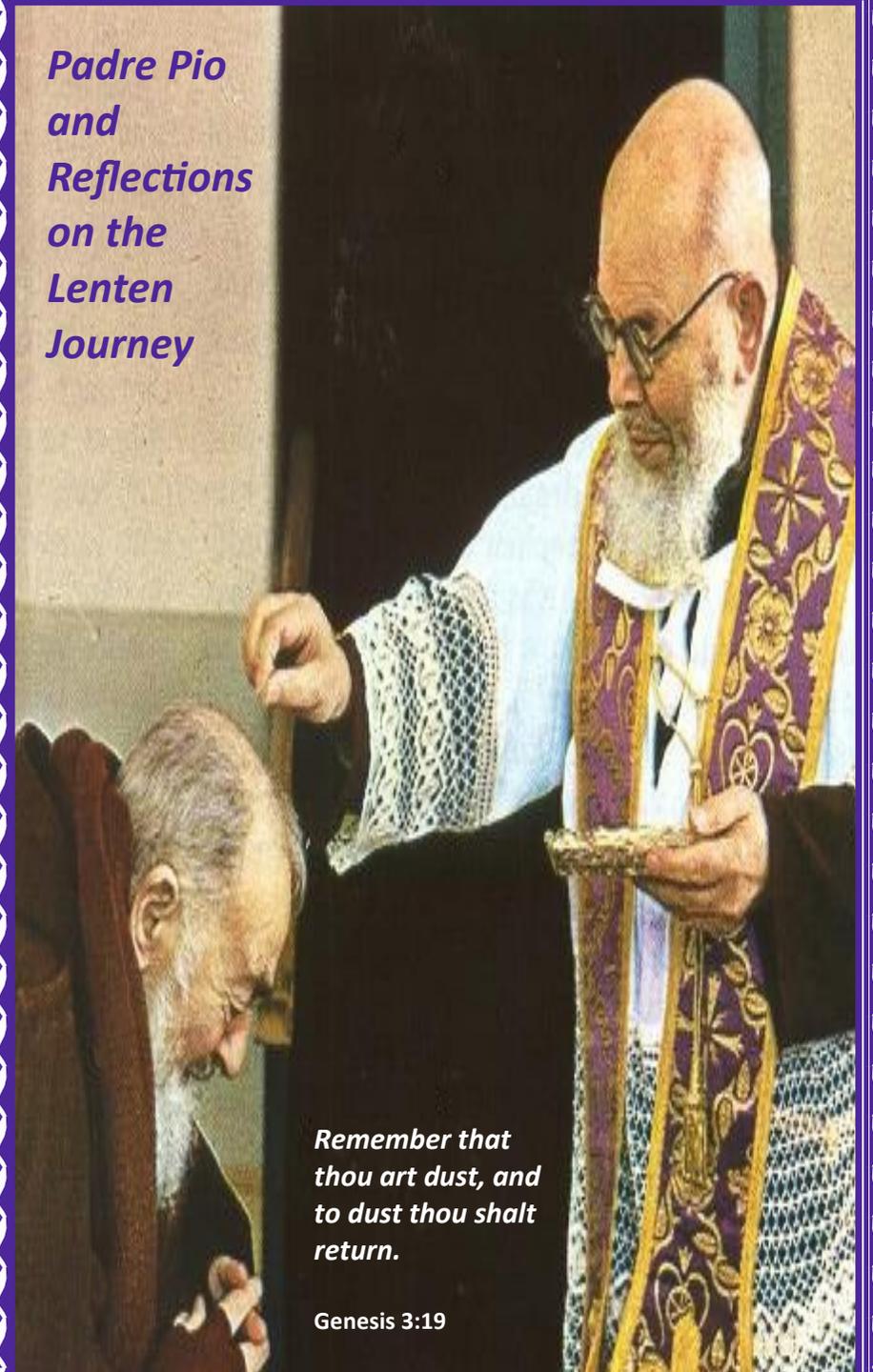


**WEAPONS** - For millennia the People of God have always known the best 'weapons' to use against anything that may lead them away from a holy and healthy relationship with God. In the Liturgy for Ash Wednesday, as well as throughout the season of Lent, we are reminded of three essentials that help us to 'turn around' and regain and grow in God's grace: **PRAYER, FASTING, AND ALMSGIVING**. **Prayer** establishes, strengthens, or re-establishes our personal relationship with God. Through prayer we see ourselves from the perspective of the Divine Plan. God becomes a 'Real Presence' in our lives Sacramentally in the Eucharist, our daily Viaticum for life's journey, and spiritually, at every moment and encounter throughout the day. Then it is that the gift of existence and life we recognize in persons, places, and things remind us of the awesome presence and love of God for all and in particular for 'me'. How can anyone not accept the challenge to keep him/herself always available to the love of such a God? Thus, the **fasting/penance** we perform are not negative acts of renunciation or denial, as much as positive choices we make to avoid allowing ourselves to be controlled by anyone or anything that could or would lessen or destroy our relationship with God. Only the individual can know what is necessary for his/her particular life, and the Church asks that we, as a Body of the Faithful, a Mystical Body of Christ, practice certain external acts that proclaim to the world to Whom we belong, for Whom we live, in Whom we journey, and Where we hope to arrive one day, freed of our excess baggage. Aware that we are all children of the same God and called to share the same journey, though each in his/her own unique manner, our **almsgiving/or charitable acts** is an openness of heart that assists, where and when possible, all our sisters and brothers who, as we, seek the same goal, whether they know it explicitly, or indirectly through us or the circumstances of life. Our desire for personal **conversion** compels us to take the first of many steps on a **journey** on which we encounter friends and foes of our spiritual lives who must be embraced in love or fought in a spiritual **battle** with the **weapons** of faith (prayer), hope (letting go and trusting in providence to fulfill our needs), and charity/love (disarming our hearts to others as we seek to assist them however possible). Once we have embarked on this journey, guided by the Spirit of God, following the footsteps of Jesus, there is nothing less to expect than ...

**VICTORY!** - We are victors in the Victim. We walk the road of the Cross. Though there are many difficulties we must overcome, our victory is basically a victory over ourselves; that part of ourselves that hesitates or refuses to let the Holy Spirit work in and through us. The journey of Lent leads to a victory so often misunderstood. It is a victory whose trophy is a blood-stained Cross and a mangled, tortured, derided Person, executed as a common criminal Whose crime was truth, compassion, and love. The paradox of the Cross is the glory of the Christian. The sign of contradiction becomes our sign of commitment, commitment to Life through death to ourselves, so that *it is no longer I who live but Christ Who lives in me*. Jesus Himself said, *when I am lifted up I will call all people to myself*. We come to the foot of the Cross, at the end of our Lenten journey, not as vanquished victims, but as victors who *bear the brand marks of Jesus in my body, therefore let no one bother me*.

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## *Padre Pio and Reflections on the Lenten Journey*



*Remember that  
thou art dust, and  
to dust thou shalt  
return.*

Genesis 3:19

## Padre Pio and Reflections on the Lenten Journey

### Messages to Padre Pio Prayer Groups and his Spiritual Children

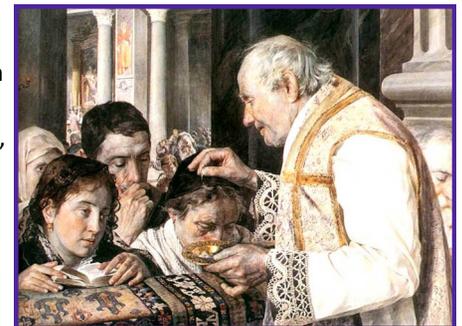
Lent is the time for us to reconfirm our Covenant with God in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. All without exception are called to enter the Lenten journey from Ashes to Palms, that ultimately leads us to the solemn experience of the holiest of all weeks, the Week of the Offering of the Innocent Lamb of God on the Altar of the Cross, so that through His open heart, the Holy Spirit might be poured out on all the world, leading from devastation to adoption as children of God. Ash Wednesday begins the sacred season of Lent. Forty days intended to help each one of us in our Christian commitment to *walk in the way of true conversion*. In the Opening Prayer of the Eucharist for Ash Wednesday in the Latin Sacramentary, we read these words: *O God our Father, grant that your Christian people may begin with this fast a journey of true conversion, that the weapons of penance may make them victorious in the battle against the spirit of evil* (free translation). This prayer, that opens the season of Lent, gives us the steps we follow on our the forty-day itinerary ahead of us. The prayer mentions: **CONVERSION, JOURNEY, BATTLE, WEAPONS, VICTORY** ... and a constant presence on this journey through life, 'the evil one'. These are strong words. Reflecting on them and acting on them can make Lent a spiritually beneficial time for all who acknowledge their value and seek to implement them during this holy season, and throughout their lives.

**CONVERSION** - Conversion is a 'turning around' or a 'change in direction'. As Christians we realize *that My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways My ways*, as God says through the prophet. We are challenged to have a change in ideas, visions, desires, and to think as Jesus would think. It is Jesus who tells us that sin is the greatest evil that can befall a human being since sin is capable of leading us away from God for eternity; and grace is God's greatest gift because it offers us a share in the very Life of God Himself. Before our conversion can begin, we must believe that sin is harmful. In an era that seems to have lost the sense of sin, it might not be easy. Then we must start making choices that are according to Gospel values that remind us of the choices Christ made and expected of His followers. The easiest way to do this is to live in God's Will, just as Jesus sought always to fulfill the Will of the Father, even when it led Him to Calvary and the Cross. A virtuous life makes the difficult demands doable: humility, obedience, charity, patience, temperance, chastity, and so forth. We act as Jesus acted, doing good to all, friend and enemy alike. As Jesus forgave those who offended Him, and loved everyone, even to his own death on the Cross, we love and forgive. This awareness and desire to 'change direction' and 'turn back' to a more grace-filled life, sets us on a ...

**JOURNEY** - Nothing happens immediately. Anything worthwhile takes time if it is to be effective and lasting. The first blast of enthusiasm often fizzles out quite soon. When desire leads to conviction and conviction to commitment, then the journey begins firmly, fixed on the goal, and 'full steam ahead'. This lifetime journey of conversion begins when God gives us His love and sanctifying grace at Baptism, the first conversion we experience. At that moment through the will of our parents and the Church, we are freed of Original Sin and set on the road of life's experience filled

with sanctifying grace. Through life, unfortunately, this grace will be tarnished and perhaps even lost for a while. The journey offers us the opportunities to regain and grow in this love of God for us. The dangers are always present, especially when we reach that point in our development that makes us, as were Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, knowledgeable of good and evil and capable of making personal choices in this regard. Thus, life's journey often, not to say always, is a ...

**BATTLE** - Conversion is a constant battle. It is a battle with the forces within us and around us. Sometimes it is a battle with two forces within us. St. Paul himself writes about the spirit and the flesh often seeming to be at odds with each other. The great saints even struggled with faithfulness to virtue. The battle is not a lost cause. There is only one God and no matter how strong, the 'spirit of evil' is, it can never be equal to God! The spiritual battle is an experience that strengthens the weak and challenges the strong in spirit. No one encounters an 'enemy' it will not be able to overpower. God's graces are always available. God's Holy Spirit and Wisdom, available to those who seek them, help us first to discern who the 'enemies' are. There are three: **Satan**, the **world**, and **vices and sins**, that we allow to control us. Satan, chief architect of all that is evil, is *always prowling*, as St. Peter writes, *looking for someone to devour*. 'Direct assault' with most would be foolish for Satan because Satan's involvement would be obvious, and I would hope that there are few who knowingly and willingly would desire to accept damnation for eternity. So, after denial, delay and discouragement, which are some of Satan's best tools to lead souls astray, Satan uses the world and our own desires and needs. The world, theater of redemption is a blessed creation that has been adulterated by humanity over the millennia. Read or watch the news, look at TV, live in certain areas of our nation; you cannot help but be aware of an 'epidemic' of violence, immorality, obscenity, blasphemy even against the goodness of God, dabbling in the occult and satanic practices. How easy it is for weak, frightened, tired, confused, indifferent, and/or otherwise challenged souls to accept to follow the easy road that avoids challenges to change and grow, rather than seek the strength and wholeness that comes with standing with and for the God-given values and principles in every human being, in particular the gifts we Catholics profess with our lips, and must also proclaim with our lives. In so doing, the vices and sins we allow to control us are probably the most difficult 'enemies' we encounter. They lurk within us. Becoming our 'friends' we learn how to co-exist and forget that, sooner or later, their presence will erode even the best of 'finishes'. We are God's masterpiece and cannot allow ourselves to be tarnished, pitted, rusted, and destroyed. To refinish the masterpiece we are, and overcome our 'enemies' that cause this decomposition, Lent offers us the appropriate tools. Used well, they are our invincible ...



Ashes may also be sprinkled on the top of the head as shown in this 1881 Polish painting.