



*“Indulge in reading holy books...
they are like pasture to the soul and a great support on the way to perfection”*

6th MONTH: MARCH

NURTURING OUR ZEAL FOR THE LORD

From the Gospel according to Matthew (7:21-27)

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but those who do the will of my Father who is in Heaven.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice will be like a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. The rain fell, the rivers overflowed, the winds blew and came fiercely against that house, but it did not fall, for it had its foundations on the rock. Whoever hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice will be like a foolish man, who has built his house upon the sand. The rain fell, and the rivers overflowed, and the winds blew, and they came fiercely upon that house, and it fell down, and it was ruined”.

"The house on the rock" is the parable with which Jesus concludes the "Sermon on the Mount". The Master is not totally satisfied with attentive listeners, nor even with their empty prayers, he wants the Word to involve the believers, to make them perceive the novelty of its message so that once they have heard it, they will redesign their lives, starting them all from scratch.

Living the beatitudes, choosing to live by a justice which is no longer based on human compromises, but open to the novelty of the Kingdom of God, means accepting the Father's will with determination and with our total commitment. He has come to proclaim a message of Mercy, that of the Father and that of those who want to be as merciful as their God. It is exactly this mercy that builds our house on the rock, because it is founded on the sacrifice of Christ. The Word brings light to our lives, it makes us realise how His image is rooted in us through our Baptism and it prompts us to start that new life that St Paul refers to in the letter to the Romans: "Brethren, you are not under the dominion of the flesh, but of the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you" (*Rom 8:9*).

From a letter by Padre Pio to Raffaolina Cerase

Pietrelcina, 28th of July 1914, Epist. II, p. 143

The importance that Saint Jerome gave to the reading of holy books is beyond belief. To Salvina, He would recommend that she always have pious books in her hand, because these are a strong shield to repel all the evil thoughts by which youth is attacked. With St Paulinus, he would insist on the same thing: he said, "Holy books should always be in your hands, as they give pasture to your spirit through the divine lesson". To the widow Furia, he would kindly recommend that she read the Sacred Scriptures frequently as well as the books of those doctors, whose doctrine is holy and sound, so that she may not have to struggle having to choose among false documents in the hope of finding the gold, holy and wholesome



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teachings there. To Demetriades he wrote: "Love the lesson of the Sacred Scriptures if you want to be loved by divine wisdom, if you want to be cherished and possessed. The holy doctor would also add, 'There was a time when you adorned yourself with various embellishments, you wore jewels on your chest, ornaments on your neck, and precious gems on your ears. In the future may the Sacred Lessons be thy gems and thy joys with which thou adornest your spirit with holy thoughts and devout affections.

Here is one more example, taken from the Fathers of the Church. Presumably Padre Pio took these texts from a spiritual book which he often consulted for both his own growth and as a spiritual director, titled *The spiritual directoire* by Giovanni Battista Scaramelli. The authority of St Jerome is undisputed, which is proved by the fact that Padre Pio used some of his works to reiterate the fact his spiritual daughter should pay a special attention to the Holy Scriptures.

The first text is addressed to Salvina, married to Nebridio, nephew of one of the Roman matrons, Elia Facilla, who was very close to St Jerome. After she was widowed with two children, the saint recommended that she finds comfort and strength in the Word of God. However among all, Padre Pio would rather insist on the words of Jerome to the young Demetriades, when the latter decided to consecrate herself to God. Despite having been betrothed from a young age, Demetriades revealed to her mother and grandmother her desire to consecrate herself to God.

The two women ask several spiritual authors of the time, including Jerome and Augustine for letters to encourage her. This is when Jerome recommended the girl should have the Holy Scriptures as her only adornment.

We are dealing with St Jerome, an author whom Padre Pio would repeatedly quote precisely because of his connection with the Scriptures, which they both believed form the backbone of spiritual life.

Raffaelina Cerase found reading these texts especially difficult and Padre Pio wanted to make her understand that a soul that meditates on the Word of God builds its house on rock.

St Teresa and the "Ecce homo"

In the Greek version of the Bible the term ‘zeal’ (zelos) translates a very common concept in the language of the prophets: it is the "fervour of the spirit". Elijah is filled with zeal for the Lord (1 Kings 14), in the narration of the life of the Maccabees, Mattathias is burning with zeal (1 Mac 2:24); in the book of Isaiah, zeal describes a particular way in which God acts: 'This the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do'.

We could say that Padre Pio, too was taken by the zeal for the Lord, when almost forcefully he imposed on Raffaelina the reading of the Word of God. The examples quoted from the writings of St Jerome make us understand how it is precisely by virtue of the Holy Scriptures that the zeal for the Lord is provoked in these people.

In the Christian tradition, the zeal for the Lord holds a different connotation, depending on the which liturgies we are celebrating, but this is especially true when it is nourished by the meditation on the Passion of Jesus. St Teresa is excellent at showing us how meditation on the humanity of Christ, in particular during his Passion, can bring us to the zeal for the Lord. In Lent in 1554 she was particularly struck by the sight of a statue of *Ecce homo*, the suffering Christ presented by Pilate to the Jews, after the scourging.

To meditate on the Word is to meditate on the love that Jesus showed for us through his sacrifice. According to some testimonies, Padre Pio said that, in order to live the zeal for the Lord, every soul should meditate on His Passion every day.



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Meditate on the Passion of Jesus

There is a page taken from Padre Pio's life that shows his humanity, in a meaningful way. The account is made by various authors, I refer here to a text by Father Alessandro da Ripabottoni. It is the narration of the hernia operation that Dr Giorgio Festa performed on Padre Pio in 1925. He did not want his surgeon to see his stigmata during the operation, which he might have seen if Padre Pio had fallen asleep. In fact this had been forbidden by the Holy See, so Padre Pio decided he would go through the operation without having any anaesthetics.

At some point, however, Padre Pio was going through quite a lot of pain, and Padre Alessandro reports (probably because reported by the doctor) the words of Padre Pio, ‘Enough, doctor. Make haste, make haste, make haste now...’. Then as if beating his chest, he said: "O my Lord, my God, how shameful of me. I have never been able to offer you anything in my life and now, for this little that I would like to suffer, for this trifle, compared to your passion of the cross, I lie here complaining and am about to lose my senses’. I have quoted this text also because we should be reminded of another detail: during the operation Padre Pio asked for the relic of the Holy Cross to be placed before him.

Throughout all his life, the focal point of his life and meditations was the Passion of Our Lord. We know that the great saints often recommended meditating on the Passion of Jesus, because in the light of Jesus’ total self-offering on the cross, we too can understand the meaning of our own offering.

Illusion or hope?

On 21st August 1997, while Pope John Paul II was in Paris, on the occasion of World Youth Day, he asked all young people to meditate on the mystery of Easter, so as to reignite their faith in Baptism:

"Let us manifest - he said - all our love for the Lord, as Peter did when, on the shore of the lake, after His Resurrection, he said to him three times: "You know that I love you" (cf. Jn 21:4-23).

Padre Pio would recommend the meditation on the Passion of Christ not only out of compassion, so as to be moved into a superficial state of feeling, but rather so as one could be projected into history, and challenged into creating a more personal and authentic relationship with Jesus.

Getting to live a true relationship with the life of Jesus, (today we would say, of interfacing with Him) requires that we make profound choices, which free us from the short circuits of the sterile contemplation of our pain or from the cold contemplation of our illusions.

Let us remember that the word illusion comes from the Latin verb *ludere*. Illusion therefore is wanting to remain in the game that we often construct for ourselves as we do not want to look at life as it truly is. In Demetriad's gesture of taking off her jewellery, St Jerome sees the choice of no longer wanting to play, and asks her instead to clothe herself with the Word, so as to live the zeal of the Lord, to be rich only in him.

Illusions (meant as escapes, in all kinds of games) are often the woodworm of our existence, they drive us to seek answers outside of our responsibilities, they lead us to think that we can heal our grief and wounds through play (illusions); zeal for the Lord and meditation on his Passion, help us to look at reality through the lens of redemption. This lets our eyes see inside it, as filled by the meaning of the Word which is essentially a saving Word.



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THE DEGREES of PRAYER LIFE

M. BELDA, *‘Guided by the Spirit of God’*, EDUSC, Rome 2009, p. 387

Prayer is one of the most important expressions in spiritual life, and throughout the history of spirituality, some attempts have been made to schematise spiritual progress according to different degrees in the development of the prayer life.

One such attempt was made by Ghigo II the Carthusian (+ 1188), who drafted the first treatise on mental prayer, if one can call it that way. This is a fifteen-page pamphlet composed c.1145, *‘Scala claustralium’*, and it speaks of four degrees of the prayer life: *Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio and Contemplatio* (*reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation*):

"One day, during manual work, while I was thinking about the exercises of the spiritual man, suddenly I saw four steps clear in my mind: *lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio* (...). The *lectio* is the application of the spirit to the Holy Scriptures. *Meditatio* is the careful investigation of a hidden truth with the help of reason. *Oratio* is the divine straining of the heart towards God to ward off evil and obtain good. *Contemplatio* is the elevation to God of the soul that is enraptured by the savouring of eternal joys. The ineffable sweetness of the blissful life, the *lectio* seeks it, the *meditatio* finds it, *oratio* implores it and *contemplatio* savours it. And the very word of the Lord: "Seek ye shall find"; 'Knock and it shall be opened unto you' (Mt 7:7). Seek by reading, you will find by meditating; knock by praying, you will enter by contemplating. *Lectio* brings nourishment to the mouth, *meditatio* chews it up and chews it up and minces it, *oratio* acquires flavour from it, and *contemplatio* is that very flavour which rejoices and restores".

PRAYER to SAINT PIO by MONS. LUIGI RENNA

Padre Pio, you are
my brother and my guide.
I want to bless the Lord for the gifts He bestowed on you.
In His most mysterious way He marked you
with the wounds of His Passion,
so that you would be witness of his mercy
in the world.
Obtain for me a true conversion,
your protection for all those who are dear to me,
and, if the Lord were to ask me,
teach me how to carry my Cross.
I pray that the power of the Gospel
May be a word of hope and salvation
for every human being.
By your wounded hand, please bless
the Church and all of our society,
grant us that all men and women
may be instruments of compassion and peace.