

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Receive the Holy Spirit

The Lord God shaped man from the soil of the ground and blew the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living being.

A Giving Of Life

This short sentence from Genesis 2 describes the most basic relationship: the one between us and the God who called us into being, into life. We read in it the lovely Hebrew thought that the breath that moves in and out of our lungs is the breath of God. At any moment, then, we are sustained by the fleeting presence of the air which God is giving to us *now*. I remember a day when I was praying in the middle of Rome, that noisiest of cities. I suppose I was within earshot of about two thousand internal (how could noise so penetrative be caused by anything called *internal*?) combustion engines. The windows of the courtyard chapel were trembling in their frames. Roller-shutters were going up and down, sirens were wailing on the Corso Vittorio, trams clanging on the Lungotevere. I closed my eyes, stuffed my fingers into my ears, and in that muffled - if imperfect - quietness, I heard two sounds of which I had been previously unaware. One was the rushing of my bloodstream. The other was the sound of my breathing. It was as if the outer world had receded, and I could listen to the hidden sound of my being alive. I became suddenly aware of the even deeper reality - equally drowned-out by the noise of the world - the presence of the one called in the Psalms "God of my life".

This Moment Is Holy

One of the prayers in the Missal calls God by the beautiful title "Pastor Aeternum" - *Shepherd of all the Ages*. I receive the image of a great and serene figure, moving grandly through the changes, glories, and disasters of history, caring for the transient and vulnerable creatures whose lives rise and fall in it, himself sublimely, eternally, alive and life-giving. There is a very different, complementary image: the image of Jesus, surrounded by incident, meeting huge crowds of people, a life criss-crossed with encounters, torn all ways by the griefs and questions and incapacities of so many people. Here is a Shepherd of the present moment,

who can open the fevered instants of experience to the eternity of God, in healing, forgiving, enlightening, and reconciling.

Breath of Life

When Jesus breathes on his disciples today, he says: *Receive the Holy Spirit*. In this moment, he "sends" his disciples as the Father sent him. In this moment they become shepherds, and they do so with the same divine authority that he had exercised on behalf of the Father. It is a gift of life, a new creation, a new humanity that is alight with the power of its Maker and Redeemer. How does that breath live in us? I wonder what the exact meaning is of the words: "Those sins you retain, are retained"? Is it simply a concession to the disciples of authority over sin in the world? Or is it a caution to the Church, to be absolutely forgiving, to communicate the grace of God without stint, because what we do not surround with the forgiveness of Christ will *remain* unhealed? Certainly I think that we should listen for the depths of our life, where the Spirit of life breathes in us the realities of the new world, the new Creation, to which we really belong. We must apprehend the eternal life of God, in the present moment, despite our being enmeshed in so many noisy, engrossing concerns - so that the love of God may light up our living.

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