

Part of a routine physical examination is having the physician place a stethoscope at four points of a patient's back. The patient is told to take a deep breath, hold it for a couple of seconds, and then exhale it. What the physician is doing is assessing the health and air capacity of the patient's lungs.

Anyone who suffers from diseases such as asthma, emphysema, COPD, has had a bout of pneumonia, or some other lung-related disease knows how crucial to life the act of breathing is. Today as we are increasingly concerned not only for our own physical health, but for the health of our planet as well, clean air is also a major environmental issue.

Breath is the symbol of life and has been since ancient times. The first creation story in Genesis depicts the life force of the Creator as *ruah*, (a Hebrew term meaning “breath” or “wind,”) bringing forth all life. In the second story of creation, the first human creature becomes a living being only when the Creator breathes into its nostrils (Gn. 2:7). At Pentecost, it is the same divine life-giving force that recreates a frightened group of disciples into bold proclaimers of the Gospel.

The disciples, like anyone who has experienced the life-breath of a loved one physically, emotionally, and spiritually disappear at death felt something of their own life-breath, their spirit and zest for life, snuffed out with Jesus' death. Huddled together in the Upper Room in Jerusalem they were unable to muster any energy for carrying on his mission. Grief and fear had deflated any impetus to continue the movement in which he had drawn them.

In today's Gospel we find the disciples, and ourselves, again in the Upper Room in Jerusalem on Easter Day evening. Into their, and our, midst the Risen Jesus comes. His risen and glorified humanity is able not only to pass through physical doors locked

in fear of the threatening powers of the world, it also is able to pass through the fear, despair, and grief that can lock down our hearts and souls. After his greeting of “Peace” Jesus breathes on the disciples saying, **“Receive the Holy Spirit—Receive the *Holy Ruah*.”** (Jn. 20:22,23). Just as the divine *ruah* made the clay in Genesis a living human being, so the breath of the Risen Jesus brings divine life and communion to the disciples. This same breath of the Holy Spirit is present and active among us today. We experience its presence in various ways in our life, but especially here in the liturgy. In the Mass God’s Spirit speaks to us through the person who proclaims his word in the Scriptures, instructs us through the priest or deacon in the homily, and as the priest utters Jesus’ own words over bread and wine, transforms them into his body and blood, his risen personal presence, which we, consuming, incorporates and transforms us into his church.

Pentecost celebrates God’s intimate presence within us. God the Father and Jesus his Son through their Holy Spirit, is as close to each of us as each breath we take into our lungs thousands of times every day; a constant life-giving, life-sustaining force. And just as every breath we take simultaneously sustains our life it naturally cannot be held on to permanently but must be exhaled into the world, so too does the Spirit’s power direct us outward to mission, exuding the love, peace and forgiveness we have inhaled from the Living One. Our second reading from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians reminds us that each of us is a gifted person. Each one of us has been given a special gift or gifts by God to be exhaled for the salvation of the world and the building up of the church.

Take a deep breath. Hold it; feel the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, the nearness of God to you. Now exhale that same divine breath into the world.
Pentecost blessings!