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“HUMBLE AND HIGHEST CREATURE” Walking with Mary, Mistress of Integral ecology

7. Mary, Breath of God

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Before reading this text, I invite you to stop for a moment, close your eyes and listen to your breathing. I don't know if you ever noticed it: without breathing we cannot live. Yet, most of the time in our lives we do not realise that we are breathing. We realise this when we start having health difficulties, such as a cold, or when we are in environments where the air is lacking or is bad. Air pollution is one of the harmful consequences of industrial development. Lack of oxygen is one of the consequences of unrestrained deforestation that has injured and continues to injure ever larger areas of our earth. Many of the diseases that affect us and lead to our death are linked to the toxic substances we breathe, paradoxically, not only in developed countries, but also in poorer countries, where the West often dumps its waste of all kinds, without any control or realistic possibilities for disposal.

Yet, over the last few years, we have also demonstrated the ability to change our behaviour to diminish the deleterious effects of pollution: just think of the 'hole in the ozone layer', which seems to have closed thanks to the joint efforts of international governments to reduce the production of the harmful gases that caused it. If we succeeded once, that means we can succeed again! It is important, to this end, to mature more and more in discernment and freedom, so that we can make the choices, big and small, that the planet needs, each according to our social position and responsibilities.

The air, in Scripture, is the symbol of the Spirit of God and freedom, and following the Spirit in freedom almost always requires the courage to make choices against the tide. Nicodemus, for example, was a leader of the Jews. That is, he was a person who had a social, public position that gave him prestige and authority in relation to others. He was also a Pharisee, i.e. one who had studied the law and was committed to its observance. For Nicodemus, moreover, all this was not just appearance: he truly loved God and sought him with all his heart. Nicodemus is not one to be satisfied with what he has already achieved. This is precisely why he feels drawn to Jesus and desires to meet him. Fear of the judgement of others, however, drives him to go to Jesus at night. Nicodemus is not a free man. Jesus understands him and announces to him the liberation that the Spirit gives to those who allow themselves to be led by Him. The Spirit is pure freedom, like the wind, the breath of which we perceive but cannot control the direction of its blowing. Whoever is born again of the Spirit, thanks to Baptism, is called to resemble the Spirit. In the letter to the Galatians, St. Paul forcefully reminds the believers of this: "Christ has set us free that we might remain free; stand firm therefore and do not let the yoke of slavery be imposed upon you again" (Gal 5:1). In the case of the Galatians, as in the case of Nicodemus, it was a matter of making salvation depend not on keeping the law, but on love. In our case, it is a matter of learning to recognise what weighs us down and forces us to repeat habits that do not save, while God opens before us the new paths of his creativity and love.



In the face of life's difficulties, in the face of personal failures, in the face of the ecological crisis and the suffering of so many brothers and sisters, we can have the experience of the prophet Ezekiel, to whom God shows an expanse of withered bones, representing the people of Israel who have lost hope of being rescued and delivered by God (Ezekiel 37). Faced with that spectacle, God asks the prophet: "Son of man, shall these bones be revived?" And the prophet replies: "Lord God, you know it". Ezekiel, with these words, acknowledges at once his own weakness and the power of God. As creatures, we cannot create life from death. God, however, can do it and wants to do it in our lives. All he asks from us is willingness to allow ourselves to be filled by the Spirit. Thanks to Ezekiel's faith, God can fulfil prophecy: "Prophecy to the spirit, prophesy son of man, and proclaim to the spirit: Says the Lord God: Spirit, come from the four winds and be with us. and blow upon these dead, that they may be revived". "I prophesied as he had commanded me and the spirit entered them and they came back to life and stood up". By restoring life to withered bones, God repeats the gesture of creation, when he had breathed his Spirit into the nostrils of Adam, newly moulded from the earth (Gen 2:7). This is why the New Testament presents the resurrection of Christ and of believers as the beginning of a new creation: "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; old things have passed away, behold new things have come into being" (2 Cor 5:17).

It is not said of Mary that at the angel's announcement, or even before she left in haste to join Elizabeth, she stopped to ask the permission of her parents or Joseph, whose bride she was (Lk 1:26-39). A disobedience that is attentive listening to one's conscience, the sacred place in the human being where God dwells and in which it is possible to hear his voice. Throughout her life, Mary allowed herself to be led by the Spirit and therefore flew on the wings of holiness, doing good to all those she met. In Mary, in her womb, and with Mary, thanks to her upbringing, the Son of God learnt to breathe and grow free. Mary was therefore God's breath on this earth, the space of freedom and newness that God needed to renew creation from within. In her womb the Spirit wove together the flesh and bones of the new man who redeemed us. In the Magnificat, this breath becomes a song, an exaltation of God's power of love that overthrows the powerful from their thrones, raises up the humble, satiates the hungry and sends the rich empty-handed.

A story is told of Mother Mazzarello who, one evening, having to complete a tailoring job, decided to stop and sew after a good night, together with some sisters, by candlelight. Hearing Fr. Costamagna's step - and knowing his strictness to the rule - Mother blew out the candle, signalling to the sisters to be silent until the priest had passed on. Observance for its own sake, in short, does not belong to the Salesian charism, and there may be circumstances in which the transgression of a rule or an innovation in the rule is the only way to be faithful to God's call and the spirit of the charism. "Do with freedom what charity requires," with these words Maria Domenica encouraged the sisters to put the concrete exercise of demonstrated love above the law. Of course, without rules, life together, in the family and in society, becomes impossible, but it must always be clear that rules serve to protect life and make it flourish. The moment a rule, a custom mortifies people, it means it is time for reform. Of course, the first reality to be reformed is always our heart. The more we make ourselves inwardly free, free of judgements, prejudices, fears, rigidity, the more we will be able to contribute to that renewal of the Church and society that God also expects from us and that Pope Francis continually urges.