

The divine Breath

In the meeting of the Lord Jesus Christ with the disciples as they gathered in the upper room in the evening of the Sunday of Resurrection, St. John, who was present that night, mentions to us a very important incident which is recorded in his Gospel: *“So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”* (John 20: 21-23)

This divine breath, which brought to them the grace of the Holy Spirit, is of course, a distinct breath and different from the descending of the Holy Spirit which came upon them on the Pentecost. It is clear that it is a breath that gave them authority to forgive the sins of people, or to bind and tie them. Therefore, they become stewards of God on this matter, which is in fact the jurisdiction of God alone. (Mark 2: 7)

The Holy Church emphasizes to us, through her faithful tradition, that this breath which the Lord Jesus Christ gave as a gift to his disciples, is in itself the breath that works in the sacrament of priesthood to this day. And it is the breath that completes all the sacraments. Let us see some examples:

In the sacrament of baptism, the priest prays special prayers, while fasting, to consecrate the water before anyone can be baptized in it. These prayers are called the liturgy of baptism, in which the deacons and the congregation participate. In this liturgy, there are many beautiful prayers and readings as well as anointing of the water with holy oils in the name of the Trinity. Nonetheless, breathing three times on the water on the shape of the cross is a fundamental practice in this liturgy. These rituals are made such that the water takes the power of the Holy Spirit, so it gives a new birth to whoever is baptized in it.

Additionally, during the baptism, when the priest says: *“I baptize you O so and so in the name of the Father”*, the person partially comes out of the water and the priest breathes in his face. Then, he submerges him a second time as he says: *“And the Son”*, and lifts him up from the water and breathes in his face one more time. Then he submerges him a third time as he says: *“And the Holy Spirit”* and then lifts him up from the water and breathes in his face a third time. By doing this, the baptism would be completed and the person would have received the second birth of Water and Spirit.

In the sacrament of confirmation, after the priest anoints the baptized person 36 times on his body with the Holy Myron while praying beautiful prayers accompanying the anointments, he concludes these prayers by saying: *“May the Lord Jesus Christ bless you. Accept the Holy Spirit through by His name, and be a pure vessel...”* When the priest breathes in his face, this person becomes a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit and a chosen vessel for God.

In the sacrament of confession, after the priest prays the three known absolutions upon the head of the confessing person, He blesses him with the cross and breathes on his head as he says: *“May God absolve you”*. Through this breath, the repenting and confessing person receives forgiveness of sins.

In the sacrament of communion, during the unction prayers in the liturgy, the priest breathes in the bread after he breaks it, and also breathes in the cup. Then, he prays the prayers of the Invocation of the Holy Spirit to transubstantiate [Change of the substance without the change of the form] the bread and wine into the true body and the true blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the sacrament of unction of the sick, after concluding all prayers, the priest anoints the oil on the shape of the cross three times in the name of the Trinity while breathing in the oil each time. Thus, through faith, this oil would have the power of healing of the diseases of the body and soul. Thus, the same way in prayers of Al-Laqqan (Basin), the priest breathes in the water to give it the power of cleansing, healing, and blessings.

In the sacrament of matrimony, the priest prays the three absolutions on the head of the bride and groom while they are slightly bowing down, then he blesses them with the cross and breathes on them. Thus they become one blessed by God.

In the sacrament of the priesthood, after concluding the prayers, laying of the hands, the calling of the names [of the ordained priests], and the anointment in the name of the trinity, the patriarch or the bishop breathes the Holy Spirit in the mouth of the newly ordained priest to become a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4: 1) as he says to him: *“Accept the Holy Spirit”*, as the Lord Jesus did with his disciples. In the same time, the new priest opens his mouth and says: *“I opened my mouth and drew in my breath.”* (Ps. 119: 131) With this divine breath, he starts his priestly ministry and completes all sacraments as explained above.

Thus, we see that breath of the Holy Spirit which was granted by the Lord Jesus Christ to his disciples is still effective and extended across generations in the work of priesthood, and it gives life to the Church until today. Through priesthood, the Holy Spirit forgives, sanctifies, cleanses, guides, edifies, convicts, comforts, illuminates, and supplements, as well as leads, organizes and oversees. The Holy Spirit fills the Church with blessing, peace, joy, and love. In short, the Holy Spirit is the greatest asset and the capital of the Church. As the breath of life, that God breathed in Adam when He created him, was the secret for his life, it is the same Devine breath that the Lord Jesus gave to our fathers, the pure Apostles, when he passed the tradition of the sacrament of priesthood. This breath is the secret of life of the Church until today, and will continue to give life to her till the end of times.

Fr. Yohanna Naseef
fryohanna@hotmail.com