

The breath of peace

I remember once seeing a very anxious 6th grader hyperventilate. He had lost his backpack. All his books and homework were gone. The worry was too much. In the moment he was seized with sheer panic. He could barely catch his breath.

His teacher, no stranger to worry herself, beckoned him: “Daniel, sit with me...Breathe in slowly...Deep breaths...Close your eyes...Focus on your breath. Breathe in...Breathe out...It will be OK...It will be OK.”

As the minutes passed, Daniel was visibly released from his suffering. His distressed spirit was calmed, freed from the dread that has seized him. What’s more, within the hour, he was resolved to find his backpack or even buy a new one!

Right now we live in as tumultuous a time as any. We run the risk of “hyperventilating.” So much can feel uncertain and overwhelming.

In Sunday’s gospel reading, the Risen Christ stands in a locked room where fear abounds. Jesus breathes and speaks: “Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20: 19-21)

Have you ever noticed the energy that emerges when you simply stop, focus on the moment and deliberately take deep breaths? I invite my diaconal students to begin every homily/sermon with slow, deep, deliberate breaths. I tell them the congregation will wait and that their confidence will be reflected in their delivery and presentation. Years ago, a psychologist I worked with advised: “When very angry, step back, breathe deeply, continue to breathe calmly for ten minutes. I guarantee you your response will now be different. There will be less regret.”

Breathing...taking the time to breathe deeply is an underrated Christian spiritual discipline. It is not accidental that the word “inspiration” has to do with drawing air into the lungs.

Jesus breathed: “Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” Prayer can be the daily practice of taking the time to be still and to breathe in deeply. It is the habit of allowing that peaceful breathing to linger. Allow yourself to focus on the moment. Ask for grace to be filled with the energy you need.

Resurrection means that Christ is everywhere, like the air around us, inspiring peace, lest our fears overtake us, and we become unable to catch our breath.

Our prayerful inhaling may not change the frenzy around us. It may very well enable you to breathe in spiritual oxygen needed to face the moment or the day at hand. You may even become a gift that calms another soul imprisoned by fear-an instrument of Divine Mercy.

With every breath you take, may you inspire Christ's peace, both within and around you.