16. Eternal expiring

"Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen 2:7).
The soul in us is like the seed of the love of God that grows for our whole life with a rhythm of receiving and giving, like the inhaling and exhaling of the lungs, or, for the heart, the diastole with which the heart relaxes and is filled with blood, and the systole with which it contracts, pushing the blood toward the arteries, veins, capillaries, so that the body live, move, express itself.

The centurion was a witness of the extreme gift of breath that animated Jesus in his human and earthly life, which is not just an animal breath, just as our soul is not only animal, but a spirit made for eternity. In Jesus the coincidence of this breath of his body, of the spiration of his soul, with the breath of the Holy Spirit is the mystery of his mystery, is part of his identity as God made man, as Man-God. The Church, the fathers, the mystics, read the expiring of Jesus on the cross as a first breath of the Holy Spirit, that of the first appearance of the Risen One the evening of Easter in the Upper Room.

When Jesus appears to the disciples in the Upper Room, with the doors closed, it is as if by rising he had not simply recommenced respiration, as happens when a reanimation is successful, but as if his glorious Body already expressed the eternal breath of the Holy Spirit which, in the Trinity and on us, on the Church, is an eternal breathing, an eternal exhalation of love, of grace, of consolation, of wisdom, of light. The Holy Spirit is an eternal out-breathing, which has no need for breathing in, because it is a gift without origin and without end of the Father's love for the Son and the Son's for the Father. This breathing out, this spiration, this exhalation without ever inhaling, that is without holding back, this giving of self without return payment, is the absolute gratuitousness of the love of God, of the love that God is.
As Jesus says to Nicodemus: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8)

Upon contemplating this, we remain literally without breath. It is like when we hear a singing hold a note for a time that seems infinite to us. It makes us lose our breath, because for us it is inconceivable to breathe out without taking a breath.

The glorious Body of Christ has not ceased sending out on the Church, on the apostles, on the disciples, on each of us and on all mankind, that Breath of the evening of Easter. Pentecost too was not a precise, circumscribed event, but a beginning – for us and for God –, of a gift of the Spirit that by His nature cannot end, cannot be taken back, like the gift of the Son and of the Father, or better: in the one and eternal Gift that the Trinity is in Itself and for all.

This is what Jesus tried to explain to the Samaritan woman, which she could not grasp because no one can *grasp* this mystery, but can *believe in it*, can receive it, can let oneself be struck by it:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'” (Jn 4:10–14)

It is always the idea of a spring that can do nothing but give, that has no need to be fed by another than itself, than by its own springing forth; the idea of a breath that does not need to be reinflated by anything but by its own breathing out.

The final exhalation of Christ on the cross is then the physical sign of the highest mystery of the gift of his life, of his love all the way to the end and without being drawn back in. The centurion saw this, perceived this: that the last breath of Jesus was not so much or just the exhausting of his vital spirit but the beginning of an endless gift that the Risen One will then immediately continue, will make his disciples experience in the Upper Room, without end, without drawing back in, without running out.

A few hours after seeing this, when Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, the same centurion feels himself called to go right away to Pilate, the Roman procurator. Perhaps in the meantime he had gone back to his neighborhood with his men, silent as never before when returning from those missions; sad, as they had never been before, with a sense of emptiness inside. And yet, a strange emptiness: a void without anger, without disgust, without vulgarity. A sadness that did not push them as usual toward alcohol, games, women, or the sleep of a beast unaware of everything…
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The centurion maybe sat down at table, without an appetite; then, without having touched his food he might have lain down on his mat, without being able to sleep, looking at the ceiling without seeing it, with his brain and his heart dominated by the images of the crucifixion, of *that* crucifixion, of that Man, of that Face, of that passion without lament, without shouting and blasphemy. What should he now make of that experience, of that encounter, of that light shed on the divine power of that man who, however, was now dead? The centurion cried out: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mt 27:54), but the Man was now dead! What life should continue after this fact? He had seen the Mother of the condemned man, the other women around the cross, a young disciple full of pain; he had looked at them as they left that accursed place, continually turning back to look upon the dead, crucified man. They at least were with someone, loved each other, would have consoled each other. But him? He was desolate; he had no one, he knew no one with whom he could share that strange thing, that indefinable impression that for a moment appeared to him like a flash of piercing light.