



I've always been afraid of deep water. As a child, when it came to sports, I always chose to run or to kick a ball over swimming. But now I have no choice since I have a slipped disc. Swimming is basically the only physical activity I can do without the risk of worsening my condition.

There's something frightening about being under water: you can't breathe. You feel the lack of something very necessary. If you don't take in new air, you will eventually die. On the other hand, while your head is underwater, you can still exhale and feel the bubbles around your face.

Underwater inhalation and exhalation are not as simple and automatic as they are outside the water. While swimming you have to coordinate your movements and breathe at the appropriate moment.

I was swimming the other day and ran out of breath in the middle of the pool. Desperately I lifted my head out of the water, gasping for air. I realised then that I need God's grace as much as I need air in my lungs, or even more. The concept of 'spiritual breathing' dawned on me. We all need to lift ourselves up, towards God, who is always present, like the air around you now.

We can feel suffocated by our daily routine and the many tasks that we have to perform. It is not only natural, but also necessary, to lift up our spirit, to detach ourselves, at least for a moment, from the merely worldly affairs, and to think about things above (cf. Colossians 3:2). Just as it is impossible to swim without ever taking in new air, it is also unreasonable to live without breathing spiritually. Prayer is, indeed, defined as "the raising of one's mind and heart to God"[1]. Spiritual breathing, thus, involves turning towards the Lord, who is like the air we need to live.

Once a swimmer inhales, he lowers his face into the water again. In this way he maintains speed and steadiness. It's the moment to exhale. Keeping the air inside is not useful. Breathing out is as important as breathing in. God's grace and love must be diffused in this world just as the swimmer leaves bubbles behind him in the pool, which

mix in with the mass of water.

This is the second part of spiritual breathing: spreading God's love in our surroundings. Christian life is complete only when spent in giving what has been received. God diffuses his grace in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and then we spread the fruits of our contemplation[2]. This can be done especially through concrete acts of mercy and love. They don't have to be showy or difficult. Simple charity is within everybody's reach. Little acts of love transform the world as little bubbles amidst the water.

Many may feel suffocated or frightened in today's world. If you already have 'air', give it to others in the form of 'bubbles'; if you yourself feel suffocated, it's time to 'turn your head' and pray: simply lift your spirit to the Lord.