

## Gospel text

### **John 1: 29-34**

29 The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, so he said in a loud voice, "This is the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world. 30 About him I have already said, 'After me comes one who has become more important than I, for before me he existed. 31 And I had no idea of his existence, but I came with my water baptism so that he might be known to all Israel. 32 This is what John testified: "I saw the spirit descend from the world of God like a dove and remain on him. 33 I did not know him personally, but the one who sent me to baptize in water said to me: 'If you ever see the spirit descend and remain on anyone, he is the one who baptizes in the holy spirit. 34 This is what I have seen and this is what I testify to: this is the Son of God.

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## Gospel commentary - Homily

### **Assuming a personal destiny to allow life to flourish**

When a mother is expecting a child, she wants this child to be perfectly healthy. This was the case of Vania<sup>1</sup>, an international model. After a girl, it was now a boy. His name would be Henry-Louis. But the months and years that followed revealed what no one wanted: Henry-Louis had a severe intellectual disability. He needed help to wash himself. To go to the bathroom. To get dressed. In the middle of winter, he could go out in sandals in the snow, without a coat, to show off his Montreal Canadiens hockey team jersey. One day, after a visit to her child's elementary school in an underprivileged area, a public school that lacks everything, despite the dedicated and caring staff, she left in tears. Henry-Louis' mother took the initiative to visit each of the families whose child was attending the school to determine their needs. Many of them are single parents. From there, the idea of a foundation that would be created years later, the Foundation for the little Kings, took shape.

In the meantime, Henry-Louis grew up and entered high school. Vania, once again, visits the establishment to discover that it is poorly adapted to the needs of handicapped teenagers: there are stairs that are difficult to climb for students who have poor eyesight or who have great motor challenges (there is no elevator), the classrooms are tiny, and the doorframes are too small, which become embarrassing when the staff has to control a teenager of 6 feet and 200 pounds. Here she is again in tears. She decided to take on an ambitious project: to convince the authorities of the need for a brand new school, designed for this special needs clientele.

Henry-Louis has finally obtained his diploma of mandatory education. But at age 21, young people like him with severe intellectual disabilities fall into a "black hole". They are too old to attend a special school. And their case is considered too serious to be able to integrate a day center or a work platform for the disabled. Vania decided to get involved. Her foundation convinced a number of large companies to open a special workplace for these people. When the project was born, 16 young people, including Henry-Louis, participated in a five-year internship in one of these establishments. A specialized educator from the health network supervised them on site. The "heaviest" cases also had the right to an accompanist - provided by the school service center. The "black hole" became a well of light. And today, Henry-Louis is a regular employee of one of these institutions.

I wanted to tell you this story because it allows us to enter into the mystery of this passage from John's gospel where John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus is the Lamb of God who bears the sins of the world, that he is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit, and that he did not know him before when he baptized in water. What does all this mean? Let's look at the lamb of God. Of course, the lamb evokes the animal without fangs, without claws, without horns, and therefore vulnerable. But the evangelist is thinking above all of that mysterious figure in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 who is said to have been despised and struck down without opening his mouth, and yet it was our sufferings that he bore, our pains with which he was burdened. By taking on flesh, Jesus assumed our human condition marked by wounds, violence, narrow-mindedness, selfishness, weakness, moments of waywardness, but also by good will, the thirst to love, the taste for truth. What I have translated as "who bears the sin of the world" is translated by most of our bibles as "who takes away the sin of the world", which is not wrong, but risks misleading us: all the insistence of Isaiah that the evangelist certainly has in mind is on the fact that the servant bears and assumes suffering humanity, that is what the Hebrew word means and that is also the primary meaning of the Greek word of the evangelist. It is an essential step before speaking of "taking away". It was after crying and visiting families to "bear" their needs that Vania took the initiative of a foundation. It was after carrying the cross of our darkness that Jesus opened the door to light.

Why speak of baptism in the Holy Spirit? The Greek word at the source of the word "baptize" means to sink, in the sense that a ship sinks to the bottom of the water. John the Baptist spoke of a baptism of repentance where one sinks one's old life, which implies first of all that one recognizes it as such. Vania sank in tears while looking at the human misery. Sinking is an important step, for it is in the midst of darkness that the power and dynamism of the mystery at the source of this world can intervene and act, a power called the Holy Spirit. It is in the midst of suffering and death that this force raised Jesus from the dead.

We may be surprised that the evangelist insists on putting on the Baptist's lips that he did not know Jesus. In fact, historically, it does not appear that John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the messiah, so that at the time of the first Christian communities, the disciples of John the Baptist were still pursuing their mission, as the Acts of the Apostles testifies. But the evangelists saw John the Baptist's work as God's plan, whereas John the Baptist's call was heard by Jesus, which awakened him to his mission, and so he was seen as a forerunner. But the evangelist's insistence that he did not know him makes a point: without knowing that he was a forerunner, by simply pursuing his own mission, by fully assuming his destiny with his baptism in water, John

the Baptist opened the way to the baptism in the Holy Spirit, i.e. to this mysterious transforming power of our humanity. This is what allows us to identify ourselves with John the Baptist, we who have no idea of the impact of our lives, insofar as we assume what is our lot, with its joys and sorrows.

The ideal in this world is strength, power, might. It is really counter-intuitive to promote the lamb of God, the powerless being who bears our humanity with its weakness, its suffering, its tears. But true life can only flourish on this path. It is by accepting her disabled child that Vania has been led on new paths of life. Nobody controls what will be his or her lot in life. But by assuming it fully, by "sinking" into it as in a water baptism, one gives the possibility to the baptism of the Spirit, i.e. to the transforming force of the mystery at the source of this world. This was the way of Jesus, this is the way that is offered to us.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, January 2023

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<sup>1</sup> This story was published in [La Presse](#) (Montreal, Canada) by Caroline Touzin, on 27 December, 2022. For the full text (French): [The ex-model who fights for her little kings](#) ▲