

Homily

«*God's Plan and the Sacraments of Christian Initiation*»

Reception into the Catholic Church of *Hanna Håkansson* (Archdiocese of Stockholm)
and Confirmation of *Anna Tompson* (Archdiocese of Westminster)

Basilica San Lorenzo «in Piscibus» in Roma,
Thursday, February 20th 2014, 6.00 pm
(*Isaiah 61:1-3-6.8-9 – John 14:23-26*)

Dear *Hanna Håkansson* and Dear *Anna Tompson*,
Dear Families and Sponsors,
Dear Father *Charles Rochas*
Dear brothers in priestly service and in the diaconate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

If I remember well, I first entered this building in 1982, when I was preparing my doctorate in Moral Theology at the Gregorian University. I was with the then Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Bishop *Paul Josef Cordes*, one of my predecessors as Secretary, who also comes from the Archdiocese of Paderborn and who currently, as a Cardinal, has this as his titular church.

Bishop Cordes had been looking for a place close to Saint Peter's Basilica that could be used as a centre for youth. Despite difficulties and some opposition, he had settled upon the disaffected church of San Lorenzo «in Piscibus», which at that time was being used as an *Art and Design Studio* for the near-by High School *Scuola Pontificia Pio IX*¹. More than thirty years ago, I saw the arrival of this altar, which comes from the Vatican Gardens and had been half-buried not far from the Vatican Museums. I was also here when this hand-painted copy of the Cross of San Damiano was brought in, having been carried here from Assisi².

When I think about it, it seems to me that this place is still, today, an *Art and Design Studio*; not so much on the basis of human creativity, but in order to discover God's project for the human person, and therefore for each one of us. Listening to the *Word of God* and receiving the *Sacraments* continually bring us face to face with the image of God.

(The earlier history of this building also refers to the theme of *God's plan and image*. The sculptor *Pericle Fazzini* (1913-1987) used thus space as his studio from 1970 to 1975, while

¹ Cfr. Claudio Rendina, *Le Chiese di Roma*, Newton & Compton Editori, Milano 2000, 181.

² Cfr. John Paul II, *Homily* for the Inaugural Mass of the "San Lorenzo" International Youth Centre, March 13th 1883, in: *Insegnamenti* VI,1 (1983), 705-709.

creating his famous sculptural composition “The Resurrection”, destined for the Paul VI Audience Hall in the Vatican ³. For Christians, Christ is the perfect image of God, finding its high point in his resurrection from the dead ⁴.)

1. God’s plan for the human person

If we take time to reflect, we discover that all of the Church’s sacraments, and in particular the sacraments of Christian initiation - *Baptism*, *Confirmation* and the *Eucharist* -, show us the original plan that God has for humanity, then introduce us to this plan, and remind us of this plan. We see easily that the sacrament of confirmation is there to help us and to guide us towards God’s plan.

Renewing our baptismal promises – something that we will do here in a few minutes time – reminds us of what happened to us years ago, when we received the Sacrament of Baptism. It is good – as Pope Francis himself has said often recently – to reflect on the profound meaning of baptism for our Christian faith. The Sacrament of Baptism is the first step in Christian initiation. We know that passing through this “gateway” made of us *sons and daughters of God*, *reborn* in water and in the Holy Spirit, a *new creation*. We know that we were incorporated into the mystical *body of Christ* (cf. 1 *Cor* 12, 13), becoming members of his Church.

This is why we can compare Baptism to one side of a coin or medal, where we see the symbols of baptism: *water*, the *Holy Spirit*, for example in the image of a dove, *immersion*, *Jesus’ baptism* in the River Jordan, a *baptismal font* or indeed other symbols like these. On the other side of this coin or medal there is the Sacrament of *Confirmation*, and here also there would be the symbol of the Holy Spirit: it is the sacrament of *mature* faith. *Confirmation*, the sacrament that will be conferred on Hanna and Anna in a few minutes time, is like an act of ratification – indeed a confirmation – of the duties they received at their Baptism.

Baptism and Confirmation are two sacraments that go together – they are inseparable. In each of these sacraments the Holy Spirit is, twice over, the dynamic power that is given. So this medal, with two sides to it, is, for Hanna and for Anna, the “*seal of the covenant*” between them and God the Father, with Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

2. Some brush-strokes in God’s plan

³ Ferdinando Mor, *Fazzini e la Risurrezione*, Editore Monogramma, Ravenna 1999; Giorgio de Marchis, *Pericle Fazzini. 1913–1987. Bildhauer und Maler*; Halle an der Saale Kunstverein 1995. The sculto describe the fundamental idea of this work inthese terms: “I thought about showing Chrsit as he bursts out from this great olive grove, place of peace at during huis last prayers. Christ resurrects from this crater opened by a nuclear bomb: from an atrocious explosion, a vortex of violence and energy”.

⁴ Cfr. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter «*Redemptor Hominis*», March 4th 1987, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1987, n. 14: “This man is the way for the Church-a way that, in a sense, is the basis of all the other ways that the Church must walk-because man-every man without any exception whatever-has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man-with each man without any exception whatever-Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it: “Christ, who died and was raised up for all, provides man"-each man and every man"-with the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme calling (GS 10).”

The two readings, from the Old Testament and from the New Testament, show us a few brush-strokes of this work of art that is God's plan for each human person. The *first reading* comes from the Prophet Isaiah (cf. *Is* 61:1-3.6.89) and sets out some of the consequences of being anointed with holy oil – chrism – and therefore of the anointing that happens in the Sacrament of Confirmation. The Lord “has *sent* me to *bring the good news* to the poor, to *bind up* the wounds of the broken-hearted, to *proclaim* freedom... and set prisoners free... to *announce* a year of the Lord's mercy... to *console*.. and *bring joy* to the afflicted.”

These are demanding tasks that help to re-establish the image that God has of each human person, and that he has for all creation. God's plan intended that the human person be in *harmony* with himself or herself, and with others; men and women who might be *free*, deep down in themselves and far-afield in the world; men and women of *mercy*, who *see* the wounds of others and then *help* and *console* them.

In the Gospel of John (cf. *Jn* 14: 23-26) we are reminded of the foundation of all the commitments asked of us by the Prophet Isaiah: *love towards God*. “*If someone loves me, he will keep my word*”. And Jesus promises in reply the gift of God's love: “*my Father will love him and we will come to him and dwell with him*”⁵. In each Sacrament we enter into this love that comes from God, but only if we, in turn, do our part: offering *our* love. The Sacraments give us the strength, and the courage, and the perseverance that we need in order to dwell in God's love.

The Gospel of John also tells us that the Consoler – the Holy Spirit – has an important task in this dynamism. “*The Consoler, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and will remind you of all that I have said*”. Because of the deep bond between the Sacrament of Confirmation and the Spirit of God, we call upon the special assistance of the Consoler during this celebration, the Spirit who wants to remind us, without ceasing, of the brush-strokes of God's plan for us. Here the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit come to mind, for they give colour to the picture God paints: *Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Strength, Knowledge, Piety, Wonder and Awe* for God.

3. The Sacraments of Christian Initiation: a wonderful blessing from God

I would like to summarise my reflexions with the famous Blessing of Aaron, that comes to us from the Old Testament, given by God to Moses, and is found in the Book of Numbers (cf. *Nm* 6: 24-26):

***“May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make his face shine down upon you and give you grace.
May the Lord look upon you and grant you peace.”***

⁵ Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, in: HThL NT IV/3, 93-96; Jürgen Becker, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, Kapitel 11-21, in: ÖKT 4/2, 558-563; Charles Kingsley Barrett, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, in: KEK Sonderband, 455 f.

The three lines and six invocations of the Blessing of Aaron are accomplished in a particular way in the Sacraments of Christian Initiation: because these are indeed a great blessing from the Lord ⁶.

With the coming of Christ, *God's face* shines upon us, just as in this blessing of Aaron: God has shown us his face in a unique and definitive way in the person of Jesus Christ. (cf. *Eph* 1: 21). This shining light of God wants to reach out to each human person ever created: each one created in the image and likeness of the Creator.

And if we want to *see* God, if we want to know *what God is like* and how he *acts*, then we need to look at *Jesus*, the only-begotten Son of God. We need to meditate on his *word*, and become aware of his *action* and his *gestures*. Finally, we need to encounter him in the *sacraments*, particularly in the sacrament of the *Eucharist*.

At the same time, Jesus is the *highest grace* that God could ever give us, and he is offered to us in his *incarnation*, his *sacrifice*, his *death* and his *resurrection*.

In the last line of the Blessing of Aaron, *God's nearness* to us is mentioned, and *peace* is the supreme expression of this nearness. This *Shalom*, coming from God, is much more than a simple absence of war, much more than a silencing of gunfire, much more than a lack of conflict. Indeed, this *Shalom* that comes from God entails being and living face to face with the Lord, and means living in a profound harmony with oneself, with others and with the whole of creation: with all living things and the nature that surrounds us.

So let us pray for *Hanna* and for *Anna*, so that the great gifts and graces that they receive with the Sacraments of Christian Initiation, given to them today, might grow and be strengthened with time.

Let us also pray for the whole of the Christian community: may each member do what is necessary in order to be good witnesses and faithful companions for *Hanna* and for *Anna* in their journey of faith.

Amen.

□ *Bishop Josef Clemens,*
Secretary, Pontifical Council for the Laity,
Vatican City

⁶ K. Seybold, *Der aaronitische Segen*. Studien zu Numeri 6,22-27, Neukirchner Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1977; ders., *Der Segen und andere liturgische Worte aus der hebräischen Bibel*, Theologischer Verlag, Zürich 2004.