

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

What is in a name?

January 12-13, 2013 7:00 pm, 9:00 am SVDP, 12:00 Noon, 5:00 pm

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

“What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” *Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1-2)* In the play, the context is all-important. Here Juliet tells Romeo that a name is an artificial and meaningless convention, and that she loves the person who is called "Montague", not the Montague name and not the Montague family. But is this correct to say that names are meaningless? For Christians, today's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is a perfect opportunity to highlight the importance of names. Consider these statistics from the Social Security Administration:

Boys names 2011

- 1. Jacob
- 2. Mason
- 3. William
- 4. Jayden
- 5. Noah
- 6. Michael
- 7. Ethan
- 8. Alexander
- 9. Aiden
- 10. Daniel

Girls names 2011

- 1. Sophia
- 2. Isabella
- 3. Emma
- 4. Olivia
- 5. Ava
- 6. Emily
- 7. Abigail
- 8. Madison
- 9. Mia
- 10. Chloe

Note: Rank 1 is the most popular, rank 2 is the next most popular, and so forth.

2011- 5 out of 10 boys names either biblical or saints

2011- 3 out of 10 biblical or saints name (though admittedly obscure)

Top Ten Names for Children 1963

1	David	868	Lisa	509
2	John, Michael (tie)	862	Mary	474
3			Maria	386
4	James	744	Susan	372
5	Robert	696	Karen	310
6	Mark	507	Patricia	308
7	Richard, William (tie)	455	Linda	289
8			Donna	271
9	Thomas	369	Sandra	255
10	Kevin	349	Deborah	22

John is now No. 27 and Mary has fallen to No. 112 – the lowest ever for both names. Yes, much has changed since my birth! Some of this is attributable to normal changes in trends— we no longer name our children Walter, Dorothy or Mildred either— as was common 100 years ago. But part of it is much deeper, including a loss of the connection between Baptism and one’s name.

Our Catechism offers helpful guidance in this area:

In Baptism, the Lord's name sanctifies man, and the Christian receives his name in the Church. This can be the name of a saint, that is, of a disciple who has lived a life of exemplary fidelity to the Lord. ... The ‘baptismal name’ can also express a Christian mystery or Christian virtue. ‘Parents, sponsors and the pastor are to see that a name is not given which is foreign to Christian sentiment.’¹

So, it is clearly the case that the Church recommends most heartily the naming of children after saints. Our Holy Father has called the Christian name “an unmistakable sign that the Holy Spirit gives birth to man ‘anew’ from the womb of the Church.”² Young people face tremendous pressures to be trendy—this has not changed one bit over the years. So too do new parents. But many trends demand scrutiny, and much of what we hold sacred ebbs and flows with the times, but we are called to “stand apart” and hold fast to tradition.

Names have meanings, and those meanings carry with them tremendous power. Take my own name, for example: The name John originates from the Hebrew and it means 'God is gracious'. Matthew means “the Lord’s gift”; Margaret means ‘pearl’; Teresa means ‘one who reaps’; Sophia means ‘wisdom’ and so on. We tend to name people after important historical personages, after relatives

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2156 (cf. also Code of Canon Law, Can. # 855).

² Pope Benedict XVI Sunday *Angelus*, 9 January 2011 at the Vatican

(carrying on the family name), or after those to whom we look for inspiration; the saints should hold pride of place amongst Catholics.

The Church proposes; she does not impose. The use of a clearly Christian name is a very strong recommendation to consider, one well worth your consideration. What is strictly forbidden is a name that would offend the Christian sensibility. But it is equally important to note what is recommended. There are some wonderful books of saints' names for young Catholic parents. Buy one, or buy one for someone you know in that stage of life! The loss of the sense of sacredness of names is connected with the loss of the sense of the sacredness of persons today.

It is crucial for us to recover a greater Christian sense today. The steady "de-sanctification" of our names sadly may well represent more than just a trend. Certainly, some names take on a character very peculiar to the times, and speak of certain generations. Others though, are ageless and withstand the test of time.

I urge to soon-to-be parents and newly married couples that it is well worth considering the importance of patron saints names, as well as noting the feast days on or around the day of birth, and heroes after whom it would spiritually benefit your child down the road if he/she knew there was a connection. *What is in a name?* In point of fact, words are important; let us pray for the grace to respect the power inherent in our words in all types of settings, including that at the time of birth. Even our names provide witness to our beliefs.

As we close the Christmas season for this year, the occasion of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord serves as a valuable reminder of the importance of our own Baptism as the primordial sacrament of our salvation. By respecting and protecting its central role in our lives, we can cooperate to help to build a civilization of love and truth.