

The Holy Name of *Jesus*

Moses thought that he was asking a simple question when, after God appeared to him in a burning bush, he wanted to know His name. The response he got must have made him wonder: “God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” (Ex 3:14) It was the first time that God revealed His name to His Chosen People.

What’s in a name? Whether we like it or not, no other word catches our attention quite like our name. In the Old Testament, we encounter a wide variety of strange and wonderful names, but none of them compares with the Divine Name. It is set apart, holy and powerful.

One of the Ten Commandments deals exclusively with it: “You shall not take the name of the LORD either before birth (think of St. John the Baptist)



Juan de Roelas, Adoration of the Name of Jesus. c.1605

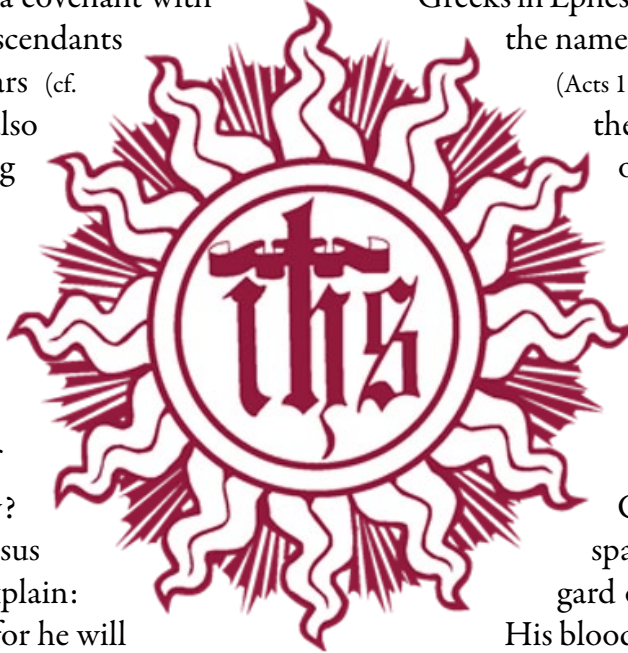
your God in vain” (Ex 20:7). The Psalmist sings of it, “Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted” (Ps 148). Indeed, because it was so holy, it was pronounced by the Jewish High Priest only once a year when he entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple. So why such a big deal over a name?

In the minds of Christians and Jews throughout Salvation History, names mattered. For one thing, knowing someone’s name revealed something about that person. Esau was named for his hairiness and Jacob for his grip on Esau’s heel when they were born (Gen 25:25-26). More significantly,

there are names that are given by God Himself, either before birth (think of St. John the Baptist)

or later in life, signifying a new mission. For instance, Abram was renamed Abraham, meaning “Father of a Multitude,” after God made a covenant with him, promising to give him descendants more numerous than the stars (cf. Gen 17:5). Jacob’s name was also changed to Israel, for having “striven with God and with men” and prevailing (Gen 32:28). Most obviously, a name also summons someone, thus, calling on the Lord’s name meant asking for His help.

What about the name of Jesus? What does it signify? Well, the Gospels tell us that Jesus means “Savior” and go on to explain: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” And this He does because He is both God and man, just as the prophet Isaiah prophesied: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa 7:14) which means, “God with us” (cf. Matt 1:23). So, in His name, we find both His identity and mission. We also learn of the power of this name. Our Lord tells His Apostles, “in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16:17). In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Peter performs his first miracle in the name of Jesus. He tells the astonished crowds that, “faith in [Jesus’] name, has made this man strong whom you see and know; and the faith which is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all” (Acts 3:16). Even the demons testified to the power of Jesus’ name. In the episode of the Seven Sons of the Jewish High Priest, Sceva, who were trying to exorcise a demon using the name of Je-



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sus, the demon responded, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” Thus, among both Jews and Greeks in Ephesus, “fear fell upon them all; and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.”

(Acts 19:17) So sweet and wonderful is the name of Jesus that St. Francis of Assisi used to lick his lips after pronouncing it. Sad to say, such example is hard to come by these days.

The loss of the sacred in our modern world includes a loss of reverence for the Holy Name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is sad to see His name spat out like a curse, with no regard or love for the One Who shed His blood for our salvation. In 1846, our

Lady appeared to two shepherds at La Salette in France. She wept as she related the main cause of her sorrow: a disregard for the Lord’s day and taking Jesus’ name in vain. As she put it, “The cart drivers cannot swear without bringing in my Son’s name.” She then prophesied a series of calamities that would come upon the French people if they did not change their ways. Incredibly, once the message spread and miracles began to accompany it, people did change and, within five years, France was filled with devotion. It is a great story of hope and a lesson for us who live in times that are certainly no better.

In our Maronite Calendar, we begin the new year with the Circumcision of Jesus, eight days after Christmas because, as the Gospel of St. Luke tells us, “...at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” (2:21) Yet it is also a reminder for us to begin the New Year with the Holy Name of Jesus on our lips.

We are all tempted to look for another savior. When

God commanded that “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3) He knew full well our tendencies. Nor is this a problem that mankind outgrew in time. Even today, we are still looking for a god that might suit us better, though most may never admit it. The most common form of idolatry is the worship of oneself. How do we know if we fall into this? The simplest way is to watch our reaction when things don’t go our way. In other words, when the One, True God’s Will opposes our own. When we look to ourselves – our skills, money, influence, etc. – to save us from what is, ultimately, the effect of sin, then we have made ourselves into our own saviors and set ourselves up for a big disappointment, for there is no other Savior but our Lord, Who came into this world to save us from our sins.

So a good way to start this New Year is with the

name of Jesus on our lips as our Lord and Savior and that spoken with love and reverence. Not only would it remind us that He is always present and involved in our lives, but it would also serve as a good example to others as well as a means of reparation for the many times that His Name is abused.

Indeed, there is no shorter prayer than that of the Holy Name of Jesus and every time we say it we are both asking Him to save us (above all, from sin) and professing our faith in Him. As the book of Sirach reminds us, “Consider the ancient generations and see: who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? ... Or who ever called upon him and was overlooked?” (2:10) May our lives then redound to the greater glory of our Lord and may His name be blessed forever! ❖