

Dearly beloved,

Today we mark the eighth day after Our Lord's birth at Bethlehem and also commemorate His circumcision and the giving of His name. January 1 has been a holy day of obligation for Christians since very early times, and that for two reasons: first, because as a perfection of the Jewish manner of celebrating solemn feasts, we mark the most important holy days by eight days of rejoicing, with both the first day of the feast and the eighth day being days where all Christians are obliged to attend Mass. The second reason is because this day was marked in the Roman Empire by excessive and unholy revelry, and so the Christians kept it as a holy day in reparation for the sins of the pagans.

Today's feast gives us many things to contemplate, among which is the giving of a name to Jesus by His earthly parents. At the time of Our Lord's birth, it was Jewish custom to name a male child on the day of his circumcision, eight days after his birth. We know from Matthew that Joseph learned the name of the child Mary had conceived from the angel who appeared to him in a dream and told him to take Mary as his wife. The angel said, "Mary will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The name Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means YHWH saves. In telling Joseph to name the child Jesus, he was instructing him and us of the nature of the child's mission: He was to save His people, and not from a foreign oppressor or from poverty, but from their sins, the thing or the no-thing which makes human life miserable, and without which the other material evils we suffer would not cause us grief. Death also, which grieves us so, came to be as a penalty for sin.

The Jewish people and many ancient cultures believed that the name a person was given had great significance for that person's life, and in some mystical way expressed the essence of the person. Hence Jesus' name tells us of His essence as man: He saves. He is unnameable as God, for whatever name we put upon God expresses only an aspect of His being and is not adequate; but as man, Christ can be named, and His name tells us why He became man: to save us.

As members of His Body, we share in all of Christ's mysteries, and His reception of a name is no different. It has significance for us beyond the meaning of the holy name, and the Book of Revelation gives us two ways in which we also receive a name and thus share in the salvation Christ brings.

In the fourteenth chapter, St. John tells us that in his vision "I looked, and on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." The ones who belonged to God had the name of Jesus and the name of the Father on their foreheads, the most visible part of our bodies, the part which others could not miss, and thus they would know that these persons belonged to the Holy Trinity.

St. John's vision is both of heaven and of earth, and thus those in grace on earth also have the name of the Lamb written on their foreheads insofar as they belong to Christ and give their lives to Him. Since a name represents the essence of the person or what most defines them, it is fitting that each Christian is mystically marked by the name of the Savior and in such a way that others know they are Christians. On earth this means we profess Christ in both our beliefs and our moral lives. In heaven it will be a quality of the body which shows outwardly the definitive and perfect union we have with our God, such that we can never be separated from Him again by sin.

In the second chapter, there is another mention of a name given by Christ to those who love Him. He says, "To him who conquers I will give a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it." This means that for the one who strives for holiness and who dies in a state of grace, of the many gifts he will receive in heaven, one will be a new name, one that only he understands, for it will acknowledge all the ways in which he suffered for Christ and gave his life to Him while on earth.

This notion of receiving a new name from Our Lord is known to us already in the story of St. Peter. His name before he followed Christ was Simon, but when Jesus had chosen him to carry out a special mission in His Church, He renamed him, giving him a name unknown before that time, for calling a child Rock (which is what Peter means) would have been akin to naming a child Tree or River. Thus in a way Peter's name was a new name which only Christ and Peter fully understood. But then there was also the development of that name, the intimate relationship that grew between Our Lord and Peter, which gave more and more meaning to the name until Peter's martyrdom. Peter made mistakes, he rebuked Christ, he betrayed Him, he ran away in fear and shame when Jesus suffered His bitter passion. And yet he was still forgiven, and the full significance of His name of Rock did not end with his betrayal, but rather included it without being defined by it.

So also when we completely dedicate ourselves to Christ, we receive a new name, a name which signifies both what we have been and what we will be. It is a name of promise, provided we cooperate with grace and trust the Lord to lead in paths unknown to us. And it is also a name that signifies that we are known, that we are understood, that the things we suffer for love of God may go unseen by the world, but not by the Lord. This is the beauty of our God: He gives us all things--life, grace, truth, love—and then He rewards us for the ways in which we serve Him. We should be the ones to praise Him, and yet in the world to come He will praise us also for being faithful to Him.

So as this new year begins, may each of consider in his own heart how Christ has marked our foreheads and given us a name that no one else knows, a role in the economy of salvation no one else can fill, a sign of love that both forgives sins and conveys grace for what lies ahead. Let us set aside one hour this week to be with Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and review the past year with Him, thanking Him for both the good and the bad, and reflecting upon the wonder and splendor of His Providence in our lives, and asking grace for the year to come. "To him who conquers I will give a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it." May we be worthy of this new name, given by Our Savior, and thus join Him in the streets of the New Jerusalem, where every tear will be wiped away and we shall shine the sun forever and ever.