

What's in a name?

Recently, a religious group in the local town invited me to be part of a panel. The main presenter offered a reflection paper of the name of Jesus. This was followed by comments and discussion on the topic. Afterwards, I was to share some reflections from my perspective.

The presenter outlined in her ten minute paper some thoughts on the name of Jesus. She talked about the need for reverence for the name of Jesus, healing in the name of Jesus as reflected in the scripture; different novenas and devotions associated with the name of Jesus.

The discussion, that followed the presentation, spoke about celebrating the sacraments, about using the name of Jesus in vain and how one might approach such misuse of the name of Jesus. During the discussion, I jotted down some thoughts and reflections.

What's in a name? In the past, parents took special care and time in choosing a name for their children. Usually, they were named after a favorite saint whose birthday occurred close to the birthday of the child or they named the child after an aunt, uncle, grandparent or someone close to the family. Nowadays, baby names are as foreign as a trip to the moon. One wonders how a child with such an unusual name will react to it as they grow into adulthood.

A name has a personal identity, aura, mystery, dignity associated with it. A person's personality, somehow, develops around such a name.

Often, if we want to hurt someone, we may tag them with a derogatory name, a nickname that often is impossible to shake off. It can be a way of not only dragging someone's good name through the mire but also can have the effect of causing psychological damage. Such practice involves taking the identity, dignity and personality of someone and crushing it.

In the Old Testament, people asked God to reveal his name. He was reluctant to do so. When one reveals one's name to another person, one sets up a bond, a relationship of trust, of identity with that person. Obviously, God revealed his name fully in the person of Jesus.

A recent survey in "USA Today," showed that the easier your name is to pronounce, the more trustworthy people will assume you are. And the reverse is also true—the more complicated your name is, the more untrustworthy you will seem. The theory behind it explains that when we encounter new information, how easy or difficult it is to process, plays an important role in all sorts of situations.

This research shows that people with more familiar names tend to be rated as more likeable, are preferred as mock election candidates and hold higher positions. In other words, our hidden biases have the potential to affect many aspects of our daily lives, both professional and personal. It also showed that, immigrants to the United States who had changed their names to better blend into their new environment, fared better in the job market and achieved higher incomes than those who stuck with their own names.

Many celebrities opt to change their names at the beginning of their careers—it's certainly true that Carlos Irwin Estevez doesn't roll off the tongue in quite the same way Charlie Sheen does, and Demi Moore is undeniably easier to pronounce than Demetria Gene Guynes.

I always remember the story told by Fr. Anthony deMello about the boy who saw this strange bird gliding effortlessly in the sky with such grace, power and magical movement. One day, he asked his elders what was that magnificent bird. They shrugged their shoulders and said, "It is an eagle." From that moment, every time the boy saw the magnificent bird glide through the sky, he simply realized it was an eagle. Naming the bird took away the mystery.

It is no wonder that God was so reluctant to divulge his name to the people who asked. Yet, centuries later, in order to forge a more intimate bond of relationship and trust with his people, he revealed his name in Jesus.

As part of the discussion that night, a woman began to quote that powerful passage from Philippians "that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11)

When I think of my own given and middle name, I know that I am connected with my two grandfathers that I never met. And I know that, because of my faith name and journey, I am connected with the author of my life. So, what's in a name? Everything that matters.