Mary the Mother of God

When my parents named their kids, they chose names that related to their faith and that they thought would sound good when we became adults. Their firstborn, my sister Margaret, received her name only partly because of the 4th-century martyr St. Margaret of Antioch and the 11th-century St. Margaret of Scotland. It had more to do with my mother's mother and my father's mother, both of whom were named Margaret. The rest of us were named expressly for biblical saints: John, Paul, Michael, Thomas and Mary in that order. Today's parents cite a variety of reasons for naming their children. Some choose saints, historical figures, celebrities, or family members, and others want a name that is totally unique to their child whether in sound or spelling, to stress such virtues as individuality, personal strength, and pleasing sounds.

The Catholic Church used to expect saints' names for the sacrament of baptism. Today the law simply requires that a name foreign to Christian sensibility not be given. Neutral names are acceptable, but not ones that would glamorize a non-Christian ideal. My father's middle name was that of the 12th-century German Saint Adolph, whose feast day was my dad's mother's birthday. That worked fine for a family originally from Prussia when he was baptized in 1919, but after the rise of Hitler, naming a child Adolph today would raise the possibility of a name foreign to Christian sensibility.

In the case of the Holy Family, Mary and Joseph had an easy time coming up with a name for their child. Gabriel had told Mary what to call him even before he was conceived. Neither of them argued with an angel. The name "Jesus" in English is the same Hebrew name as "Joshua". It comes from the word meaning "to save." You can hear it inside a word we use at every Mass, "Hosanna," which calls upon God as the highest or greatest savior. Gabriel knew that the Son of God was coming in order to save people from their sins. So the name "Jesus" is a kind of nom-de-guerre, a nickname for a warrior going into battle, like "the Red Baron." In his case, he engages the battle of sin and wins it. He is the conqueror of sin and the forgiver of sinners. He is Savior.

He took that name because we humans are sinful, weak, selfish, and ill-equipped for every spiritual battle. If we are to win the war against sin, we need help. This awareness is countercultural in a society that praises such virtues as individuality, personal strength and pleasing sounds. We are trained to prefer the battle cry, "I've got this," over the battle cry, "I need help," even when we haven't got this and we do need help.

As we celebrate Mary the Mother of God on the eighth day of Christmas, St. Luke provides the gospel passage that tells us about the naming of Jesus on the eighth day of his life—the custom at the time. On the day of his birth, when the shepherds arrived at the manger, they told everyone there about the angels who sent them. Luke then beautifully notes, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." She surely reflected as we do today at the marvels that God has done, sending his own Son into our world. Wherever our world is small and poor, sick and fractured, sinful and selfish, there is a cure. He is the Son of God. His mother is Mary. And his holy name is Jesus.

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