

8-25-2019 Saint Lawrence Patronal Feast Day  
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Happy Name's day of our parish here at St. Lawrence. Patronal Feasts of parishes around the world are great feasts, something that here in the American mission field, we don't really understand yet. We understand the very important feast days of the year where we are motivated to celebrate to a greater degree with more devotion.

Over the years we have learned more and more to celebrate as is the custom, the tradition of the church, our patron. We are the church of St. Lawrence. For some of us, that is a part of a deliberate process that we've participated in, choosing that name, reclaiming the great early martyr of the church, Lawrence, after whom the Valley is named. For others, they've discovered us after that fact. They may have simply searched the internet and found a church that was close to them and it happened to be called St. Lawrence, and they are here. But we have to take the time always to contemplate the reality behind a name, the name of our parish, our own name. What did our parents choose for us? Or did we take a new name at baptism? Do we know those who took a new name at their ordination to the diaconate, or the priesthood or being a bishop? People who are baptized and took a new name at baptism. What is this tradition? What is the power that is in the name?

In this day of general nihilism, general deconstructionism, where we are taught that nothing really is meaningful. I remember being in school and studying literature and defending the intent of the author, because when a person sits down to write a book, they have an intent. If it's a real author in a real book, the book has an intent. It comes into being for a purpose, and the author's hope is that when you get to the end of the work, you will have experienced their intent. The professors at the time would argue, "No, it doesn't really matter. It doesn't even matter what the intention. It doesn't matter if it's documented, what the intent is. The story is random. The words made up, language really just a sound that we all make and in different places there's different sounds and it really is very arbitrary. There is no real meaning to a word or to a name."

But we know as Orthodox Christians, this is not true. We know that everything is meaningful, both good and bad. We know that everything in life is to be even sacramental for us. We come to the parish, to the priest, in order to receive the great sacraments, to be baptized and Chrismated, to receive Holy Communion, to renew our baptism through confession, to be married in the church or ordained in the church, to come and receive Holy Unction in the church, these great sacraments.

But, is not all of life really to be with a little "s", sacramental? Is not sitting down at the dinner table together with our family, a little sacrament, a little communion? A communion of the little trinity of our family, mother and father and child. All of life is meaningful, all of life is sacramental, in the end we find out. All of our life is drawing us closer to those around us and closer to God. Or, pushing us away from others and away from God. As I have said many times, there is no neutral that we can get into spiritually. There is no static position that an Orthodox Christian can be in. We are either moving forward towards God and neighbor, or we are moving away from them.

And when we look even at a name, we see that even names are sacramental, that God gives names, that God gave His own son a name that we would know him by. We see that it is the tradition in the

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church to take the name of a patron saint at your baptism or to pick one later, to at least know who your patron saint is, what is their name?

If we are asked by someone "who is your patron saint?" and we don't know their name, we're in a predicament. We need to fix something. Who is our best friend in heaven that we are spending the most time with? Who are we asking to help us get to heaven with them? When we look in scripture, we see that at times God found it appropriate to encounter people and to give them a new name. There are reasons why straight from the Judeo-Christian tradition that people are not named things like Ham. There's a reason for that.

I think it's John Grisham, the novelist who has a very interesting book with a character in it and his name is Ham. No one names their children Ham. Why? Ham was a bad person in the Old Testament, he son of Noah who knew Noah's nakedness. In the character in the book, the character is a bad person. He is named Evilie and he becomes a person of evil, and in the book he dies violently and the reader is relieved when it happens. Why is no one named Jezebel? Why is that even a name that even outside of the church, people still know is a bad name? Why isn't anyone named Judas in our country? They will be, believe me, in time. In the 70's we had Judas Priest, we had Black Sabbath, they made an attempt, it will come back. But, it's amazing that no one defies the Judeo-Christian tradition enough to have confidence in those evil names.

When we pay attention to scripture, we see that when God encountered Abraham, he changed his name. His name was Abram, which meant a high father and God changed his name, not Christ, not the incarnate logos in his house, but the voice of God speaking to Abraham, changed his name from Abram to Abraham. From high father to the father of a multitude, his name meant. Did he not live up to that name that God gave him? His wife's name was Sarai, which meant my princess, and God changed her name to Sarah, which meant the mother of many nations. Did she not live up to that name that God gave to her? Even when God encounters Jacob later on, Jacob's name means supplanter.

Someone bonked their head. Jacob's name means supplanter because Jacob stole the birthright of his brother. When God encounters Jacob, He changes his name from supplanter to having power with God. He was given the name Israel. That was actually his name. When God encounters in the Logos, the form of the Logos, the incarnate Son Christ, when he encounters Simon, he renames him Peter. He changes his name from God has heard or God has listened, to the rock, and Peter will live up to this name. When we look at John the Baptist, his name is given by God. When we look at the Messiah being born of Mary, his name is given, he will be called Jesus for he will save mankind.

So, a name has power. A name identifies us. I have a great-grandfather who his middle name was Lucifer. Isn't that terrible? His father was not a believer, and his father thought that everyone's naming people after Christian saints and different Bible characters, why not go for it? Why not have a Judas or a Jezebel? Let's have a Lucifer. Thank God it was his middle name and he denied that name. He was a wonderful, gentle, believing man, but in my family history we're always mystified by that. What was he, his dad, thinking? Literally? What if he had taken on that name, I am Lucifer, and lived up to it? What a destructive evil life he would have brought into the world.

Fortunately, he denied that name and in the providence of God, we encounter things and this all comes down to here we are, we're St. Lawrence Church, we're nothing else. We don't have an

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alternate name. Our name here at St. Lawrence is not fluid, it's not going to change. We have brothers and sisters in this area who are devoted to other saints. We have Christians in our county, who they have a job to honor the Holy Prophet, Elijah or Elias in Santa Cruz. We have brothers and sisters who their job, were all Christians, but some of us are called to a different job. Some of them have the job of honoring the holy apostles, the leaders, Peter and Paul. It's their job. We are all brothers and sisters in the church, but here in this parish we have a job to honor the name of St. Lawrence.

Lawrence means the bright one or the shining one. He fulfilled, think about it, how did he fulfill his name? He was given the name, the shining one, the bright one, and he ends his life illumined on the gridiron burning in fire, but not in pain. Being destroyed by man and yet shining with the grace of God, and the grace of his faith, even to his last breath, giving things to God and exhorting the people as he cooked on the fire. In some traditions, he says at the end, to the emperor who is very distraught, if you look in the icon, you can see his face. He says to him, "I'm done now. You can turn me over and eat."

He was not afraid. He was shining even in that fire, that illumined not only his body, but his soul as well, with light and with uncreated light, he lived up to his name. So, when we come to these patronal feasts, we have to realize that in God's providence, we were brought here to honor St. Lawrence. That is one of the works that we are called to as members of this parish. We live in a Valley, most of us that is named after him, but the people don't know. They know San Lorenzo, San Lorenzo, San Lorenzo. They have no idea who St. Lawrence is, but we are happy to tell them.

We had a couple of sheriffs in the church earlier this week. They came in, and not only being blown away with how beautiful the church was, never having been inside the building before, they ended up like every visitor does, going down the back wall, looking at the life and the martyrdom of St. Lawrence, and these uniformed men who are community leaders, turning to the clergy that were there and saying, "This is him? This is who the Valley is named after. That's incredible. What an incredible story. What a hero, what a man of faith." What an inspiration for our local people, even our local law enforcement.

So, we celebrate today with great joy. God has providentially put us in relationship with this one man, this one Christian with a very particular story. Although we go through our life dedicated to our families, I am both a Hardenbrook and a Christian. I'm a Christian first though, but I'm part of the family. I am also a Christian, but I am a member of St. Lawrence Church. I love all of the Saints, but one of those Saints I am called to be dedicated to, because I am a priest here and you are members here. So, let us renew in our life, our love for St. Lawrence, our prayers to him, that the name that God has given us would not go unfulfilled.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.