

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We've been asking this question of ourselves long before, and long since, Juliet, of the despised Capulets, posed it to her beloved Romeo, of the loathed Montagues.

Does it make any difference what we call something, or someone? Would not a rose by any other name, smell just as sweet?

Juliet, of course, had it right—Her Romeo would be as beloved to her, no matter what his name. It is his essence, not his accident of familial name that makes him uniquely who he is.

But, still, does that mean it makes no difference how we name what, and whom, we love?

Well, ask any prospective parent about names, and you'll get an earful about how important it is.

And ask any teenager who's "graduated" from Annie to Anne, or Johnny to Jon—it does make a difference. Their chosen name reflects their understanding that, while they are still essentially the person they were as a child, experientially they have come to a more evolved understanding of their relationship to the world, and they want to acknowledge and express that with a more mature refining of their name.

The choice of a name is a powerfully identifying experience-- we even recognize it sacramentally in Baptism and Confirmation—two pivotal points

in a person's faith life, two points which reflect the two powers of name choosing. First, the choosing done on our behalf, so we have an identity to

hang on to, and, second the choosing done as adults, where we decide what we will be called.

And what does this have to do with Liturgy, you ask?

Lots!

And it's especially apropos this Feast of Trinity Sunday, where we celebrate the names and manifestations of the God of our faith.

One of the great gifts of the Catholic imagination is the sense of God as an entity so complex, that a single "name" is not enough to hold, to explain the deep richness of God's nature.

Our Gift Preparation song this week, *God, Beyond All Names* by Bernadette Farrell, articulates and celebrates well the intricate richness of this experience of God.

A mystery, yes, but a certainty of our faith nonetheless: the God we experience is a God of complexity whose existence is not limited to an identifiable, quantifiable, static entity, but whose very essence is itself only expressible as an organic and dynamic relationship, the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit.

How does all this fit into the topic of liturgy and music?

There is, amongst pastors, amongst lay people, amongst composers, amongst musicians, amongst cardinals, a discussion, a rather heated one to put it mildly, about how we speak of God, and our relationship to the Divine. Loosely under the topic of "Inclusive Language" it draws in the disciplines

of theology, etymology, literature, sociology and history.

A complex topic, but, without being overly simplistic, there are two schools of thought.

The one perspective, held with tenacious conviction by many a cardinal, and many a committed church-goer, is that there is nothing "wrong" with referring to God as "Him," or to Judeo-Christian beginnings, we have, of course, understood that God is spirit, not a material being bound by human

gender. Any references to the masculine have simply been a convenient literary style, a linguistic choice to simplify the language of reference to God. There is no implication of gender by the word Him—it is merely a poetic device to express the vitality and personalness of God, an experience not communicated by a neuter/neutral word like "it." Indeed, "God stretched out His hands over the waters of the earth, and saw that it was good..." does not make for great poetry.

And when it comes to the use of masculine terminology for describing the people of God, the brothers, the sons of God, these, too, are

simply literary devices common to the writers of ancient scripture. Nobody is saying that Jeremiah or Hosea, or Matthew or Peter are only speaking to men when they say “Take heed my brothers...” WE KNOW, say the opponents of inclusive language, the writers mean all of us, no gender clarification needed. The poetic and literary integrity of the original scriptures is too important to sully with the unnecessary meddlings of contemporary social references.

In contrast, the proponents of inclusive language suggest that the “everybody knows that God has no gender” premise may work on the intellectual level. Indeed, thinking adults do not hold an image of God as an old man with a white beard, or that “his people” are only brothers and sons. But there are emotional, psychological, social and cultural levels of communication and implications of language which are overlooked and actually significantly thwarted by male-only references in the spiritual arena.

Advocates of Inclusive language propose a broadening of that palate from which we humans paint the image of the Divine. They acknowledge the importance of poetic construct in how we describe and refer to God, and they suggest that a reverence for the poetic nature of scripture would actually call for a vocabulary for the Divine that is more in use when scriptures were first written.

The opening song of today’s Trinity Sunday liturgy is an example of inclusive language.

Written by Ruth Duck, a contemporary poet and theologian, the text points to the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the God of our faith. God is Father, yes. Son, yes. And Spirit, yes. But, with tender strength, the lyrics remind us of the life-giving, birthing essence of God, the Divine Womb from which we spring and to whom we pray as we would to a mother, not just a father.

The point of inclusive language is not to replace the poetry and substance of scriptural and religious texts with political rhetoric born of any particular ideology or movement. Its intention is to remind us of the deep richness of God’s embracing love, a love that knows nothing of the bounds of time, space or that equally mysterious (but perhaps both more contentious and more delightful) human condition of gender.

The dynamic of inclusiveness is not one of subtraction, a cause bent on reducing the use of a particular form of reference to the divine, but, rather, a movement of geometric progression, where the possibilities for understanding, experiencing, and communicating the God of All Creation are only expanded.

So, what’s in a name? The world, perhaps, a universe as large or as small as we choose to make it. Such a gift. From a God who loves us, as a mother, and a father.