

Choosing a Confirmation Name

By Dennis C. Smolarski
Liturgy Training Publications
Liturgy 90, April 1999

Before looking at the pros and cons of choosing “confirmation names”, it would be helpful to reflect on names in a more general human and religious context, particularly in the context of the name used at baptism.

Personal names are often taken for granted, yet parents often spend many hours deliberating when choosing a name for a newborn. Sometimes a child is named to honor a relative, and sometimes a child is named after a saint held in high esteem by the family. Sometimes a person has a special “nickname” used only by close relatives. Whatever the origin of our names, they become part of our history and our identity.

Names are important in our religious tradition as well. The prophet Isaiah, speaking in God’s name, proclaims to King Cyrus, “it is I, the Lord . . . who call you by your name” (Isaiah 45:3-4). After the resurrection, it was only when Jesus called Mary Magdalene by name that she recognized him (John 20:16).

Our names are used at our baptism and become part of our religious history. For many centuries it was customary to use only the names of saints at baptism, but the baptismal rite now permits other names as long as they are not incompatible with Christian faith, and the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* provides a rite for the catechumen to receive a “Christian” name for baptism (RCIA, #202).

Since confirmation is now seen in relationship to baptism, any discussion of a “confirmation name” must be placed in the context of the relationship of confirmation to baptism. Confirmation is seen as a “seal” of the faith and grace given in baptism. The current rite of confirmation tries to link the celebration of this sacrament of initiation to baptism, and thus, for example, recommends that the “sponsor” for confirmation be the baptismal godparent when possible (Introduction to the *Rite of Confirmation*, #5) and includes a formal renewal of baptismal promises after the homily.

Since the rite contains no specific directive otherwise, it presumes that those to be confirmed will be addressed by the name at their baptism.

Choosing a separate confirmation name has been a centuries-old custom for those baptized as infants but confirmed later. But this practice emphasizes a separation between the two sacraments that is at variance with our renewed understanding of the inter-relationship of baptism, confirmation and eucharist as the three sacraments of Christian initiation. And although popular in many places, a “confirmation name” is nowhere mentioned in either the former rite or the current rite; neither is it mentioned in either the old or new *Code of Canon Law*.

Thus there is no obligation to use a name at confirmation that is different from the name given at baptism, although the local bishop may find the older custom appropriate for education and inspirational purposes.

We do find references to the “confirmation names” in the history of the church. For example, Saint Adalbert (tenth century) actually received the name “Adalbert” at his confirmation. Under the guidance of Saint Charles Borromeo (sixteenth century), a diocesan council in Milan recommended that someone whose name was “unbecoming for a Christian” should receive another at confirmation. But this good advice was never an absolute requirement and does not address the situation of someone’s baptismal name being that of a canonized saint.

Taking a new name can be symbolic of a new stage in life, and we must remember that there is a biblical history of individuals whose names changed: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, and Saul to Paul. This precedent was one reason members of many religious orders chose “religious” names when pronouncing vows. But the celebration of confirmation is a time to reaffirm one’s baptism and thus should not be seen so much as a new stage of Christian life but as an opportunity to deepen the graces of baptism.

Celebrating the sacrament of confirmation can be an opportunity for candidates to reflect on what baptism and union with Christ should mean in their lives. It can also be an occasion for the candidates to reflect on how they should live out their baptismal commitment in the future, imitating the holy men and women of previous ages.

There may, however, be appropriate and pastoral reasons for someone to choose another patron saint and use this saint’s name when being confirmed. This name, freely chosen and reflecting the candidate’s devotion to a saint, can be a sign of commitment to living as a Christian in today’s world under the patronage of someone they admire. Ideally, such a confirmation name would be used in addition to the baptismal name, not in place of it, and would be the name of a saint to whom the person being confirmed has a particular devotion. On the other hand, for most individuals, using the baptismal name alone can be a powerful reaffirmation of who they are as Christians.

The decision to choose a special patron (and name) at confirmation or to honor the name received at baptism should always be considered a secondary aspect of the celebration. What is ultimately being celebrated is God’s commitment to each baptized Christian through the gift of the Holy Spirit, a reality that should never be overshadowed, no matter what name is used!