

# ARCHANGEL GABRIEL ORTHODOX CHURCH



## CATECHISM - CHRISTIAN NAME AND PATRON SAINT

*The Orthodox Church has always placed great significance upon names. In fact, not only are names of great import in the Church, but the actual process of naming someone holds great significance to us. These customs are of divine origin and of tremendous significance, but unfortunately are not a part of modern American culture. The significance of names and naming is one area where Orthodox Tradition will inevitably effect the American practice, and is also an area where we must be on guard of the reverse effect and of allowing American culture to rob the Church of meaningful and universal customs.*

### THE SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

**CREATION** - The significance of names is evident at the very beginning of Biblical history. God had just made the heavens and the earth in six days, and finally finished his glorious work of creation by fashioning man from the dust of the earth. After Adam (whose name in Hebrew means "earth" or "ground" from which he was made) was created something very interesting takes place. God brings all of the animals which had been made on the previous days to Adam so that Adam can name them (Gen. 2:19). Whatever Adam named the animal is what the animal was called. Now this all was very meaningful. Not only was Adam's headship over all of creation demonstrated by the fact that he was fashioned as the pinnacle of creation at the end of the sixth day, but his superiority to the animal kingdom was demonstrated by his power to name them and in so doing define them. By naming the animals Adam's authority over them was expressed, and Adam imaged God who had first named him. Man was to lead the physical creation in the worship and service of the Holy Trinity. He was to subdue and rule over the world, and the first act of this regal life was the process of naming the animals. Shortly thereafter God fashioned a wife for Adam out of his side. Adam called his new wife "woman" because she was taken out of man (Gen. 2:23). Her name showed her very nature as being derived from man ("For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man", 1 Cor. 11:8). After the evil serpent tempted our first parents and led them to sin bringing death into the world, God intervened and promised the Redeemer would come from the woman's seed to crush the serpent and trample down death by death (Gen. 3:15). As a result of this Adam named his wife "Eve", which means "life" or "life-producer". Her name explained who she was. She was the one through whom Christ would come, who would give life to the world. The fact that Adam did the naming was a sign that he was Eve's head and protector, and that she would find her fulfillment and destiny under his leadership.

As an interesting side note, one of the marks of the inroads of unhealthy feminism in our culture is the wife's rejection of the husband's name. Many women today refuse to take their new husbands' last names at marriage, and it is vogue also for women to hyphenate their maiden names with their

husbands' names. Also popular today is the combining of the husband's and wife's surnames into a new surname all together. This is a reflection of non-Christian family norms, and is not an Orthodox practice.

**ABRAHAM** - This excursion into the significance of names in the opening chapters of the Bible is simply intended to highlight the significance of naming and names. This reality is found throughout the Bible. Think of our righteous father Abraham and our mother Sarah. Were their names always Abraham and Sarah? No. They were originally Abram and Sarai. God himself gave Abraham and Sarah new names when he established His covenant with them (Gen.17:5,15). Abraham's name now reflected God's promise to him that he would be the father of many nations for "Abraham" means "father of a great number."

Remember also Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. Jacob received a new name from God as a grown man. Do you know what his new name was? Israel (Gen.32:28). God gave it to him after he wrestled with the angel of the Lord. Israel means "he who persists with God".

**DANIEL** - The list of Biblical accounts of name changes etc. goes on and on. There is a particularly interesting account of the significance of names in the book of the prophet Daniel. You remember the scenario of Daniel's life. He was part of an elite group of young Israelite men who were captured by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in about 600 B.C.. Daniel and his friends were taken into exile in Babylon from Israel as young men, probably about the age of 16. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to train these gifted youth in his Babylonian court so that his government would be served by the best. Having arrived in Babylon Daniel and his friends were subjected to a radical re-education process to indoctrinate them into Babylonian wisdom and life and to extirpate any Israelite ways of thinking. The Israelite youths were instructed in the "language and literature" of the Chaldeans. Their diet was altered to conform with that of the Babylonian court, and significantly for our present interests all of their names were changed. "Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach, and to Azariah Abednego" (Dan1:7). Here we see a universal recognition of the great significance of names. The name Daniel means "God is judge" in Hebrew, and so it was changed to Belteshazzar which means "May the god Bel protect his life." Who is Bel anyway? He was a Babylonian god!

## ORTHODOX NAMES IN THE CHURCH TODAY

This venerable and ancient Biblical custom concerning religious names and the significance of naming continues amidst the people of God in the Church today.

### **Baptismal Names**

"By Orthodox practice, an infant is not given a name until he/she is baptized [or in the Naming Service in preparation for baptism on the eighth day or on the day of Churching- ed.]. Actually, in Orthodox countries where the Orthodox faith is the state religion, such as Greece, an infant is not even registered with civil authorities until it is registered by the priest acting as a civil registrar, the priest himself having first named the child. If an infant happened to die before it was baptized, the death certificate would read, 'an unbaptized boy/girl of (name of parents)'" (A Dictionary of Greek Orthodoxy, Rev. N.

A. Patrinos, Hellenic Heritage Publications, Pleasantville, N.Y., 1984; p.48). Because Orthodox receive their names not at their physical birth but at their more important spiritual birth when one becomes a Christian, and because the names Orthodox receive are saints' names we call our names "Christian names".

### **The Role of the Godparent and the Priest**

On the day of baptism or on the eighth day at the Naming Service of Prayer it is the Godparent who first names the child. The choice of the Christian name traditionally involves the Godparent. In some traditions in the Church, the first-born receives the name of his paternal grandfather if a boy and of his maternal grandmother if a girl. Additional children are named at baptism by the godparent who is presenting the child for holy baptism, and today it is common for the godparent and biological parents to meet together prior to the baptism and agree upon a appropriate name (Ibid., p.49). From that moment on the person is called this Christian name in the Church by the priest. From his earliest days as an infant at the chalice the person will hear his Christian name spoken and have his identity as a child of God and of His Church reinforced as the priest says, "The servant of God (N.) receives the precious and holy Body and Blood of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ for remission of sins and for eternal life" while administering the sacred Cup. Throughout his Christian life the individual will hear his Christian name from the mouth of the priest in prayer during the Liturgy, during the mystery of confession, and finally even at his funeral when the priest will pray, "For Thou art the resurrection, the life, and the repose of Thy servant (N.), who has fallen asleep, O Christ our God..." At each of these moments the Orthodox Christian is drawn both to a remembrance of his Christian identity and of the nearness of his patron saint whose name he bears.

### **Namesdays**

The Christian name given to a newly baptized child or adult is the name of the saint who will be that person's patron saint throughout his life. "By bearing the name of a saint, the Orthodox acquires an identity akin to that of the saint whose name he/she bears... By Orthodox tradition beginning with the early Church, the Orthodox celebrates his namesday on the day of the feast of the saints whose name he/she was given at Baptism. One's date of birth appears to be of lesser importance to the Greek Orthodox than his namesday. The former signifies one's physical birth while the latter is the all-important day of his spiritual birth. And it is widely believed among the Orthodox that what makes physical birth really meaningful is one's spiritual rebirth at Baptism" (ibid., pp. 50, 261). "The festival of their patron saint they keep as their Namesday, and to most Orthodox (as to most Roman Catholics...) this is a date far more important than one's birthday" (Ware, Met. Kallistos, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, 1963, p.257). Celebrating one's namesday honors one's patron saint, and directly connects the Orthodox with his own baptism and the continuing life and intercession of one's heavenly patron. On this day one should by all means seek to attend the divine service at Church and join in the veneration of his patron, and celebrate his patronage. It is a day of great happiness.

Some Orthodox Christians, due to unusual circumstances surrounding their reception into the Church, have at times not been given Christian names at their baptisms/chrisiations. This permitted oversight is an act of *economia* in order to facilitate the reception of large numbers of converts in a short period of time or for some other pressing reason, and over time it is expected that those received in this

way will adopt Christian names and patron saints. Acts of *economia* are not intended to become fixed rules, but are exceptions to fixed rules in order to build up the Church in particular situations. The fixed rule of our faith is that Christian names are given to the baptized/christmated and all Orthodox Christians have patron saints whom they love and honor.

Some Orthodox who lived out much of their lives without being Orthodox and having a Christian name do not use their Christian names in everyday usage. They do, however, use their Christian names in the Church when they are commemorated and prayed for, and when they receive holy communion. Having and using a Christian name is a great dignity and privilege. It is our family name given to us by God himself. Its use reminds us of the great gift of being a part of God's family and related to the saints of heaven. We remember that through the mouth of the priest or bishop Christ himself has given his servant a new name and identity. Our Lord has said, "To him who overcomes...I will give a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it" (Rev. 2:17). In the future faithful Christians may look forward to receiving a final name given directly by Jesus himself perfectly fitted to their character.

## HOW TO FIND A PATRON SAINT

If you find yourself Orthodox and without a patron saint here are a few suggestions. Do something about it in order not to rob yourself of the tremendous comfort of having a patron. Pray to God, and ask him to show you who your patron should be. Ask that the saint himself would act on your behalf, and in effect choose you! Meditate and seek to discern if a love for a particular saint has been born in you already by the Holy Spirit. If you are still at a loss consider taking one of the saints commemorated on the day of your birth or baptism/chrisamation. Finally, don't make the taking of a patron into such a difficult issue that it takes you years to decide. After prudent consideration make a decision, and begin to use your Christian name, if not at all times then at least in the Church for prayer and the eucharist, and begin the wonderful journey of learning about and emulating your patron saint and celebrating your name day!

## A FEW ADDITIONAL REMARKS

In closing we leave with a few miscellaneous remarks on the practice of using Christian names. Orthodox don't name animals with Christian names. To do so is disrespectful to the saints. Did you know that at the time of his tonsure a monastic takes a new Christian name, and gives up using his previous Christian name since monastic tonsuring is viewed as a second baptism and the beginning of a new kind of angelic life? Lastly, it is fitting to remind our readers of that name which is above every name: the ever-blessed name of Jesus. Our Lord himself was named Jesus because the archangel Gabriel told Joseph to name him so. Why "Jesus"? The angel tells us our Lord was named Jesus "because he would save his people from their sins" (St. Matt. 1:21). Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew "Joshua" which means "the Lord is salvation." Our Savior was named after that great servant of Moses Joshua who led the people of Israel into the promise land. And so, as the greater Joshua, our Lord shall lead us into that greater promised land of everlasting life and blessedness to the glory of His All-Holy Name!

A PRAYER TO ONE'S PATRON SAINT

*"Pray unto God for me, O Holy God-pleaser, (N.): for I fervently flee unto thee, the speedy helper and intercessor for my soul."*