

**The Baptism of Julie La, Kukula Glastris, and Sophia Hope Bowers D'Ambrosio
The Feast of All Saints, 2009**

Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

David Schlafer

Julie, Kukula, Sophia—

I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What in God's name are we doing?

Julie, Kukula, Sophia—

You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever.

What on earth is going on?

The sacrament of baptism—doesn't have much to show for itself, does it?

- A few drops of water—and those quickly dried.
- A few familiar phrases—said and done in practically no time.
- A few symbolic gestures—curious at best.

What in the world is happening? It isn't easy to show the world, is it?

- The candidates look clean already—what they're being “cleansed from” is not evident.
- The words we speak over them are solemn, indeed—
but what those words mean is difficult to fathom.
- The actions we undertake are very small scale—
and they don't generate any dramatic special effects.

Is this, in fact, just a folk ritual, a quaint little custom—simply ceremonial—
merely the celebration of a rite of passage?

What in God's name are we doing?

Is that a better way to pose the question? It's not an easier way!

For centuries, those who practice baptism have heartily disagreed on what it is they're doing:

- *We are turning a candidate into a Christian.*
- *We are saving a soul from the fires of hell.*
- *We are responding in faith to the grace of God.* (Whatever that means.)
- *We are making promises for children too young to make promises for themselves.*
- *We are signifying a serious commitment only adults can make.*
- *We are just doing what Jesus said to do, just because he said to do it.*
- *You haven't been baptized unless you've been dunked—No! A tiny dribble is all it takes.*

Underneath all the contention and confusion, what in God's name are we doing?

Well, naming, for one thing—baptism has to do with naming.

“*What's in a name?*” “*Nothing much,*” replies the character from Shakespeare.

“*A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*”

“*Names are arbitrary—convenient devices for keeping tabs on assorted 'Hey, YOU!'s*”

Granted—names *can* seem like nothing much—

but, like a baptism, there's more to a name than meets the eye.

Human bodies we can observe, their movements we can note;

but a person's true name we can never see.

What we call folks can be written down, read, and spoken easily enough;

but those verbal markers only gesture toward a deeper reality,

a reality we encounter in one another daily—but a reality that words can never pin down.

Our name—it's a focused but open symbol for the being we are—
which is something far larger than what we've accomplished, or what we've messed up.
Our name is a symbol for those who have gifted us, for those with whom we keep company,
for those who comprise the whole complex fabric of our relationships.

A name in utter isolation is not a name at all.

Our identities are shaped by those with whom and by whom we are identified.

Julie, Kukula, Sophia—

I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

Julie, Kukula, Sophia—

You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever

We convene today on the Feast of All Saints—all those whom God distinctively identifies
by identifying distinctively with each and every one of them.

All Saints—those who, in turn, have named and claimed their God-granted identities—
particular identities that they discover and share in companioning with one another.

All Saints—those who are alive among us, and those whom—though we love—we see no longer;
but who are nonetheless present to God, and who dwell among us,
upheld in the power of Life Everlasting.

The Sacred Texts this day depict the richness of our identities in two vivid images:
Feasts and Tears.

Feasts and Tears—celebration and sorrow—each and both: How can this be?

What have Feasts and Tears to do with naming and identity—with baptism?

Isaiah envisions a gathering on God's mountain,

a gathering the total antithesis of a Washington Cocktail Party.

- All are invited, not just a favored few.
- Table conversation centers not around who's getting the best of whom;
but who is hurting, and how God's tender touch is making for healing.
- There is fine food for all—not just scraps discarded from exhibitions of excess.
- Death is not denied here by elaborate media distractions.

No, death is dealt with directly; its oppressive heaviness slowly diffused,
one gently wiped tear after another.

Do you see it? This is not a banquet where tears have to be masked with makeup.

This is a celebration where compassionate care is the main event.

Baptism is like that: candidates are welcomed—tears and all,

into a community identified *with* and *by* the One who knows compassion from the inside—
the One who names us, each and all, as God's own people.

What Isaiah imagines as a death-transforming banquet,

the author of Revelation boldly expands into a sweeping alternative social order—

- A Holy City coming down from God.
- A city in which all relationships are reconfigured, and all identities renewed.
- A city in which God dwells: pitching a tent of divinity on the ground of humanity.

And so, in the Creed we confess, in the Vows we affirm, in the prayers we uplift on this day,
we identify the one who descends to identify with us.

Together, the candidates for baptism, and the community of the baptized
reach up to touch God's descending city, crying:

*"Come Lord Jesus, quickly come; energize us to prepare for your city,
our hands building justice, as your hand dries our tears."*

The author of John's Gospel has an even more breathtaking baptismal vision:

The One who comes to name Lazarus into life is the One who himself has the tear-stained face.

The being of Lazarus can be rekindled only by the sacrifice of his own life.

Yet costly though his call will be, Jesus makes it still: *LAZARUS*

- Not "*Hey You*"
- Not "*To whom it may concern, from no one in particular*"
- Not "*Old family friend to whom I owe a favor.*"

No, simply, clearly Jesus calls: *LAZARUS—COME OUT!*

Lazarus does—And Jesus tasks his disciples with removing his shroud.

So, here and now, in the name of the One

- who names us, and identifies himself as one of us,
- who welcomes us to his own feast,
- who wipes our tears, his own face still stained,
- who strengthens our hands to build God's descending new Jerusalem from the ground up:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—

Julie, Kukula, Sophia, Come OUT!

In the company of all the saints, by water and oil, word and gesture, we baptize you.

On this day, in this community, you are marked as Christ's own, forever.

Confess the faith, proclaim the resurrection, share the priesthood. AMEN.