

What's in a name? Virtue ethics and name changes

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Nov. 13, 2008



In today's postmodern world, there are old and new worries that go into the celebration of marriage. The timeless worry seems to be whether one's parents will like one's new spouse or partner. However, a new debate that more couples are having than they did two or three generations ago is what to do about last names. I just got married this past summer, and we had long periods of discussion, prayer and reflection in order to make the decision about our family name. I would like to propose that Thomas Aquinas' development of virtue ethics helped us to come to our decision about what to do with our last names.

Virtue ethics is a system used for making moral decisions that is based on goals and character, rather than rules and consequences. Aquinas helped to formulate the concept that a model of virtue ethics can be used to help make a person the best that they can possibly be. A virtue is something to be practiced in order to meet the perfection of a capacity for an individual human person. Virtue ethics involves setting goals (which can vary from individual to individual, culture to culture, or society to society), and then attempting to virtuously attain these goals.

Contemporary virtue ethicists such as Jim Keenan say there are four key virtues: prudence (recognizes what is reasonable for you in your life circumstances), justice (relationship to those around us in the world), fidelity (relationship to those closest to us), and self-care (relationship to self). The more one practices in attaining the perfection of these virtues, the better we get at practicing ethical living. It is encouraged that as Roman Catholics, we attempt to pull in four sources in order to decide how best to live virtuously. These four sources are scripture, the traditional teachings of the church, the secular sciences (sociology, biology, psychology, and so on), and our personal experience.

First, why is choosing a last name in a new, lifelong committed relationship important? After all, there are wars and poverty going on out there. It seems that Catholic social teaching should lead us to pour our energy into figuring out solutions for these problems. However, I would argue that last names are important. It can be a statement of who a couple wishes to be. Or it can be a statement of who a couple wishes *not* to be. It can be a statement of identity for a family, for many the primary social units that we have in this society.

It seems that there are a few options that most people take: 1) One member of the couple takes on the other member's last name; 2) Both members of the couple retain their given name; 3) One or both members of the couple hyphenate their name together; or 4) the couple merges or comes up with a completely new name together. There are merits and difficulties with all these options. No option is perfect for every couple, and in some cases, a choice is made only because it is the best available but by no means perfect.

There are probably other solutions that I'm not even thinking of. However, it seems prudent to remember that a

couple needs to learn how to measure their goals and virtues not just as individuals, but also as a newly forming couple. There will be surprises along the way, but perhaps one of the first lifelong decisions that a couple faces is what name to put on their newly minted marriage certificates. It is possible to incorporate the centuries-old teachings on virtue ethics from Thomas Aquinas and incorporate them into a contemporary decision-making process.

Of course, there is no scripture teaching on what to do with names when a couple gets married. The beauty of scripture passages on love and marriage is that it is not explicit, which leaves room for the couple to operate out of the theme of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where he encourages community members to bind their gifts with one another through love.

Critics, take note: Most diocesan marriage forms leave it open-ended for the couples to choose to write in their former name and new name. In fact, I found the Madison, Wis., diocese to be ahead of Dane County, Wis., as the diocese asked for a former name and the county asked for a maiden name.

This allows for a couple to consider their personal experience and the psychological and social sciences when making a decision. Each couple will be different in that there will be different personal experiences with name changes, and there will be different cultural and gender contexts to consider. However, age-old wisdom from the thinking of Thomas Aquinas still rings true today when deciding what to do with name changes.

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