

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

By George Melendez, Council 10514 Lecturer
Good of the Order (from January 2022 council meeting)

"He who, when tempted, makes the Sign of the Cross with devotion, makes Hell tremble and Heaven rejoice." This quote is attributed to St. John Vianney, Patron of Parish Priests.

Catholics grow up making the Sign of the Cross. It's second nature. We begin and end our prayers with the Sign of the Cross. It's made while all of the seven Sacraments are being given, during the Mass, when a priest gives his blessing and hopefully in times of temptation. We make the Sign of the Cross when we get up, at work, at play, before and after meals.

We make the Sign of the Cross as we pass in front of a Catholic Church to indicate our belief that Jesus is really present in that Church in the Blessed Sacrament, and we want to honor Him. The next time you pass by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton on Belle Terre Parkway or St. Mary's on Old Dixie Highway or St. Brendan the Navigator on A1A, reach out and sign yourself. Let Him know, that you know He is there, in the Blessed Sacrament. Or better yet if you have a few extra minutes, stop in and say hello.

From the beginning of Christianity, the Sign of the Cross was a badge of identification, a shield in times of temptation, a demonstration of belief in the Blessed Trinity and the fact that Jesus died on the cross for us.

So where did the custom of signing with the cross originate? It began at Calvary when Christ first made it by hanging on the cross.

The early Christians often traced a small cross on their foreheads, and for them it was a sign of faith. It identified them as followers of Christ, just as it does for us today. They were persecuted and had to hide the fact that they were Christians. They used to identify themselves by tracing a cross on the ground with a stick or their sandal, and then quickly wipe it out. Tracing a cross on the forehead became popular almost from the very beginning of Christianity.

It's a curious fact that the cross doesn't appear in Christian art until the fourth century, but the tracing of the cross on the forehead with thumb or index finger is found in popular Christian usage as early as the second century.

The more expansive Sign of the Cross, touching forehead, chest, and shoulders is first mentioned in the devotional life of Christians in the fifth century, but it was not until the early Middle Ages that the gesture came into general use. By this time there was also a widespread custom of blessing in the form of a cross using the Holy Eucharist, the gospel book, or a reliquary.

We are so accustomed to making the Sign of the Cross that we may have forgotten what the gesture means.

In the 5th and 6th centuries, a heresy or false teaching, called the Monophysite Heresy spread. It taught that Christ had only one nature. The Christians, who believed what the Apostles had taught, wanted to emphasize that Christ had two natures -- His divine nature and His human nature. It was suggested that people make a large cross with two fingers signifying the two natures of Christ. A custom that's observed even today

when the Pope gives his blessing, with two fingers extended at St. Peter's in Rome.

In different places, during the following years, the Sign of the Cross was made with three fingers extended, in honor of the Blessed Trinity. The other two fingers were bent to the palm of the hand to signify that Christ had two natures -- a human nature and a divine nature.

During the celebration of the Mass, the Sign of the Cross was made in any of three ways:

With three fingers -- in honor of the Blessed Trinity.

With one finger -- in honor of the Oneness of God.

With five fingers extended -- in honor of the five wounds of Christ.

In the 13th century, Pope Innocent III decreed that the Sign of the Cross should be made with three fingers, from the forehead to the chest, and from the right shoulder to the left shoulder. At a later date, the whole hand was used, and the direction changed from the left to the right shoulder.



While one is making this sign, the words used have differed over the years. Some of the older prayers were: "In the Name of the Holy Trinity"; or "In the Name of Jesus of Nazareth"; and today we pray, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen".

During Mass, the deacon or priest will say: "A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke or John" and we respond: "Glory to you Lord." As we say this, we bless ourselves three times by making a small cross on our foreheads, on our lips and on our heart.

- The Sign of the Cross on the forehead indicates that we believe in the good news of the Gospel.
- The Sign of the Cross on the lips indicates that we must preach the Gospel by word of mouth.
- The Sign of the Cross on the chest indicates that we must treasure the word of God in our hearts.

By doing this, we are acknowledging that Christ is with us in our thoughts, in the words we speak, and in our hearts.

So, what does the Sign of the Cross mean? In summary, it reminds us of the sacred mystery of the Holy Trinity, especially that there are three Persons in One God and that Christ died on the cross for us.

I'll end with a quote from Fr. Almire Pichon, a Jesuit priest, who once said: "I believe that if our signs of the cross were always made as if in the presence of God, rather than as if we were chasing away flies, they would open for us the heart of God. Each Sign of the Cross brings us nearer to God. For each Sign of the Cross well made, there is one added degree of eternal glory. Each Sign of the Cross made with devotion deposits within your heart another degree of love, which you would not have had without it."

And now I ask you to join me as we make the Sign of the Cross, to bring us closer to God, increase the love in our hearts and make Heaven rejoice.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen