

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

In the course of history no symbol has expressed the mentality of Christians more faithfully than the cross. The cross is the concrete expression of the Christian mystery, victory through defeat, of glory through humiliation, of life through death. It is the symbol of a God who became man to die as a slave to save creatures. It is the symbol of a life that is not afraid to look to the height and breadth and depth of things because in every direction its arms remain outstretched.

It is interesting to note that long before Christ the symbol of the cross was held in high esteem and venerated by many pagan cultures as a sacred sign of the stability and the integrity of the universe, pointing to the four directions of the compass and gathering to itself the entire cosmos. More amazing still, this ancient symbol would in the “fullness of time” become the instrument of redemption and the means of the glorification of the Son of Man; as St. John Chrysostom says. *“I call Him king because I see Him crucified: it belongs to the king to die for His subjects.”* Crucifixion, death, salvation, kingship, glory – the cross!

IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Because the pagan world could not and would not understand such a deep mystery, such “foolishness”, the early Christians hesitated to use the cross openly as a sign of the new faith. When it did appear, it was usually disguised

as an anchor or was intertwined amid vines. With the liberation of the Church from persecution under the Emperor Constantine, however, the cross slowly emerged as the sign of the Christians. Eusebius relates that the cross even supplanted the Roman eagles on the military standards: *En touto nika* (Gain the victory with this).

Despite their reticence to use the cross as a public symbol before the fourth century, the Christians did make wide use of it as early as the second and third centuries to sign themselves on the forehead. In the second century Tertullian reports: *“In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out... whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.”* In the fourth century St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes, *“Let us not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Let the cross be our seal, made with boldness by our fingers on our brow and in everything...”*

By the sixth century in the East, probably due to the raging Monophysite heresy which denied the double nature of Christ as both God and man, two fingers began to be used to trace the sign of the cross, now no longer on the forehead but more boldly with a larger sign made on the body. The succeeding centuries saw further modifications emanate from Eastern tradition because of a desire to profess more explicitly the belief in the triune God and the double nature in Christ. The thumb and two fingers were extended to symbolize the Trinity while the ring finger and the little finger were folded back on the palm to profess the God/Man, Jesus Christ.

This newer usage also spread to the Western Church where we read Pope Leo IV, writing in the middle of the ninth century, instructing his clergy: *“Sign the chalice and the host with a proper cross... with two fingers outstretched and the thumb hidden within them, by which the Trinity is symbolized. Take heed to make this sign rightly.”* In the thirteenth century Pope Innocent III directed most explicitly that the sign of the cross be made with three fingers from the forehead to the breast and from the right to the left shoulder, the actual way it still is made by the majority of Eastern Christians. The Western Church retained this ancient form till about the fourteenth century when gradually the open hand was introduced and the sign began to be made in an inverted fashion, from left to right, perhaps mistakenly following the lead of the priest who in blessing inverts his movement so it would be seen correctly by the congregation before him.

OUR PRESENT FORM

Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholics place great emphasis on the sign of the cross as a profession of faith in the three basic doctrines of Christianity: the Holy Trinity, the double nature in Christ and the mystery of redemption. This act of faith in the teachings of Christianity is also an act of consecration to God of all human activities: thoughts, affections, and actions.



The gesture is presently made by joining the fingers (thumb, index and middle finger together and erect; third and little finger down on the palm) and lifting the hand first to the forehead, then to the breast, to the right and then to the left shoulder. In the Scriptures right generally represents good and left evil, and in the Creed the Son is said to sit at the right hand of the Father, thus the signing of the right shoulder first. Eastern Christians sign themselves often especially at every mention of the name of the Holy Trinity and in conjunction with the metany or bow made to reverence holy things such as the altar or an icon.

teaches: *"For wherever the sign shall be, there also shall He be".*

THE PRIESTLY BLESSING

When a priest blesses with the sign of the cross, his hand is held in a posture meant to convey that the blessing is not from the priest himself but from Christ God. The fingers spell out "IC XC", the first and last letters of the Greek for Jesus (IHCOYC) Christ (XPICTOC). *"At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth"* (Philippians 2:10).



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SYMBOL OF FAITH

The sign of the Cross is a symbol of faith, a sign that shall be contradicted, a standard to lead on toward final victory as St. John of Damascus

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