

# THE SIGN OF THE HOLY CROSS

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In the course of history no symbol has expressed the heart of Christians more 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.

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 on everything; over the bread we eat, and the cups we drink; in our comings in, and goings out; before we sleep, and when we rise up; when we are on the way, and when we are still... It is the Sign of the faithful, and the dread of devils.

*Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*

over them in it, having made a show of them openly for when they see the Cross they are reminded of the Crucified; they are afraid of Him, who bruised the head of the serpent. Despise not the Seal, because of the freeness of the gift; but for this the rather honor your Benefactor."

By the sixth century, probably due to the raging Monophysite heresy which denied the two natures of Christ as both God and man, two fingers began to be used to trace the sign of the Cross, now no longer only on the forehead but more boldly with a larger sign made on the body.

Following centuries saw further a desire to profess more explicitly the belief in the triune God and the two natures of Christ. Consequently, 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 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!

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. 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 on everything; over the bread we eat, and the cups we drink; in our comings in, and goings out; before we sleep, and when we rise up; when we are on the road, and when we are still. Great is that preservative; it is without price... It is the Sign of the faithful, and the dread of devils: for He triumphed

## MAKING THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

In our Orthodox tradition, great emphasis is placed on sign of the Cross as a profession of faith in the three basic doctrines of Christianity: the Holy Trinity, the two natures of 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. We sign ourselves 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.

In our tradition the sign of the Cross is formed by holding the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand together, representing the Holy Trinity, and folding the last two fingers into the palm to signify the two natures of Christ. With this gesture one touches the forehead while invoking the name of the Father, then, bringing the hand to the belly, invokes the name of the Son, and then brings the hand first to the right shoulder and then moving to the left while invoking the Holy Spirit. 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.

Living in a predominantly Western Christian society as we do, it may surprise some that signing the Cross in this way was once also the norm in the Western Church. In the thirteenth century

Pope Innocent III directed most explicitly that: "the sign of the Cross is made with three fingers, because the signing is done together with the invocation of the Trinity. ... This is how it is done: from above to below, and from the right to the left, because Christ descended from the heavens to the earth, and from the Jews (right) He passed to the Gentiles (left). Others, however, make the sign of the Cross from the left to the right, because from misery (left) we must Cross over to glory (right), just as Christ crossed over from death to life, and from Hades to Paradise." The Western Church retained this ancient form until about the fourteenth century when gradually the open hand was introduced and the sign began to be made more often from left to right, perhaps from the faithful mistakenly following the the priest who in blessing inverts his movement.

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

## A NOTE REGARDING THE BLESSING FROM A PRIEST

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 (Ιησούς) Christ (Χριστός), just as Christ's hand is depicted in a gesture of blessing in icons.

"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).



Illustration courtesy of Carrie Chuff