THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

“…In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Often times Catholics see the Sign of the Cross as simply “a ‘lead in’ to prayer;” sort of an ‘appetizer’ before the ‘real meal.’ In actual fact the Sign of the Cross is a ‘prayer’ in the true sense of the term, both in its words and in its gestures. When understood rightly it is also a statement of belief; a summary of the creed. If fact, the Church highlights the importance of this prayer by granting a partial indulgence to “the Christian faithful who devoutly sign themselves with the cross while saying the customary formula.”

This catechesis on the Sign of the Cross intends to explain how this prayer is a summary of the Creed.

**Catholic Culture**

The Sign of the Cross is intimately tied to Catholic culture. For example, when you are at Applebee’s and see a family in the restaurant make the Sign of the Cross you think, “Aha! Catholic!” Or when you see an athlete make the Sign of the Cross during a game you think, “Aha! Catholic!” The Sign of the Cross is one of the cultural elements of our faith that sets us apart as a Catholic people.

Because of the cultural connection of the Sign of the Cross to Catholicism people who are considering becoming Catholic will frequently ask, “When can I start making the Sign of the Cross?”

It is a significant moment in a person’s life of faith when they start making the Sign of the Cross because psychologically they are identifying themselves with the Catholic faith. Culturally, therefore, a person starts making the Sign of the Cross when they are ready to publicly identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church.

And yet, the Sign of the Cross is not exclusively Catholic. It’s really a Christian symbol because it represents the basic truths of Christianity. The ‘Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit’ is a Christian notion. It is also a baptismal reality since Christians are baptized in the name of the Trinity. So the Sign of the Cross is a statement in the belief of the Trinity. If a person has already been baptized it is a reminder of his or her baptismal promises; if one has not been baptized it can serve as an anticipation of full entry into faith.

**Grammatically Incorrect**

Have you ever noticed that the Sign of the Cross is grammatically incorrect? If you were a student in grade school English class and you turned the Sign of the Cross in as a sentence you would get it checked wrong for two grammatical errors. Can you find the two errors in this prayer?

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1 The Handbook of Indulgences, #55.
2 And they sometimes add, “When can I use holy water in a Church when I enter a Church?”
First, this prayer is not a complete sentence… it is a prepositional phrase. It starts out, “…in the name…” We have to ask ourselves, “What is the subject and object of this phrase? What is ‘in’ the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?” The answer is everything we are doing. Our entire life is of God’s concern; everything we do should be in his name. One scripture passages says, “Cast your cares on the Lord because He cares for you.” When we were baptized, our entire life was place under the protection of this sign.

As such, this sign is a blessing. It calls forth God’s attention and assures us of a divine presence and the consolation of the Spirit. When I get in the car with some friends we begin the trip with the Sign of the Cross because every trip carries with it a certain danger. We desire God’s protection for that trip. When a teacher begins a class, she does so with the Sign of the Cross to ask for inspiration for herself and her students. St. Ignatius of Loyola said that everything we do should be for the honor and glory of God: “Ad majorem Dei gloriam.” Everything we do ought to glorify God. The Sign of the Cross, therefore, reminds us of God’s help and directs our actions to his glory.

So the first grammatical error is the prepositional phrase starting with “in.” To state the meaning of this more explicitly, my life is the antecedent to the prepositional phrase “…the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

What is the second grammatical error?

Shouldn’t it be “names” and not “name.” “In the names of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” No. While grammatically there are three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, theologically there is one God. We believe in one God composed of three divine Persons. The three divine Persons are called the Trinity. The most fundamental reality that defines us as a Christian is the Trinity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to this as the central mystery of our faith. The blessings of our life find their source in the Trinity; and the mystery of the Trinity is alluded to by the use of the singular word “name.”

An Embodied Sign

The Sign of the Cross is made up of two intersecting lines: one horizontal and one vertical. When we make the Sign of the Cross we are trace it across our body. The cross is signed upon my very self: the horizontal line across my shoulders and the vertical line down my torso. This embodied experience is very important for us as Catholics. We kneel, we sit, we stand, we use incense, we ring bells… we use our whole body when we worship. Jesus himself says, “Sacrifice or

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3 1 Peter 5:7
4 Philippians 2:1-2
5 CCC 232
6 CCC 234
oblation you wish not; but a body you prepared for me.” 7 My own body, my very self, is what I offer as a sacrifice to the Lord. My very body is sanctified by the use of the Sign of the Cross.

In fact, so embodied is the sign of the cross that is the basic shape of protein matrix found within our cells. This protein matrix is called Laminin 8 and takes the form of a cross even within our cells. The shape of the cross is found in the smallest structures of our bodies.

Not only is the sign of the cross embodied in our cells but “the Sign of the Cross is inscribed upon the whole cosmos” 9 too. The ancient Greeks discovered two movements in the stars, the elliptical movement of the heavens and the orbit of the earth. These two movements form the sign of the cross upon the universe.

**The Father**

The Sign of the Cross starts by calling upon the name of the Father with the right hand touching the head. Notice we don’t start at the shoulder or at our stomach; we start at the head. This is a very physical way of reminding us that God is the **source** of all that is. God created us and wants to be known and loved by us.

Starting here not only reminds us that he created humans but it also reminds us that he is the “origin of everything,” 10 the creator of the universe. **Creation** is the first act of God’s revelation whereby he invites us into a loving relationship with him. In fact, one can say that creation is the theater in which the drama of our salvation is played out.

Starting at the head also reminds us that God is also the source of “transcendent **authority.”** 11 But this authority is not that of a dictator or an oppressive taskmaster. It is the authority of a **Father**… a Father who cares for us. As Jesus says, “What father would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish?” 12 God is tender toward us, but he also corrects our faults, as any good father would do. This is why St. Paul teaches us to call God, “Abba,” 13 which the Aramaic word for “daddy” or “papa.”

**The Father and The Son**

The next action of the Sign of the Cross is a downward movement of the right hand from the head to the stomach. The action from the head signifies the knowledge that comes from the mind.

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7 Hebrews 10:5
10 CCC 239
11 Ibid.
12 Luke 11:11
13 Romans 8:15; Gal 4:6; cf. Mark 14:36
In other words, Jesus is the procession of God’s knowledge. The Father knows himself and in knowing himself he begets the Son, Jesus.

The Father begets the Son. Now, this ‘begetting’ doesn’t happen at two separate times. There was never a time when there was a Father without the Son. It is not as though the Father came first and then Son was created. No, there is no “creation” of Jesus. The term we use is ‘begotten.’ Jesus is begotten by the Father. So in the life of the Trinity the Father knows himself and in knowing himself, (again this is why we touch the head) he begets the Son. In other words, Jesus is everything that is knowable about the Father.

This is a significant theological concept. Let me ask you this: how do you know what I am thinking? I use words. And not only words but also gestures, actions, postures, facial expressions and the like. In this way you are able see and hear me and come to know my thoughts. Well, how do we know what is inside the Father’s mind? By the words, gestures, actions, postures and facial expressions of Jesus. Jesus is literally everything knowable about the Father. This is why Jesus is called the Word, capital ‘W.’ Jesus is the “Word of the Father”: when the Father speaks Jesus is who we see and hear. That is why Jesus talked with us, walked with us, conversed with us and explained things to us: to show us the Father. Philip, the apostle, learned this when he asked Jesus to “show us the Father.” And Jesus exasperatedly says, “Philip, have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

The reason why we as Christians are so connected to the Person of Jesus is because Jesus is the source of the knowledge of the interior life of the Father. To know Jesus is to know the Father. Jesus is so important to us because he is the visible expression of the Father’s interior life: of God’s thoughts. The Father knows himself; and in speaking, he spoke a Word, and that “Word became Flesh.”

Notice that the incarnation is in essence a form of communication. Human communication includes gestures, postures, words, facial expressions and the like. God imparted his word in written form in the Old Testament, but it wasn’t enough that he gave his written word; that is not complete human communication. Rather, the Father gives his very self in the person of Jesus Christ. In the flesh of Jesus we are now able to see the gestures, postures, facial expressions and actions of a person walking the earth who is simultaneously both God and man. Listening to Jesus is really the communication of everything that is important about the Father’s plan for human life.

The Word Becomes Flesh

Several things about the downward gesture of the Sign of the Cross at this point are interesting. Starting at the head, the right hand traces down the body, following the esophagus to

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14 CCC 241
15 John 14:8
Our stomach or, in the case of women, to their womb. So this gesture calls to mind three images: the womb, the throat and the stomach.

“The Word became Flesh.”  

Women have the special privilege that when the hand moves to the belly it moves to their womb. Jesus entered a womb. He became man. At the moment of conception, God became man. This is one of the reasons why we, as Catholics, are very concerned about laws surrounding abortion and contraception; because according to the Scriptures, at the moment of conception, Jesus became man. Human life begins at conception.

The moment when the Second Person of the Trinity took on flesh is called the incarnation. At this moment divinity was united to humanity. These are the two natures of Jesus: divine and human. The Latin root of word incarnation is ‘carne,’ meaning flesh. In-carnation means ‘en-fleshment.’ When the Holy Spirit descended upon the Blessed Virgin Mary Jesus was conceived in her womb and there he resided as in a tabernacle. When you go into a Catholic Church there is a big gold box in the middle of the Church called a tabernacle. A tabernacle is an ornately designed container usually gilded or made of precious metal that secures the Holy Eucharist inside Catholic Churches. A person wouldn’t dare go up and hit or push or mess with a tabernacle because its contents are very sacred. In a similar way the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a tabernacle, the sacred space where Jesus entered human history. For this reason we call Mary Theotokos, which means God-Bearer. This is why we, as Catholics, revere the Blessed Virgin so much: she was chosen by God to be the tabernacle of the Word.

So it is with us as well. Just as a woman conceives a child and receives it into her womb, so too, through the Eucharist we en-flesh Jesus in our own flesh. We, like Mary, are called to bear God within our bodies. This is why we sign our bodies with the cross: our bodies are also tabernacles. As St. Paul reminds us, God dwells within us, as in a temple.  

Our Eucharist

The downward movement of the hand from the head not only gestures to a womb but also to the stomach. Jesus not only takes flesh, as in the womb, but he also becomes our food in the Eucharist. Because he instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper we are able to receive the flesh of Jesus into our body. As Catholics we believe that the Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Yes, it looks like bread, however, through the power of God what was bread is no longer bread but actually the flesh of Jesus. And his flesh, united with our flesh, makes us one body with Christ.

As the Sign of the Cross passes down my body, so this Eucharist passes down the esophagus into our stomach. In other words, we consume the Eucharist. But in actually, since the Eucharist is God, it is better to say that God consumes us. The lesser is always consumed by the greater and the

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16 John 1:14
17 Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16
Eucharist is greater than us. He is taking us into himself through the Eucharist. We become one with God. Literally our blood is physically pumping the blood of Christ for about seven minutes after we receive communion. In this way we partake in the unity of the Holy Trinity. In this way Jesus unites us to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

One of the most important words we need to remember, one that specifically refers to the Eucharist, is Communion. When a Catholic receives the Eucharist for the first time it is called ‘First Communion.’ Or we refer to ‘receiving communion’ during Mass. The word ‘communion’ means ‘with unity.’ Communion refers to our unity with Jesus and, through Jesus, to the Trinity. And it is also unity of all the faithful with one another because we all receive the same Eucharist.

The Paschal Mystery

The downward action of hand further signifies Jesus’ suffering and death. The stomach can be likened to a tomb. Remember that as Jonah spent three days in the belly of a great fish so Jesus spent three days in the tomb. Our belly is a place of digestion, a place of ‘breaking down’ and of ‘final consumption.’ Thus, the downward action signifies the ‘breaking down’ of Jesus.

Jesus suffered and died on our behalf. He who did not have to suffer chose to share in our suffering. He who should not have died, died for us, so that we will be able to rise with him. This is called the Paschal Mystery: the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Jesus’ sacrifice is the greatest proof of God’s love for us. God did not have to save us by sending his Son to die on the cross. In his divine power he could have snapped his fingers and made sin and suffering simply disappear; but he didn’t. God wanted us to know that he understands our human condition: humans suffer and humans die. If God would not have sent Jesus to suffer and die then we could accuse God of not really knowing what we humans experience. But as Scripture says, “he suffered in every way we have, yet he did not sin.”

Jesus’ Paschal Mystery is the sacrifice that proves his love for us. Love sometimes look like a cross; a sacrifice; a suffering. Suffering is a part of our world. Suffering is a universal experience of human life. It is a common denominator among people. So many people have raised their fist up to heaven and said, “How can a good God allow good people to suffer? How can bad things happen to people who don’t deserve it? Why do bad people get away with the evil things they do?” The cross is Jesus’ answer. “As you suffer, so I have suffered. As you hurt, so I have hurt. As innocent people taste injustice, so I also have tasted injustice.”

Jesus’ answer to suffering is that he himself suffered. But he also and rose! Suffering is not the last word. The last word for Jesus Christ is love, love that offers itself in true sacrifice. Sacrifice is the surest sign of unselfish love. Sacrifice says, “There is nothing in this for me. This isn’t ‘for

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18 It takes about seven minutes for the host to digest within the body.
19 Jonah 1:17; Matthew 12:40 “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”
20 Hebrews 4:15
me.’ This is for you!” Sacrifice means that the one I love is more important than my personal well-being. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is the communication of God’s selfless love for us.

The gesture of the Sign of the Cross it is a collision of two intersecting lines. This collision represents the sacrifice of our own lives. As Christ suffered and sacrificed for others, when we sign ourselves, we are also committing to sacrifice for others.

Notice too how the two lines could go on indefinitely, they do not turn back in on themselves. They are in a sense ‘unbounded.’ The Sign of the Cross is not a circle that is bounded and turned inward. No, it is a cross that stretches outward. This represents the infinite expanse of love. Love itself is intended to be ‘unbounded.’ The cross signifies the “breadth, and length, and depth and height of the love of Christ, that surpasses all knowledge.”

In the same way we are called to stretch outward, like a cross, selflessly, not to be turned inward, like a circle, selfishly. Our sufferings, united to the sufferings of Christ, break us out of selfishness and teach us how to sacrifice for others. The intersecting lines of the Sign of the Cross are like the cross-hairs of a weapon aimed at selfishness. They are the “X’ that marks the spot” of battle where we die to self and live for Christ. As St. Paul says, “I have been crucified to Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

**Faith**

So the downward movement of the hand when making the sign of the Cross is fraught with meaning: Incarnation, Eucharist, Communion, suffering, death, Paschal Mystery. Just as Jesus is the procession of God’s knowledge, so too the downward action represents the theological virtue of faith, the supernatural gift of knowing. This is why Jesus came, to give us knowledge of the Father: to give us faith.

**Redemption**

Following the downward movement of the hand, we then move the hand back upward toward the left shoulder. This gestures signifies our redemption.

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21 “As we have taken the circle as the symbol of reason and madness, we may very well take the cross as the symbol at once of mystery and of health. Buddhism is centripetal, but Christianity is centrifugal: it breaks out. For the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed for ever in its size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its center it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travelers.” G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pg. 49-50
22 Ephesians 3:18-19
23 Galations 2:20
St. Paul reminds us that, “the sufferings we experience are as nothing compared to the glory to be revealed in us.” ²⁴ We know people who suffer, even to the extreme. Yet St. Paul says that those sufferings are ‘nothing’ compared to the glory to be revealed in us. Jesus, who died, did not let death be the last word. Jesus, who suffered, did not let suffering be the last word. He rose. He rose with nail marks in his hands and his feet.

We need to ask ourselves the question, “Why would Jesus rise from the dead still having wounds in his side, his hands and feet?” Because Christ’s wounds, present in his glorified body, symbolize for us that the sufferings in our life become victories when we overcome them. His wounds were trophies; the devil tried to defeat Jesus but failed. Jesus’ wounds are a sign of his victory over death, the devils’ strongest weapon.

How many of us have ‘wounds’ inside our heart, minds and souls? How many of us have the scars of past suffering in our life? I dare say all of us do. If you asked a man or woman, aged with years and experience, what enduring memories that they have, the most likely story they are going to tell is one of a challenge that he or she overcame. They might tell a story of victory over some trial the faced because that accentuated their life and uniquely characterized it as their own. And so can sufferings that we have overcome do the same to our lives.

The redemption of the human heart wounded by suffering demonstrates that the trials of this world are nothing compared to the power of God that lives inside us. Jesus is risen! As St. Paul says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” ²⁵ This anticipation of glory after suffering is Christian hope.

**Hope**

Hope. So after we lower our hand down to the belly we then lift it back up to the left shoulder. This upward movement of the hand represents the theological virtue of hope. This is a sign of redemption that follows suffering and death. The action of the hand going up not only signifies redemption, it also signifies the resurrection and the ascension as well.

**The Resurrection**

Jesus’ bodily resurrection is a mentally altering experience for the human person, especially for the people of Jewish culture. Judaism did not have a clear expectation of a bodily resurrection. With that in mind, consider what it was like for the two Jewish disciples leaving Jerusalem, on the way to Emmaus, who had no idea that Jesus would rise from the dead. On the way to Emmaus, the resurrected Jesus was walking right next to them on the road, as if he was playing a boisterous practical joke. Even though Jesus was walking with them they couldn’t recognize who he was. We might ask ourselves, “How could they not recognize Jesus?” Because the last thing they expected is for Jesus to be physically alive. Maybe the disciples thought, “Wow, what a striking resemblance to Jesus!”

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²⁴ Romans 8:18  
²⁵ Romans 8:18
But they wouldn’t have expected that person to be Jesus. And yet, when Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them that he disappeared and the two disciples recognized him: “That was Jesus!”

The reason they hadn’t recognized him was because the reality of resurrection, physically rising from the dead and returning to life, was not possible until Jesus Christ died and rose. Jesus’ resurrection has transformed the entire way the human mind conceives of life after death. Today we simply assume that our loved ones go somewhere after they die. They are raised from the dead; and not only raised, but their souls are reunited with their bodies just as Jesus’ soul was reunited with his body.

**The Ascension**

The upward movement of the hand is also a sign of the Ascension. Jesus came down from heaven, signified by the downward action of the Sign of the Cross, to reveal God’s inner thoughts, his plan to us. Then Jesus ascends back up into heaven, signified by the upward action of the hand, to restore our access to the Father.

The Ascension was the moment when Jesus entered bodily in to the Father’s presence in heaven. Symbolically, heaven is up and earth is below. Between them Jesus tells us there is a “great chasm.”26 The reason why the Father sent Jesus into the world was to bridge that chasm. Jesus, being both human and divine, or as St. Paul says, being both “earthly” and “heavenly”27 bridges the “great chasm”. Jesus came to ‘shoe-string’ tie us back together between heaven and earth. He stoops down to our level, becomes human, experiences everything we experience, in order to push us up into God’s presence. The Ascension is the first moment of humanity’s bodily entry into heaven. It is also the promise that, as Jesus bodily ascended into heaven, those who are united to him will be bodily taken into heaven after we die.

**The Holy Spirit**

After his Ascension Jesus sends the Holy Spirit. The next gesture of the Sign of the Cross is movement of the hand crossing our body along our shoulders from left to right. As we will see this horizontal line signifies both the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ. This action also passes over our heart and represents the theological virtue of **Love**.

Not only did Jesus come down from heaven at the incarnation and go back into heaven through the Ascension, he then sends the Holy Spirit to us. Whereas we experience the ‘knowledge’ of the Father in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit we experience the ‘love’ of the Father and the Son. So, in the Trinity, the Father knows himself, and that self-knowledge begets the Son. The Father

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26 Luke 16:26
27 1 Cor 15:47-49
and the Son love one another so completely that that love ‘spirates’ the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus is the procession of God’s knowledge, symbolized by the right hand starting at the head, the Holy Spirit is the spiration of God’s love, further symbolized by the hand crossing our shoulders, passing over our heart.

**Love**

When humans experience love they are experiencing something of God. As St. John says, “God is love.” People who question the existence of God saying, “You can’t explain God’s existence,” would have the same challenge explaining the existence of love. It’s not easy to prove love exists. You can’t point to it, taste it or smell it. You can only say, “I experience love.” In the same way, we may not be able to prove God exists by our physical senses, but we experience him through love.

God is love. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. He is a third person. The Father is a person, the Son is a person and the Holy Spirit is a person. Together they form a communion, or a community of persons. The Trinity is a “Community of Love.”

**The Body of Christ**

What we can say of the Trinity, a “Community of Love,” we should also be able to say about the Church, a community of love. We ourselves are united in a bond of love just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united in a bond of love. This bond is what forms us into the Body of Christ, the People of God, the Church. The horizontal movement of the hand moves from shoulder to shoulder and signifies this love of the human community, reminding us to “carry one another’s burdens.” Just as the Trinity is a community of persons united by the Holy Spirit, so too the Church is a community of persons united by the Holy Spirit.

Many people ask, “Why do I have to go to Mass every Sunday? Can’t I pray to God by myself?” The answer is this: the God who himself is a Community of Persons, desires to be worshipped in a community of persons. Our faith unites us into one community. And this community is the Body of Christ. The Eucharist forms us into this one Body: we receive the Body of Christ in order to become the Body of Christ!

**Family**

The Trinity, as a Community of Persons, also reveals the Catholic understanding of the family. As there is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, so there is a mother, father and child. The bond that is inside the Trinity should be the bond that is inside the family. We live our life

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28 To spirate means ‘to breath forth.’ It is a technical theological word explaining how the Holy Spirit is related to the Father and the Son.
29 1 John 4:8, 16
30 Galatians 6:2
protecting that bond, learning to communicate better and to sacrifice more. Just as Jesus is the communication of the Father in the Word, and just as Jesus sacrifices on our behalf, and just as Jesus is obedient to the Father, so too should husbands communicate their wives, parents should sacrifice for their children and children should obey their parents.

**The Christian Moral Life**

The two lines of the Sign of the Cross, the horizontal and the vertical, also represent the two Great Commandments, which Jesus declared when the Pharisees asked him, “Which commandment in the Law is the greatest.” What is interesting about the commandments in the Old Testament is that Hebrew scholars say that there are roughly 613 explicit commands in the Old Testament. So the Pharisees ask Jesus, “Of the 613 commandments in the law which are the greatest?” And Jesus says, “Love God and love your neighbor.” The vertical line of the Sign of the Cross represents the **love of God** and the horizontal line represents the **love of neighbor**.

So not only does the Sign of the Cross represent the theological mysteries of our creed but it also signifies the morality of our faith. The Christian moral life is boiled down to two things: Love God and Love neighbor. And if that is too confusing for some it can actually be boiled down to one thing: love persons. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three persons and my neighbor is a person. So really you can say the one fundamental commandment of the human person is: love people, God first, neighbor second.

**Amen. Credo.**

And so the last word of the Sign of the Cross is “Amen.” Amen is a Hebrew word, which means, “Yes,” “I believe,” or “So be it.” Scripture tells us, “Let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ mean no.’ Anything more is from the evil one.” Saying, “Amen” imitates Mary who says, “Let it be done to me according to your word.” Amen is a statement of affirmation to all that we have spoken of in this reflection: the person of Jesus Christ is the communication of God the Father, for the salvation of souls through the power of the Holy Spirit unto eternal life. To know Jesus is to have openness to eternal life. St. Paul says, “In the end three things last, faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love.” The Sign of the Cross is a sign of faith in the doctrines of the Church; a sign of hope in the resurrection of Jesus; a sign of love for God and for neighbor.

Thus this simple Sign of the Cross that we make, all too frequently without thought or devotion, is actually a summary of the entire **creed**. This is why the Church gives a partial indulgence when we devoutly make the Sign of the Cross. The first word of the creed is ‘**credo,**’ that is, ‘I believe.’ The Sign of the Cross summarizes, in word and action, what we believe. As our

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31 Eph 5:21-33  
32 Matthew 5:37; James 5:12  
33 1 Corinthians 13:13
Baptismal Liturgy says, “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church and we are proud to profess it in Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

So let us end as we began…

…in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
THE CREED

I believe in one God, the Father almighty,
    maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
    the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
    true God from true God,
begotten, not made, **consubstantial**
    with the Father;
Through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
    he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was **incarnate**
    of the Virgin Mary,
    and became man.

For our sake he was crucified
    under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
    and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
    and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
    to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
    the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
    who with the Father and the Son
is adored and glorified,
    who has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one, holy, catholic,
    and apostolic Church.
I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins
    and I look forward to the resurrection
of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Amen.
Father
Holy
Son
The Sign of the Cross
(Prayer, Blessing, Culture, Grammatical errors, Embodied)

Creation Authority

Trinity Community of Persons Family

Spirit

Amen Credo

Faith

Love of God

Love of Neighbor

Love

Body of Christ

Love of God

Morality
Two Great Commandments
Three Theological Virtues

Incarnation
Word became Flesh
Two Natures
Eucharist
Communion
Suffering
Death
Paschal Mystery

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

Faith

Hope

Earth

Son

Son

Family

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Creation
The Sign of the Cross by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger/ Pope Benedict XVI


The most basic Christian gesture in prayer is and always will be the Sign of the Cross. It is a way of confessing Christ crucified with one’s very body, in accordance with the programmatic words of Saint Paul: “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (I Cor 1:23f). Again he says: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (2:2).

To seal oneself with the Sign of the Cross is a visible and public Yes to Him who suffered for us; to Him who in the body has made God’s love visible, even to the utmost; to the God who reigns not by destruction but by the humility of suffering and love, which is stronger than all the power of the world and wiser than all the calculating intelligence of men.

The Sign of the Cross is a confession of faith: I believe in Him who suffered for me and rose again; in Him who has transformed the sign of shame into a sign of hope and of the love of God that is present with us. The confession of faith is a confession of hope: I believe in Him who in His weakness is the Almighty; in Him who can and will save me even in apparent absence and impotence. By signing ourselves with the Cross, we place ourselves under the protection of the Cross, hold it in front of us like a shield that will guard us in all the distress of daily life and give us the courage to go on. We accept it as a signpost that we follow: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). The Cross shows us the road of life — the imitation of Christ.

We connect the Sign of the Cross with confession of faith in the triune God — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this way it becomes a remembrance of Baptism, which is particularly clear when we use holy water with it.

The Cross is a sign of the Passion, but at the same time it is a sign of the Resurrection. It is, so to speak, the saving staff that God holds out to us, the bridge by which we can pass over the abyss of death, and all the threats of the Evil One, and reach God. It is made present in baptism, in which we become contemporary with Christ’s Cross and Resurrection (cf. Rom 6:1-14).

Whenever we make the Sign of the Cross, we accept our baptism anew; Christ from the Cross draws us, so to speak, to Himself (cf. In 12:32) and thus into communion with the living God. For baptism and the Sign of the Cross, which is a kind of summing up and re-acceptance of baptism, are above all a divine event: the Holy Spirit leads us to Christ, and Christ opens the door to the Father. God is no longer the “unknown god”; He has a name. We are allowed to call upon Him, and He calls us.

Thus we can say that in the Sign of the Cross, together with the invocation of the Trinity, the whole essence of Christianity is summed up; it displays what is distinctively Christian. Nevertheless, or rather for this very reason, it also opens the way into the wider history of religion and the divine message of creation.

In 1873, on the Mount of Olives, Greek and Hebrew grave inscriptions bearing the sign of a cross were discovered from the time of Jesus. The excavators inevitably assumed that they were dealing with Christians of the earliest times. In about 1945 increasing numbers of Jewish graves with the Sign of the Cross were being discovered and assigned to more or less the first century after Christ.
The discoveries no longer left room for the view that these were first-generation Christians. On the contrary, it had to be recognized that signs of the cross were established in the Jewish milieu.

How are we to make sense of this? The key is to be found in Ezekiel 9:4f. In the vision described there, God says to His linen-clad messenger, who carries the writing case at his side: “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark [Tav] upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it”. In the terrible catastrophe now imminent, those who do not connive in the sin of the world yet suffer from it for the sake of God, suffering impotently yet at a distance from sin, are sealed with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the Tav, which was written in the form of a cross (T or + or X). The Tav, which as a matter of fact had the form of a cross, becomes the seal of God’s ownership. It corresponds to man’s longing for God, his suffering for the sake of God, and so places him under God’s special protection. Erich Dinkler [a German liturgical scholar] was able to show that cultic stigmatization — on the hands or forehead — was occasionally practiced in the Old Testament and that this custom was also well known in New Testament times.

In the New Testament, Revelation 7:1-8 takes up the basic idea in Ezekiel’s vision. The discoveries of the graves, in conjunction with the texts of the time, prove that in certain circles within Judaism the Tav was a widespread sacred sign — a sign of confession of faith in the God of Israel and at the same time a sign of hope in His protection.

Dinkler summarizes his findings by saying that, in the cross-shaped Tav, “a whole confession of faith is summed up in one sign”. “The realities believed in and hoped for”, he says, “are read into a visible image, but the image is more than a mere reflection; it is in fact an image in whose saving power one places one’s hopes” (p. 24).

As far as we know, Christians did not at first take up this Jewish symbol of the cross, but they found the Sign of the Cross from within their faith and were able to see in it the summing up of their whole faith. But was Ezekiel’s vision of the salvific Tav, with the whole tradition built upon it, not bound to appear to Christians later as a glimpse of the One who was to come? Was the meaning of this mysterious sign not now “unveiled” (cf II Cor 3:18)? Did it not now become clear to whom this sign belonged, from whom it derived its power? Could they fail to see in all this a prophecy of the Cross of Jesus Christ, who has transformed the Tav into the power of salvation?

The Fathers belonging to the Greek cultural world were more directly affected by another discovery. In the writings of Plato, they found the remarkable idea of a cross inscribed upon the cosmos (cf Timaeus 34ab and 36bc). Plato took this from the Pythagorean tradition, which in its turn had a connection with the traditions of the ancient East.

First, there is an astronomical statement about the two great movements of the stars with which ancient astronomy was familiar: the ecliptic (the great circle in the heavens along which the sun appears to run its course) and the orbit of the earth. These two intersect and form together the Greek letter Chi, which is written in the form of a cross (like an X).

The Sign of the Cross is inscribed upon the whole cosmos. Plato, again following more ancient traditions, connected this with the image of the deity: the Demiurge (the fashioner of the world) “stretched out” the world soul “throughout the whole universe”.

Saint Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165), the Palestinian-born first philosopher among the Fathers, came across this Platonic text and did not hesitate to link it with the doctrine of the triune God and His action in salvation history in the person of Jesus Christ. He sees the idea of the Demiurge and the world soul as premonitions of the mystery of the Father and the Son — premonitions that are in need of correction and yet also capable of correction. What Plato says about the world soul seems to
him to refer to the coming of the Logos, the Son of God. And so he can now say that the shape of the cross is the greatest symbol of the lordship of the Logos, without which nothing in creation holds together (cf I Apol. 55).

The Cross of Golgotha is foreshadowed in the structure of the universe itself. The instrument of torment on which the Lord died is written into the structure of the universe. The cosmos speaks to us of the Cross, and the Cross solves for us the enigma of the cosmos. It is the real key to all reality. History and cosmos belong together. When we open our eyes, we can read the message of Christ in the language of the universe, and conversely, Christ grants us understanding of the message of creation.

From Justin onward, this “prophecy of the Cross” in Plato, together with the connection of cosmos and history that it reveals, was one of the fundamental ideas in patristic theology. It must have been an overwhelming discovery for the Fathers to find that the philosopher who summed up and interpreted the most ancient traditions had spoken of the cross as a seal imprinted on the universe.

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 200), the real founder of systematic theology in its Catholic form, says in his work of apologetics, the Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching, that the Crucified One is “the very Word of Almighty God, who penetrates our universe by an invisible presence. And for this reason He embraces the whole world, its breadth and length, its height and depth, for through the Word of God all things are guided into order. And the Son of God is crucified in them, since, in the form of the Cross, He is imprinted upon all things” (I, 3).

This text of the great Father of the Church conceals a biblical quotation that is of great importance for the biblical theology of the Cross. The epistle to the Ephesians exhorts us to be rooted and grounded in love, so that, together with all the saints, we “may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (3:18f).

There can be little doubt that this epistle emanating from the school of Saint Paul is referring to the cosmic Cross and thereby taking up traditions about the cross-shaped tree of the world that holds everything together — a religious idea that was also well known in India.

Saint Augustine has a wonderful interpretation of this important passage from Saint Paul. He sees it as representing the dimensions of human life and as referring to the form of the crucified Christ, whose arms embrace the world and whose path reaches down into the abyss of the underworld and up to the very height of God Himself (cf De doctrina christiana 2,41, 62; Corpus Christianorum 32,75f).

Hugo Rahner has assembled the most beautiful patristic texts relevant to the cosmic mystery of the Cross. I should like to add only two more. In Lactantius (d. ca. 325) we read: “In His Passion God spread out His arms and thus embraced the globe as a sign that a future people, from the rising of the sun to its setting, would gather under His wings” (81). An unknown Greek author of the fourth century, contrasting the Cross with the cult of the sun, says that Helios (the sun) has now been conquered by the Cross. “Behold, man, whom the created sun in the heavens could not instruct, is now irradiated by the sunlight of the Cross and (in baptism) enlightened”. Then the anonymous author takes up some words of Saint Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 110), who described the Cross as the cosmic hoist (mache) for going up to heaven, and says: “O what truly divine wisdom is this! O Cross, thou hoist to heaven! The Cross was driven into the ground — and behold, idol worship was destroyed. No ordinary wood is this, but the wood that God used for victory” (87f).

In His eschatological discourse, Jesus had announced that at the end of time “the sign of the Son of man” would appear in heaven (Mt 24:30). The eye of faith was now able to recognize that this sign had been inscribed into the cosmos from the beginning and thus see faith in the crucified Redeemer
confirmed by the cosmos. At the same time, Christians thus realized that the paths of religious history converged on Christ, that their expectations, expressed in many different images, led to Him. Conversely, this meant that philosophy and religion gave faith the images and concepts in which alone it could fully understand itself.

“You will be a blessing”, God had said to Abraham at the beginning of salvation history (Gen 12:2). In Christ, the Son of Abraham, these words are completely fulfilled. He is a blessing, and He is a blessing for the whole of creation as well as for all men. Thus the Cross, which is His sign in heaven and on earth, was destined to become the characteristic gesture of blessing for Christians. We make the Sign of the Cross on ourselves and thus enter the power of the blessing of Jesus Christ. We make the sign over people to whom we wish a blessing; and we also make it over things that are part of our life and that we want, as it were, to receive anew from the hand of Jesus Christ. Through the Cross, we can become sources of blessing for one another.

I shall never forget the devotion and heartfelt care with which my father and mother made the Sign of the Cross on the forehead, mouth, and breast of us children when we went away from home, especially when the parting was a long one. This blessing was like an escort that we knew would guide us on our way. It made visible the prayer of our parents, which went with us, and it gave us the assurance that this prayer was supported by the blessing of the Savior. The blessing was also a challenge to us not to go outside the sphere of this blessing.

Blessing is a priestly gesture, and so in this Sign of the Cross we felt the priesthood of parents, its special dignity and power. I believe that this blessing, which is a perfect expression of the common priesthood of the baptized, should come back in a much stronger way into our daily life and permeate it with the power of the love that comes from the Lord.