

Incarnate Word Tract Series #3 The Sign of the Holy Cross

1 – Whence Does It Come?

The sign of the cross is believed to have been used by Christians from the times of the Apostles. The first written records testifying to the sign of the cross as a Christian prayer came from about the year 200A.D. At first Christians made a small sign of the cross with the thumb upon the forehead. Later the sign was made as we make it today, with the whole hand, from forehead to breast, then from shoulder to shoulder.

The sign of the cross is not in the Bible. The Apostles gave no divine command that it must be used. Rather, the custom of making the sign of the cross grew by itself, in the prayer and devotional life of people who loved the Saviour Who had died for them on the cross, and who saw in the cross the mystery of God's love for them and God's meaning for their life.

At the Reformation

Recognizing its great benefit to the faith and devotion of the people, Martin Luther and the other Blessed Reformers kept up the use of the sign of the cross. In fact, Luther urged it to be used in both his Large and his Small Catechisms. The holy sign has been in use in the Church from Apostolic times up to our own day.

2 – What Does It Mean?

In discussing the meaning of making the sign of the cross, it is to be said that the sign of the cross is: the sign of Baptism, a confession of faith, and an acted-out prayer.

The Sign of Baptism

At our Baptism into Christ we were all signed with the sign of the cross by the Minister of Christ. Ever since our Holy Baptism we have been marked men, marked for Jesus. And this same Jesus said: "If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." When we make the sign of the cross, we are, in our will, returning to our Baptism. We are embracing the cross upon which our "old man was crucified with Christ." When we make the sign of the cross we are saying a very definite "yes" to God's verdict of death upon all sin in us. (The sinful nature in us must die with Christ on the cross). And we are saying "yes" to the new life which Christ won for us on the cross, and gave to us in Baptism.

A Confession of Faith

Because it is an emblem of suffering and death, and of faith and victory, the sign of the cross is at once a confession of faith. To trace the sign of the cross upon our bodies is to confess faith in Christ the Crucified. In so signing himself the Christian says

with St. Paul: “God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” By this sign we confess that all that we are and all that we have is through the cross of Christ alone.

An Acted-out Prayer

In our worship of God we are to use all of our selves, our bodies as well as our minds and souls. Our hands and shoulders join our minds and lips in praying to God. The outward gesture reflects the inner attitude. The sign of the cross is really a prayer—a prayer which is offered in the form of an action. It is no less a genuine prayer even if there are no words with it.

3 – When Is It Used?

Blessed Martin Luther says in his Small Catechism: “In the morning and in the evening . . . you shall bless yourself with the sign of the holy cross and say, In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” Before and after any prayer it is good to make the holy sign. At the Eucharist, it is the old custom to make the sign at the Invocation, the Absolution, at the end of the Nicene Creed, after receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, and at the Benediction. Needless to say, a Christian may make the holy sign at any time that his devotion suggests, in the routine of daily Christian life. It is good for us to make the sign of the cross frequently, because it is the sign of our baptism and the sign of our salvation.