
**May I never
boast of
anything,
except the cross
of our
Lord Jesus Christ,
by which the
world has been
crucified to me,
and I to
the world.**

Galatians 6: 14, NRSV

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The Sign of the Cross



It is increasingly common to see Christians of all traditions making the sign of the cross. Now a frequent accompaniment to acts of worship and private prayer, what does it mean, how and when do we do it, and how did the practice originate?

What does it mean?

For Christians, to look on the cross is to identify ourselves with the Christ who died there, and to trace it on ourselves is a reminder that we are incorporated into Christ at our baptism and are sharers in his death and resurrection. To make the sign of the cross is to profess faith in the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Besides identifying us as Christians, the sign of the cross helps to concentrate the mind, marking the starting point of a time when we are focused on God.

How?

Generally, the right hand is used. The thumb, index, and middle finger are brought to a point. They are then placed on the forehead, then moved down to the breast, and then from one shoulder to the other. In the Western tradition the left shoulder is touched first and in the Eastern tradition the right shoulder.

'The sign of the cross seems to have originated in the second century, and was originally traced only on the forehead with the thumb of the right hand. This was meant as an encouragement in times of trial and as a means of recognition . . .'



When?

The sign of the cross both initiates and punctuates our worship. These are the main places where it is often used:

- On dipping the hand in holy water when entering a church – a reminder of our baptism.
- At the beginning of the Eucharist: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'
- At the absolution.
- When the Gospel reading is announced: three small crosses made with the thumb on the forehead, lips and chest. This action embodies a prayer that we may embrace the message of the Gospel with our minds, proclaim it with our lips and believe it deeply in our hearts.
- At the elevation of the host and chalice.
- Before receiving Holy Communion.
- At the blessing.

The sign of the cross is also often used at other times, for example, before meals, at the beginning and end of private prayer, at times of danger or anxiety, first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

Origins

The sign of the cross seems to have originated in the second century, and was originally traced only on the forehead with the thumb of the right hand. This was meant as an encouragement in times of trial and as a means of mutual recognition among Christians. From very early times the sign of the cross was used in baptism and confirmation, and was traced over people and objects when they were blessed. 'In all our travels and movements,' says Tertullian (c.160-c.225), 'in all our coming in and going out . . . in whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.' And St Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315-c.387) says, 'Let us then not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the cross our seal, made with boldness . . . in everything; over the bread we eat and the cups we drink, in our comings and goings; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we awake; when we are travelling, and when we are at rest.'

