

Printed with ecclesiastical approval.

The Evangelization Station

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net

www.evangelizationstation.com

Pamphlet 297

The Sign of the Cross

The most important sacramental of our Church, and the one most frequently used, is the sign of the cross. The sacramentals are intended, as the Catechism tells us, "to excite good thoughts and to increase devotion," and these results are accomplished most effectively by this holy sign, for whenever we use it we are reminded of the sufferings and death of our Blessed Savior, and thereby we are filled with more fervent love, more profound gratitude and more earnest contrition. The sign of the cross is the symbol of our deliverance and the emblem of the mercy of God giving redemption to sinful man.

A Summary of Our Faith.

The form of words which we use in making this sign, together with the action performed, manifests our belief in the principal truths of our religion. We say: "In the name "- not "names " -and thereby express our faith in the unity of God. We mention the three Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and thus show our belief in the Adorable Trinity. The cross itself, made with the hand, manifests our faith in the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Blessed Savior, and shows that we regard Him not only as God but as man - for that He might be able to die on the cross it was necessary that He should possess a human nature. Thus we have in this brief formula a summary of the most important articles of our faith. And the sign of the cross is more

than this. It is a prayer to God, made in the name of our Mediator Jesus Christ, Who has declared: "If you ask the Father anything in My name, He will give it unto you."

How the Sign is Made.

The making of the sign of the cross is a very ancient practice. It probably goes back to Apostolic times, and was in common use in the second century. Among the early Christians it was usually made very small, by a slight movement of the finger or thumb, on the forehead or breast. In the days of persecution the faith of the Christian had to be concealed, and any more conspicuous sign would have put him in danger of death.

The devotion to the sign of the cross in those distant days is attested by many writers. They tell us that it was used by the more devout on every occasion. No work was begun without invoking God's blessing by this holy sign. The triple sign of the cross was employed very commonly in the early centuries of the Church and in the Middle Ages. It is not used at present except at the beginning of the Gospels at Mass. It is made by marking the forehead, the lips and the breast with a small cross, using the thumb, and is intended to remind us that our intellect must be attentive to the Word of God, our lips ready to announce His truths, and our hearts filled with love toward Him.

The ordinary method of making the sign of the cross is that which every Catholic learns in early childhood - the putting of the right hand to the forehead, to the breast and to the

left and the right shoulder, with the words: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." In past centuries the formula varied greatly. "The sign of Christ." - "The seal of the living God." - " In the name of Jesus." - " In the name of the Holy Trinity." - "Our help is in the name of the Lord," etc., were used. One of these old forms, "*Oh God, come to my assistance,*" is still in use at the beginning of [each "hour" or daily section] of the Divine Office...

In the Church's Liturgy.

This is not only the greatest but the most frequently used of all the sacramentals. No ceremony is performed without it. When a priest is ordained, his hands are anointed with holy oil to give them the power to confer blessings by the sign of the cross. In the administration of all the sacraments this holy sign is used at least once, and in some of them it is employed [more than once. For example, in the Sacrament of the Sick the priest anoints the sick person with oil using a small sign of the cross on the forehead and on the palms of the hands].

[Editor's note: According to the 1991 official text on indulgences, an object is blessed if the priest merely makes the sign of the cross over it, with or without words. He is encouraged to use the formula in the liturgy books, or even to say only "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."]

The Indulgences.

Has the Church granted any indulgences for the sign of the cross? She has. In 1863 Pope Pius IX gave an indulgence of fifty days to all who make that sacred sign and say: " In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." An indulgence of one hundred days is given if holy water is used when the sign of the cross is made.

[Editors note: The above text on the grant by Pius IX is included for historical purposes. More up to date is The Enchiridion of Indulgences of 1968 which states at grant 55: "A partial indulgence is granted to the faithful, who devoutly sign themselves with the sign of the cross, while saying the customary words: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."]

This holy symbol of our salvation, then, should be frequently used by us. It teaches us our true dignity. It reminds us that we are the brethren of Jesus Christ. In making the sign of the cross we become partakers in the wonderful history of our faith, and companions of the glorious saints of our Church. We are soldiers, and this is our weapon. The cross of our Redeemer has vanquished death, has overthrown the dominion of Satan. Let us, then, re-echo the words of St. Paul: "God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

From: Rev. John F. Sullivan, *The External of the Catholic Church*, P.J. Kenedy & Sons (1918). *Imprimatur* +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of NY, March 27, 1918.