

I USE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

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WE very literally “stand-up for” the Gospel at Mass. We “stand-up for” the Creed, too. We are making signs when we do these things. These are the little acts of worship which signify, which have a meaning. We talk with our whole body really. We talk without words often enough, talk by a frown or a smile. And best of all, we talk to and of God, to ourselves and to all the world, when we “make the Sign of the Cross”—even without words to go along with the sign.

In a mild sense we are doing part of a ritual dance, as Robert Hugh Benson noted so effectively in his *Papers of a Pariah*. Why not? David danced in worship before the Ark.

I use the Sign of the Cross. I make it to bless myself. To do this well I need often enough to refresh my mind by recalling aptly what I have always known, and what, maybe, I have grown too familiar with. I need to stimulate my will with the hope of things to come. I need to enkindle my charity so that, as I make the sacred sign, I really look closer at God and at my fellows, and grow spiritually toward them all. And so I can renew my knowledge of my Faith and its dogmas and history.

How, then, do we so frequently talk with one sign? Why do we bless ourselves with the Sign of the Cross? We really do it because there is something in our minds and hearts to which we wish to give expression with our hands, with our faces, with our bodies. We humans are that way. If we feel something, we show it; or, if we do not show it, we are somehow restraining ourselves, disciplining ourselves, “under wraps.”

Of course, we can render exterior acts meaningless by routine. But this dampening of our feelings, this admitting to our actions of the dullness of routine, ought really not be permitted ourselves when we make the Sign of the Cross. That blessing is too live an action. It involves too much feeling, too much thought, to be sunk into the lethargy or the apathy of a religious symbol allowed to decay. We just cannot afford to allow the supremely urgent Trinity to see us talk with a sign that is lifeless, to hear us talk without meaning in the Sign of the Cross.

Indeed, in blessing ourselves, we are really addressing the Trinity. The Trinity! Is there anything we do not owe the Trinity? God, our Father, Who created us; and God, the Son, Who redeemed us; and God, the Holy Spirit, Who sanctifies and energizes us!

We Call on God

“In the name of . . .” we say. That is an invocation. We call up someone, that is an evocation. We call up the very God of all. Men invoke, they call upon; men evoke, they call out “spirits” when they do this; men tremble at their audacity. We Christians can hardly let this invocation, this calling on, this evocation, this calling up and calling out be a mere formality. In the dark and tremulous memories of men - so say anthropologists - the name is continually found standing in the sense of person. And St. Thomas Aquinas says it more happily, we think: “The cause which confers the fullness of spiritual strength is the holy Trinity . . . We call on, we call up that cause when we say: ‘In the name of . . .’

Naming is serious business. We “name” a baby; and, forever after, that baby has become for us a definite, labelled person. Gangsters “put the finger on” another; they “name” him. And he is in for something indeed. And everyone knows how effective it is to remember the name of the one we address.

Catholic nations used to preface treaties “In the name of the Holy Trinity” to show their good faith and trembling hopes of peace under the name of God. Some Catholic nations, such as Ireland, still do. “In the name of . . . : “personalizes; it calls on the living and energizing person.

Be Thoughtful Here

We go on, then, “In the name of”

Somehow we make contact with the person and the power of the one named. In this case, we make contact with the power of God, the Three-in-One “. . . The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

I am God's creature, God's child, God's son and I go forward calling Him up with this evocation, at His command and under His direction, with His protection. I am Christ's member and I go forth at this invocation to do in my way what He does stupendously in His. I am one who "in the Spirit" speaks and acts. I exercise and I work. Alone, I might never turn my thoughts or my actions to such mighty things as spiritual realities, such as my God, my Redeemer. Alone, I might be frightened too much, awed too thoroughly, silenced too utterly by the profundity of God, mysterious, the Three-in-One. I might even not want to think of this God, so real, so personal, so intimate, so actual.

But I am bidden to start everything "In the name of"

And I do. I almost smother myself with the Sign of the Cross—that is, I bless myself so often—and I continually express myself "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." I sign my heart, my lips, my forehead, I sign the book. I sign others and I sign things. It ought not strain my imagination to wake to my mind's eye the instances when I daily and routinely make the Sign of the Cross. And always "In the name of"

The Trinity, the Cross and Grace

St. Paul spoke grandly and so often of the grace of God; and he has referred grace to the three divine Persons: "The Gift of the Father; the Life of Christ, Who was dead and rose; the Sanctification of the Spirit, Who is the efficiency and the presence of the three ineffable Persons. Yet all the acts of the Trinity are most mysteriously the acts of God.

It is true, of course, as theologians show us in their proper terminology, that God Himself teaches us in the Scriptures to speak of the three divine Persons according to "appropriation." We are obliged to express ourselves inadequately because of our weakness of comprehension and the shallowness of our human thought and the emptiness of ourselves "as of ourselves." There is the Son to reign by His death and in His life, which He communicates to us. There is the Holy Spirit to be in His Gift. Each is present in His own way: the Father, as Father and Creator: "God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth"; the Son as Sovereign and Saviour: "and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord"; the Holy Spirit as making holy and energizing us: "And in the Holy Spirit, Lord and life-giving" Unto each just soul, where the whole Trinity dwells, each Person comes with his personal character.

The Father comes into our soul without being "sent"; and He comes as Father, making us His children. He has the supreme initiative.

The Son comes; but He is "sent by the Father," and He comes as the Word, Incarnate, making of us His mystical members, expanding His Mystical Body which is somehow the prolongation of His humanity.

The Holy Spirit comes there, sent by the Father and the Son. Of them He is the Love, the Gift, the Bond; and He comes as a personal Gift Who contains the Gift of the two other Persons, as the bond that attaches us to the Trinity.

The Father adopts us in adopting us to His Son. And the Son incorporates us into Himself in "breathing into us" the vivifying Spirit. Thus we grow and thus we are incorporated. Thus we can better see and understand what we mean and intend to express when "In the name of ." we make the Sign of the Cross.

Whatever our piety be, we cannot afford to overlook or minimize these dogmas of our God. "Trinity Sunday," says Fr. Martindale, "can be regarded by us, if we like, more as a solemn commemoration of the dogma than directly of the Three Persons that are in God." And he reminds us of the high utility of that dogma for us, "for we have no right to forget any of our dogmas, certainly not on the grounds that they are too high for us."

The individual's, that is, your prayer and mine, may unfortunately neglect the fundamental triune aspect of the Godhead. But the liturgy, the really "official" prayer of the Church does not. The Sign of the Cross is made again and again in the Holy Sacrifice and in the sacraments and in the Office or Breviary, which are all liturgical rites. The Sign of the Cross "epitomizes" the whole doctrine and efficacy of the redemption, wrought in the name of the blessed Trinity:

The Teaching of the Cross

The cross—the Sign of the Cross—was a way, for the early Christians, of teaching about the Holy Trinity and of practice in the hallowed use of the Three-in-One. This sign decided right and wrong, it told and showed how to pray and

worship, it was the usable token of all Christians that was carried in the heart. “God .so loved the world . . .” that He gave us the Cross! The Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in multiplied mystery— was teaching by this sign, teaching while telling us in the words and acts of Christ the revealed and redeeming truth, the very beginnings of our salvation.

But before this sign could triumph, it had its bloody initiation. On that Cross, Christ was taunted while the soldiers divided His garments and drew lots for His unseamed tunic: “Save thyself, come down from the Cross!” That the soldiers said. The big-wigs, who were really doing Him to death, they said to one another: “He saved others. Himself He cannot save. Let Christ, the King of Israel, come down from the Cross that we may see and believe.”

St. Paul found the folly of the Cross to be real. “I judged not myself to know anything among you, but Jesus Christ and Him crucified Unto the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness.” Paul had tried at Athens to be wise with the wise. He had tried to argue. He had proposed likeness or analogy to their own beliefs, their “superstitions.” He had proposed the Resurrecion. And he failed.

But when he raised the Cross of Christ, as other Crusaders in their time were to learn, he won. The mystery of the Cross, the theology of the Cross, Christ on the Cross ! This fact was felt to be at the heart of the Church. It was telling. But it had to be etched in, to be loved in the heart of the Christian. It was so. thoroughly felt that later piety wrote such poignant prose-poetry as this ascribed to St. Andrew, the Apostle—and later patron of Scotland, for example, and of Russia—who was reported to have said just before his own martyrdom on the cross of his executioners: “Hail, Cross, which has been consecrated by the body of Christ Cross, long desired and dearly loved, unceasingly sought after, and now at last prepared for my soul which desires you, receive me and give me back to my Master, so that He may receive me through thee who hath redeemed me through thee.”

And the faithful still can feel the tug at their hearts at this imagined elegy of a great lover of the Christ who gave the cross.

Blessing of a Cross

The cross has its history as a sacramental in the Church. It is one of the many sacred signs of Christianity. It is one of those signs—lesser than the great seven signs, the sacraments of the Church—which are still signs of singular worth and power. These lesser signs, these sacramentals, these actions and things which the faithful love to observe, to do, to say, to use, while their hearts grow warm at their using, are healthy and very wise. They are fruitful little “industries” for bringing us a little closer to God and to His Church.

Hear how the Church expresses her thoughts when she solemnly blesses a cross in her ritual. “O God, Who has changed the gibbet of the cross, once for criminals in their punishments, to be for your redeemed the sign of salvation, grant your people to be well protected by its help as often as that people is rallied by its standard; let it serve as a plea for earnestness of hope; may it be a foundation of faith, a defence against all comers, a sound help to goodness. May this cross (which we, your Church’s ministers and sons are blessing) be victory against our foes, a safeguard for our towns, a guarantee for our lands, the sound protection and support for our homes so that through its might The Shepherd (of souls) may keep well his flock—this sign which for us, while the Lamb of God conquers, is changed (from being an ignominious thing) to be a sign of safety.”

The Crucifix

The Ritual speaks of the blessing of a new cross or crucifix. It is possible to be mildly confused over the word cross. The Catholic Dictionary tells us clearly enough that “A cross on which the figure of our Lord is painted, carved or otherwise represented” is a crucifix. And it adds that “whenever a cross is referred to in connection with the Catholic liturgy (e.g., an altar cross) a crucifix is to be understood.”

I Bless Myself

We have been asking: “Why do we Christians so often and so obviously make the Sign of the Cross, and what is the

dogma? And we are seeing something of the efficiency which the Church hopes we will introduce, or increase, in our own usage. We might right now try making the Sign of the Cross on ourselves, first remembering the purifying and cleansing meaning of the salt which has been tinged into the holy water, at its blessing. We first dip our fingers in the blessed and blessing water. Then we make the sign and say the words. Cardinal Newman has notable verses on the sign. “Whene’er across this sinful flesh of mine I draw the sacred sign, All good thoughts stir within me, and renew Their slumbering strength divine; Till there springs up a courage high and true to suffer and to do. And who shall say, but hateful spirits around, For their brief hour unbound, Shudder to see, and wail their overthrow? While on far heathen ground Some lonely saint hails the fresh odour, though Its source he cannot know” (Verses on Various Occasions, xxvii Oxford, 1832) .

Our Own Use

We can, as we all too well know, grow weary at our prayers. We can become suspicious of vain repetitions, as they may be dubbed. Yet Pius XII so strongly urges us to remember that “progress in the Christian life does not consist in the multiplicity and variety of prayers and exercises of piety, but rather in their helpfulness towards spiritual progress of the faithful and constant growth of the Church universal.”

So we may well try to make the simple Sign of the Cross be in a way the first of prayers, and have it spring into luxuriant meaning. Then with this tiny prayer of words and a sign we mightily increase in understanding and so grow in force of will. We do need right constantly to remember: “It is not he that says, ‘Lord, Lord!’ But he that does the will of My Father !” And, if our wills are to be at one with God’s, our intellects are to be rich and well stored from God’s, knowing the faith and hope that is in us, and eager for God’s charity.

There must be no opposition between the action of God, Who pours forth His grace into the hearts of men so that the work of the Redemption may always abide and the tireless collaboration of man, who must not render vain the gift of God.

A Catechism on the Sign of the Cross

There is a catechism model of how the great Trinitarian doctrine is to be appreciated for its utmost utility. A saint, a doctor of the Church and a very simple man—St. Robert Bellarmine, S.J.—wrote a catechism for the children of the diocese of which he was Archbishop: “for the use of those who teach the catechism to children and to other simple people.” His biographer tells us that it would be difficult to name any other book, excepting the Bible and the Imitation of Christ, which went round the world so rapidly and became familiar to so many different races.

We can judge its usefulness by hearing what this holy man says in his catechism.

The Sign of the Cross

“PUPIL: Please give me a brief account of the more important mysteries contained in the Creed.

“TEACHER: There are two principal mysteries of our faith, and both are included in that sign which we call the Sign of the Cross. The first is the unity and trinity of God. The second is the Incarnation and Death of the Saviour.

“PUPIL: What is meant by the unity and trinity of God?

“TEACHER: These are very deep truths and the explanation of them is a very slow process. For the time being, however, it will be enough to learn just the names, and a very little bit more. The unity of God means that besides all created things there is one thing that had no beginning. It has always been and it will always be. It has made all others things, and it supports them and governs them. It is the highest, noblest, most beautiful, most powerful, the absolute master of every thing; and this being is called God. There is just one God. There can be only one true Divinity, that is, one nature, one essence infinitely powerful, wise, good, and so forth. Nevertheless, this Divinity is found in three persons that are called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons are just one God because they have the same Divinity, the same essence. As, for example, if three persons here on earth, named Peter, Paul, and John, had the same body and the same soul, they would remain three persons; because one would be Peter, and another Paul, and another

John. Nevertheless, there would be just one man, not three men, there not being three bodies and three souls, but just one body and one soul. Such a state of affairs is not possible among men, because the being of men is little and finite, so it cannot be in many persons. But the being of God, the Divinity of God, is infinite. The same being, the same Divinity is found in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. There are, then, three persons because one is the Father, the second is the Son, and the third is the Holy Spirit, and there remains nevertheless just one God, because these persons have the same being, the same power, wisdom, goodness, and so forth.

“PUPIL: Now tell me what is meant by the Incarnation and Death of the Saviour.

“TEACHER: The second divine person, whom we have called the Son, besides his divine being, which he had before the world was created, indeed from all eternity, - this second person took for himself a human body and a human soul, that is, our whole human nature, in the womb of a most pure virgin. Thus he who was at first just God now began to be both God and man. After living among men for 33 years, during which time he taught the way of salvation and worked many miracles, at last he let himself be crucified, and on the Cross he died to make satisfaction to God for the sins of the whole world. After three days he rose from death to life, and after 40 days he ascended into heaven, as we say in the article of the Creed. That is what we mean by the Incarnation and Death of the Saviour.

“PUPIL: Why are these the principal mysteries of our faith?

“TEACHER: Because in the first is contained the first principle and last end of man; in the second we have the unique and most efficacious means of knowing that first principle and of arriving at that last end. And because by our belief in and confession of these two mysteries we are distinguished from all the false sects, from Turks, Jews, and heretics. And finally, because without believing and confessing these two mysteries, no one can be saved.

PUPIL: How are these two mysteries included in the Sign of the Cross?

“TEACHER: The Sign of the Cross is made saying: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; at the same time signing oneself in the form of a cross, putting the right hand to the forehead when one says: In the name of the Father, and then to the breast when one says: and of the Son, finally to the left and right shoulders when one says: and of the Holy Spirit. The words, in the Name, show the unity of God, because we say name and not names; and by name is meant the power, and the divine authority, which is one in all three persons. The words, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, show the trinity of persons. Signing oneself in the form of a cross represents the Passion, and consequently the Incarnation, of the Son of God. Moving the hand from the left to the right, and not from the right to the left, means that by the Passion of Our Lord we are transferred from temporal to eternal things, from sin to grace, and from death to life.

“PUPIL: What is the effect of making the Sign of the Cross?

“TEACHER: First, it shows that we are Christians, that is, soldiers of our High Commander, Christ; because this sign is like a flag, or uniform which distinguishes the soldiers of Christ from all the enemies of Holy Church; from gentiles, Jews, Turks, and heretics. (He would now add: Communists.) Further, this sign is made to invoke the divine assistance in all our works. With it we summon the aid of the most Holy Trinity, through the Passion of the Saviour. Accordingly good Christians are accustomed to make the Sign of the Cross when they rise from bed, when they leave the house, when they sit at table to eat, when they are about to go to bed, and at the beginning of every action that they have to perform. Finally, this sign is made to arm oneself against every assault of the devil, because the devil is terrified by it, and flees from it, as of criminals when they encounter the sign of the police. Very often by means of this sign of the holy Cross man has escaped many evils, both spiritual and temporal, when he makes it with faith and confidence in the divine mercy and in the merits of Christ, our Lord.” Thus St. Robert Bellarmine taught.

History of the Sign

We may note further points about this great sign of our salvation. It is well for us to know all we can about the Sign of the Cross. It has its history, and we know its grim initiation. There, where between heaven and earth, the God-Man hung on a cross, the redemption of mankind was having its last and most precious hour. Agonizingly fixed, Jesus Christ was

firm in His stance. His arms were wide to receive and to embrace. His head was erect to mark the courage and leadership. He was giving us a sign—His sign—the Sign of the Cross.

Though His hands could not trace it for us, His whole being portrayed it for us. And so St. Paul could and did cry out: “O senseless Galatians, who hath bewitched you that you should not obey the truth; before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been set forth, crucified among you?”

Crucified, all that He had said and all that He had done was finding its final portrayal in the sight of God and man, of angels. There the cross was rescued from being the most heart-breaking of the symbols of man. Thereafter it was to become in the hearts and minds of human beings the most strengthening and the most glorious of symbols, and the very initiation of all supernatural faith and hope and charity. Kings would glory in wearing the cross, and it would supplant the pagan tokens of fidelity, of advertisement; it would surmount the very eagles of Rome. It would be in this sign that men would conquer.

The earliest Christians had to feel their way and make their customs; and when the words and the acts of worship were not explicitly assigned by Our Lord and determined, as we see done in the “matter and form” of so many sacraments, the matter is left to the judgment of the Church. Art and even science combine to give us symbols, arbitrary but revealing when their secret is known. And so we find the Sign of the Cross in the Catacombs used as a symbol, where our “light--fleeing” fellows in the Faith taught with disguise the loved truths of their God.

The figure of the dolphin, curled around a trident, was such a disguise. This dolphin stood in their minds for the Cross of Christ, the tau— T—which is more evidently the sign of our redemption.

Archaeologists have uncovered for us one of the first recorded signs of the cross, a wicked, biting caricature, discovered on one of the Seven Hills of Rome, on the Palatine, and dated somewhere in the second century by the scientists. It is called a graffito. It is a marking, still visible, sketching on a stone, a roughly drawn crucified corpus with an ass’s head. Written beneath it is: “Alexamenos adores his god!” Under this scrawled taunt, Alexamenos, proud of his Faith, added his own scrawl: “Alexamenos is faithful.” He would not repudiate the Cross and he would make reparation in his heart and in his words for the insult to his Lord.

Use of the Sign

The use of the Sign of the Cross grew, we are told, and its beginnings were not the big cross we use to bless ourselves but the little cross made with the thumb or with one finger—the cross with which we sign forehead and lips and heart when we “stand up for” the Gospel as it is about to be read. That was used early indeed and lovingly and everywhere it became a happy custom, quick to be received. The then sturdy African firebrand, Tertullian, was quick to point out the Christian habit of making the Sign of the Cross in the second century: “In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupieth us, we mark our foreheads with the Sign of the Cross.”

Christians signed their beds. They signed their lips. And they developed their method of signing themselves with thumb or finger as the sign to confer a blessing on other objects and persons. They came quickly enough then to the Sign of the Cross that we now know so well, with hand open and all the fingers extended.

When a heresy about the person of Christ was rearing its ugly head, two fingers were used, the first and second (much as His Holiness is always shown with two fingers extruded when he blesses) to remind in heart and mind that Jesus Christ was possessed of two natures and two wills. Thus in every prayerful moment the soundly faithful were reminded to assert against the heretics, Eutyches and his monophysites, that the Second Person of the Trinity was God and Man, the God-Man, and, as the two used fingers noted (and but two were used), He had two natures and two wills. It was graphic teaching and wise pedagogy; and it was evidence of the way in which simple reminders, but constant ones, were so practically adopted to keep the heart and mind alert to the truth of Christ and alive with the love of the true Son of God. Our present day knowledge of salutary dogma may limp because we have somewhat deserted the meaning of the simpler pedagogy and practice of the earlier, more sign-minded Church.

Make the Sign Prayerfully

Along around the year one thousand Aelfric, an Anglo-Saxon teacher of the Faith, as his name indicates, could scold and teach his congregation: "A man may wave about wonderfully with his hands without creating any blessing unless he make the Sign of the Cross. But if he do, the fiend will soon be frightened on account of the victorious token. With three fingers one must bless himself for the Holy Trinity."

Our Lord had been challenged by the Pharisees: "Show us a sign from heaven." He had indeed shown that sign. And His followers were constant in using it, making their knowledge a part of their actions and reinforcing their actions with the content of their knowledge. It was not lip-service they were giving but the service of the whole man as they began to embrace with the Sign of the Cross the whole person. The mystery of Christ and His cross was not to empty out the cross of Christ by meaningless rite and word; but to endorse, to refresh, to make live the very person of the Redeemer in the hearts of those who loved Him.

Left or Right

In the East, as is still the well-known custom, the bar of the Cross was made from right to left. That was the way for very long in the West also. But the custom changed in the West.

In summary we can note that there is little doubt among the rubricists and lovers of the antiquities that long before the close of the middle ages the large Sign of the Cross, as we know it, was more commonly made in the West with the open hand and that the bar of the cross was traced from left to right.

A Sample

There is a pleasant quotation from an old, old, English text that tells us .of the cross once more.

"And then ye bless you with, the sygne of the holy cross to chase away the fiend with all his deceytes. For, as Chrysostome sayth, wherever the fiends see the sygne of the cross, they flye away dreading it as a staffe that they are beaten withal. And in thys blessing ye begin with youre hande at the heade downwarde and then to the lefte side and believe that our lord Jesu Christe came down from the head, that is from the Father into erthe by his holy Incarnation, and from the erthe into the left syde, that is hell, by his bitter Passion, and from thence into his Father's right syde by his glorious Ascension."

How very graphically the picture is painted for our imaginations. And were one to take a moment to study out the thought, the picture offers a rich suggestiveness. We are reminded, it is well to notice, of so much that the Church teaches - of the Trinity, of course; of the fact that God became man, that He redeemed man, that He continues His work and promises all of heaven. If we make the sign intelligently, prayerfully, we would be reviewing our faith, renewing our hope, stimulating in a gentle fashion our charity.

The Words with the Cross

Of course, just silently making the sign was not all of the Christian's habit. Words were quickly fitted to the actions, or it can be that actions were fitted to the words. We are told that sometimes one was taught, as he traced the sign, to murmur, "The sign of Christ," "The seal of the living God," "In the name of Jesus." Later on the words were varied further, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth," "In the name of the holy Trinity," "Our help is in the name of the Lord." This ejaculation we can verify as often as we notice how a priest, saying his office, in streetcar maybe as well as in Church before the Blessed Sacrament pauses, rests his book a moment and "blesses himself." Then there is the cry: "O God, come to my assistance"; and finally we have the form which we recognize as fixed, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That last is found in the formula for baptism in Matthew's gospel: "I baptize you . . ." It is rich indeed, as we have noted from St. Robert Bellarmine's catechism.

This Christian sign was already well known when Constantine's legions saw it and, heartened, heeded it to victory. The cross indeed triumphed in the emancipation of the Church that was begun by Constantine and never really ceased,

even to these latter days; just as it shall never cease “even to the end of the world.”

Watch How

Today, then, let us stand and watch at the door of the church as Catholics come in. They dip their hands in the holy water stoop and sign themselves. They genuflect and go into a pew for a “visit” and a prayer. Let us study a bit what they do.

There is holy water used. (Take water and a pinch of salt and a blessing by the priest and we have holy water - itself no insignificant sacramental.) The great symbol of cleansing and the purification and preservation is used as one clears one’s mind of worldliness and confusion in order to reach out appealing to God, the Father of all faith and fatherhood. That symbol is traced as one washes and preserves—it’s salty—one’s heart and affections by touching the breast with the hallowed water and attempting a closer affection with the Son of God, author of all hope and ambition and holy love, and, finally, we signalize by the sign our hearty will to cooperate with the graces, of the Holy Spirit in actually exercising the acts of charity. (We put our shoulders to it). And thus we have made a first sketch of the whole of our Faith.

The Sign and Marriage

I recall how all this was phrased by one of a group of Catholic young men who were engaged in studying the Sacrament of Matrimony. He thus tells us of the meaning and the values of the Sign of the Cross to the Catholic who had the problem of his future marriage in mind and heart.

“This, the Sign of the Cross, is the sign post which has and will guide my study of marriage, as marriage should guide our whole lives. This is true because the Sign of the Cross, if understood properly and meditated correctly, is found to contain the crux of all the teachings of Holy Mother, the Church. This is more especially true right now for me of marriage because of the deep symbolism which exists between it, the Sign of the Cross, and the mystery of Christ’s espousal of the Church at His death on the Cross of Calvary. Therefore it is most fitting and proper that this, my study, begin with the Sign of the Cross, for in it we will find the basis and central theme of my study.

“ ‘In the name of the Father’ Who, symbolized in holy water, preserves and purifies our faith and Who gives us the blessings of fatherhood in the holy state of Matrimony to fulfill our ~ natures and be spiritually fruitful, too; ‘ . . . and of the Son’ in Whom lies our hope of a sanctified life and a holy marriage, in Whom rests our ambition to be holy and steadfast in the keeping of His laws, especially in regard to our future vocation, and from Whom we receive the knowledge and inspiration for a holy love, pure and enduring, towards Whom we may orient ourselves and engage ourselves to marry; ‘ . . . and of the Holy Ghost,’ from Whom comes the grace to preserve us steadfast in keeping the laws of God, and to exercise ourselves in the wholesome and sanctified and sanctifying acts whereby we keep the laws of God for life and marriage, Amen.”

Thus spoke one of the young men. He was meditating well the Sign of the Cross.

The Sign and the Sacraments

Consider now the use that is made of the Sign of the Cross in the administration of the sacraments. They are Christ’s institution. The Church delights in signing them and us while giving them.

The baby, brought to the Church with the question: “What do you seek from the Church of God?” gives answer by his sponsors: “Faith!” And the baby, still in Original Sin, is “stamped” for the first solemn time with the seal of the Lord’s cross: “Receive the Sign of the Cross on your forehead and in your heart. Have faith in the teachings of God, and live in such a way that from now on you may be enabled to be the temple of God.” Thus the Rite of Baptism begins.

And all through the childhood, the adolescence of this new Christian down to the very last gasping breath and death, it is the same. “The cross! The cross!”

In First Holy Communion the Host comes, held aloft to be beheld, “Ecce, Agnus Dei . . .” and then, to be presented to the innocent lips; and the cross is first formed by the priestly hands, as he recites: “May the Body of our Lord Jesus guard

thy soul to eternal life.”

In Confirmation, the child is signed in the form of the cross: “I sign you with the Sign of the Cross and I confirm you with the chrism of salvation in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

On entering the confessional, the child—the penitent—is always greeted: “May the Lord be in thy heart and on thy lips . . .” and always signed with the Sign of the Cross to arm and steel and guide him in his acts of sacramental confession. And he is given his consoling and strengthening judicial release from sin: “I absolve thee . . . in the name of . . .” while the Sign of the Cross is made over him.

Married (or ordained) it is the Sign of the Cross that stands out so notably in the ritual. And, as we have said, in the last anointing—and so distinctly, too, at the last, gasp—it is the Sign of the Cross that is traced on those numbing members, on that expiring person’s body.

Even at the graveside the Sign of the Cross is multiplied. No Christian can, or would, want to miss it. No Christian but is fortified, comforted by this seemingly insignificant gesture, by this holy sign!

The Cross and the Office

And the priest in his official Office which he prays daily is never far from the Sign of the Cross, as we have noted. He makes it no less than 16 times while reciting in choir his Office, that “work of God.”

The Cross and the Mass

And, of course, at Mass, from the Asperges, when we are bedewed in the form of the cross with the holy water, till the Last Gospel, when we “stand-up for it,” and sign the book, our heads, our lips, our hearts with this gracious and saving sign, there is no intermission by the priest of the numerous signings which the rubrics call for and so pointedly indicate as he progresses with the august Sacrifice. There is, it is true, only one big Sign of the Cross where the words: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” accompany the sign. [But it is practically a separate study to note the thoughts and words which accompany the other Signs of the Cross which the priest makes while saying Mass. There are some forty-odd of them, the one big one with the Trinitarian words, the little ones on forehead, lips, the crosses over the sacred objects, the benediction]

Augustine’s Prayer

And so, true to our purpose, which is to help in using this good grace of God - the Sign of the Cross—by knowing more of it and of its inescapably connected dogmas, especially the dogma and the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, we suggest a final summation from the lips of another great lover of the cross, great saint and great teacher in the Church - St. Augustine. When he was finishing off his tremendous treatise on the Trinity, wherein he taught the doctrine with profoundness and sublimity, he tells us that he would complete his work, “better with a prayer than with an argument.” “O Lord, our God, we believe in Thee, The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost. For the Truth would not say: ‘Go, baptize all nations in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost’ unless you were a Trinity. Nor would you, O Lord God, bid us be baptized in the name of him who is not the Lord God. Nor would the divine voice have said: ‘Hear, O Israel, The Lord thy God is One God,’ unless you were not so a Trinity as to be One Lord God. And if you, O God, were yourself The Father, and were yourself The Son, your Word, Jesus Christ, and were yourself The Holy Ghost, your Gift, we should not read in the book of Truth: ‘God sent His Son’; nor would you, O Only-Begotten, say of the Holy Ghost: ‘Whom the Father will send in My Name’; and ‘Whom I will send to you from the Father.’ Directing my purpose by this rule of faith, so far as I have been able, so far as you have made me to be able. I have sought you, and have desired to see with my understanding what I have believed; and I have argued and laboured much. O Lord, my God, my one hope, harken to me, lest through weariness I be unwilling to seek you, ‘But that I may always ardently seek your face.’ Do you give me strength to seek, who has made me find you, and has given the hope of finding you more and more. My strength and my infirmity are in your sight: preserve the one and heal the other. My knowledge and my ignorance are in your sight;

where you have opened to me, receive me as I enter; where you have closed, open to me as I knock. May I remember you, understand you, love you. Increase these things in me until you renew me wholly . . . O Lord, the One God, God The Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is of yours, May they acknowledge who are yours, and if anything of my own, may it be pardoned, both by you and by those who are yours, Amen.”

Nihil Obstat
W. M. COLLINS
Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur
✠ D. MANNIX
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis
16th October, 1956
