

The Sign of the Cross?

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Are You Missing Something?

WHAT USE DO YOU MAKE OF THE SIGN OF THE CROSS?

We make the Sign of the Cross very frequently, but do we realize how excellent an act it is? Do we fully realize how excellent a prayer it may be made? Could we explain its meaning to non-Catholics, who might ask why Catholics make the Sign of the Cross so frequently?

Our entire life lies enclosed between the Sign of the Cross. When we were born, it was probably made over us by the piety of those who assisted at our birth; if not, we were signed with the Sign of the Cross at Baptism. At death it will be made over us if we cannot make it upon ourselves.

Our days, our meals, our Masses are each enclosed between the Sign of the Cross with which we open and close the day. In temptation and in danger we instinctively make upon ourselves the Sign of the Cross. It is the most habitual and frequent and yet the simplest of all the religious acts we perform. But custom and use can rob it of its excellence and reduce it to a mere routine formality and make it mean next to nothing to us. It would be a pity to reduce that noble spiritual action to the ranks of the merely mechanical and unconscious. In the movies a director trains illiterate Catholics to make the Sign of the Cross as a mere wave of the hand. This is so true to life (watch people entering or leaving a church) that it would be comic if it were not tragic. But at other times the director trains his intelligent characters to make the Sign of the Cross very deliberately and devoutly. How we use the Sign of the Cross is one of the marks distinguishing the well-instructed, devout Catholic from a poorly-informed and indevout Catholics. Therefore, we confer a real and solid spiritual benefit upon ourselves in reflecting upon the meaning, psychology and manner of using the Sign of the Cross.

If you have never reflected upon the Sign of the Cross, you will be amazed to discover how very much there is to it. Let us reflect (a) first on the various elements of the physical act of making the Sign of the Cross, and (b), secondly, on the spiritual attitude of the person making it.

(A) The Physical Act

The Sign of the Cross is an act which includes the whole person. It includes the tongue, the hand and the principal parts of the body. With the hand, we make the Sign of the Cross on the principal parts of the body: the head, the breast or heart, the shoulders. The shoulders indicate the entire frame, one's whole being. The indication is, therefore, that the Sign of the Cross is something in which the whole man should participate with his whole being. He should put his whole heart and soul into it.

Help

Let us reflect upon the significance of the use of the hand in making the Sign of the Cross. The hand has been providentially fashioned for the purpose of making signals or signs. (It would be interesting to pause here to show the relation between the “sign language” used by primitive peoples, and human speech.) The Sign of the Cross is a signal as well as a sign. Sometimes it is a “distress” signal, as in time of temptation. Sometimes it is an S.O.S. Always it is a love sign, as we shall see later. But now we emphasize the truth that the first of many prayerful sentiments which the Sign of the Cross may express is a petition for help. The hand is the instrument of the body which we use most frequently and by which we do most of our work. Artists use it to shape their artistic conceptions on canvas or in marble. Think of the hand of the surgeon and its usefulness. Some say that the hand is one of the most spiritual parts of the body. In fact, looking at some persons’ hands, one feels it impossible to associate them with anything that is gross or ignoble. The hand, as every student of anatomy knows, is very delicately formed, with many joints, flexible, and penetrated with sensitive nerves of feeling. It is, indeed, a machine through which a person can reveal his soul. By the hand we welcome the stranger and greet our friends, joining souls as we join hands. By a similar use of the hand we express joy, agreement, sympathy. The point is that the hand can beautifully and greatly speak. In the Sign of the Cross the hand speaks to God! If we would make the Sign of the Cross carefully it would be a real prayer, a real message or signal to God, even though our lips never spoke a word.

Faith

The physical act of the Sign of the Cross includes also the lips and the tongue in the words, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” The words themselves (separated from the sign) constitute an act of faith in the Holy Trinity. By the words we express our belief in one God in Three Divine Persons. What the physical Sign of the Cross, made with the hand on the body, stands for we shall see when we proceed now to examine what the spiritual attitude of the person signing himself can and should be.

(B) The Spiritual Attitude of the Person Making the Sign of the Cross

Our spiritual attitude is what makes or mars the value of the Sign of the Cross as a prayer. If a person were to make the Sign of the Cross so absentmindedly as to take no spiritual attitude and give no mental attention to it, it would hardly be a prayer. Let us, therefore, see what one’s spiritual attitude or thoughts could be while making the Sign of the Cross.

Act of Contrition, Love, Thanksgiving

First, one could hardly attend to the Sign of the Cross without being reminded of the Crucifixion. And of what does a crucifix speak to us? First, of our sins, for which Our Lord is atoning on the Cross. Being reminded of that truth, our hearts are filled with contrition for our sins. The Sign of the Cross, therefore, carefully and slowly made, brings into the mind a swift, wordless act of contrition. (We have already shown that the words make of it an act of faith and that it may be an S.O.S. signal expressing a petition for God’s aid.) Of what else does the Crucifixion speak to us? Certainly of Our

Lord's love for us. He is dying there for us. "Greater love than this no man hath that he lay down his life for his friends." Being reminded of that supreme proof of His love for me, we are moved to thank Him for His love and to return it. "I thank Thee and I love Thee" is in my mind, unexpressed, as I slowly and thoughtfully make the Sign of the Cross. And, therefore, the Sign of the Cross includes an act of thanksgiving and an act of love.

Hope

An act of petition, faith, contrition, thanksgiving and love! Is that all? No, there can be more to the spiritual attitude than that. It can also include an act of hope because the Crucifixion reminds us that Our Lord is there on the Cross to open the gates of heaven for us. Therefore, in making the Sign of the Cross we may be inspired to hope. The simple sign of the Cross, therefore, may include a wordless act of hope. Is that all? No, we are not yet finished with our analysis of this apparently simple act.

Resignation

Our Lord bore the cross upon His shoulders. He asks us to bear our cross, too. "Take up your cross and follow me." "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." When, therefore, in making the Sign of the Cross, our hand touches our shoulders we are reminded of these words of His and there is in our minds a swift and wordless act of resignation to the cross we are at the moment carrying. Seven acts in one! Petition, faith, contrition, thanksgiving, love, hope and resignation! Are all seven in our minds every time we make the Sign of the Cross? No, but sometimes all seven are there, if we make it slowly and pronounce the words distinctly. At other times, forced by circumstances (e.g., entering a church for Mass in a crowd) to make it more quickly in public than we would in our own private prayer, not all seven are there. Usually the cross will call forth at least these two thoughts: contrition and love, and, of course, the words constitute an act of faith. But what a beautiful, beautiful prayer and practice the Sign of the Cross is! Yet, non-Catholics, in their ignorance, sometimes regard it as a superstitious practice! Why, it is far and away superior to any practice they have of recalling what they, as well as we, regard as of paramount importance: the Crucifixion. How we regret having made it thoughtlessly in the past! How determined we ought to be to make a real prayer of it in the future! Think of all the excellent prayers and meritorious acts our Signs of the Cross during all the years of our future lives here will involve. To what a staggeringly immense total of merit will they mount in a lifetime!

Practical Hints

Now, let us answer the question: How may we PRACTICALLY provide against making the Sign of the Cross thoughtlessly? In what practical ways may we train ourselves always to make the Sign of the Cross prayerfully?

I suggest first that you always make the Sign of the Cross slowly. Never rush; never make it hastily but always deliberately. Secondly, it will be helpful to memorize the seven words: faith, help, hope, love, contrition, thanksgiving, and resignation. After memorizing the words, make the Sign of the Cross with these seven words, instead of the usual "In the name of the Father," etc. For instance, in touching the forehead say, "Faith, help, hope"; the heart, "love, contrition, thanksgiving," and reserve "resignation" for the shoulders. [In this connection the devotee of the Little Flower will

sometimes recall, in making the Sign of the Cross, the words of St. Therese addressed to her crucifix every morning: “O my dear Jesus, You have suffered and wept enough during your thirty-three years on earth. Rest today. Today it is my turn.”]

The above suggested exercise is merely exercise; it is just a means of training ourselves to make the Sign of the Cross prayerfully.

After practicing the memory exercise it would be a mistake to try to crowd all seven prayers into a single Sign of the Cross; that would be to reduce the prayer to something forced and mechanical. But the result of the suggested memory exercises will be that you will become “cross-conscious” and will always make the Sign of the Cross with abundant fruit and merits.

Three Helpful Devices

There have been invented devices for making the Sign of the Cross prayerfully, and I am sure they will prove as helpful to you as they have been to others. Sometimes on a walk or alone in church practice this device for making the Sign of the Cross more prayerfully: Say aloud the word “contrition” and then hold “contrition” before your mind while you are making the Sign of the Cross slowly and without words, intending by the Sign of the Cross on forehead, breast and shoulders to express your contrition for your sins which caused the Crucifixion. Do the same with the words “love” (revealed for us on the cross); then “hope” (of final perseverance, and ultimately of heaven because of the cross); then “thanksgiving” (for all the cross means to us); then “resignation” (to whatever cross is current); then, using the words, “In the name of the Father,” etc., after pronouncing the word “faith,” intend by your sixth Sign of the Cross an act of faith in the Holy Trinity. Finally, hold the word “help” and make the Sign of the Cross wordlessly. [We can scarcely make the Sign of the Cross without thinking of our Blessed Mother standing beneath the cross and without a little wordless prayer to the Mother of Sorrows, which would be an eighth possible constituent of the Sign of the Cross: a prayer to Mary.]

Another excellent practice is to go through this same process in bed when for any reason you are sleepless.

A third practice which you will find very effective is to accompany the ejaculation, “Sweet Heart of Jesus, be my love,” with the Sign of the Cross made on yourself slowly as you pronounce those words, instead of the usual, “In the name of the Father,” etc.

Use the Sign of the Cross on yourself to repel all temptations, whether against faith, or holy purity, or against incipient rebellion in the face of the boredom born of routine sameness. At these latter times you will find that the Sign of the Cross expressing “resignation” is most effective.

So much for these helpful practices which give variation to our prayers and are in themselves highly effective prayers.

Psychological Results

We referred to the psychological effects of the Sign of the Cross. Is that effect not obvious? What a mental catharsis is the Sign of the Cross used dozens of times daily! How effectively such a frequent practice clears the mind of what is base and elevates it to what is lofty! What a powerful effect upon our mental habits is this frequent preoccupation of the mind with “contrition,” “love,”

“thanksgiving,” “faith,” “resignation,” and “hope”! And the act is so simple a one that there is no reason why a soul intent upon pleasing God should not practise it very frequently every day. Our days could be thus easily filled with prayer. Everyone is familiar with the practice of sprinkling the day with ejaculatory prayer. Why not add to these ejaculations the frequent and fervent Sign of the Cross? It will readily occur to anyone (housewife, student, teacher, or office-worker) at what times during the day he or she could manage a prayerful Sign of the Cross expressing love or contrition or thanksgiving or any other of the possible seven acts. The most illiterate or the busiest person could rise to a height resembling “contemplation” by the frequent use of the Sign of the Cross, and this frequent communion with God would amount to union with Him! What is there in life that could for long disturb the tranquility of a soul thus constantly in communication with God?

A Sacramental

All this is independent of the consideration that the Sign of the Cross is one of the sacramentals of the Church. The sacramentals (like holy water) are intended to excite good thoughts and to increase devotion and they (the Sign of the Cross included) do remit venial sin. Some venial sin is remitted every time I make the Sign of the Cross devoutly! Finally, the Sign of the Cross, in addition to being a very powerful prayer for ourselves, may be a source of edification to others. We do not, of course, think of others when we are making the Sign of the Cross publicly, but, nevertheless, in the course of the lives of those who sign themselves devoutly, others will inevitably be affected and many may be induced by our example not to continue to reduce this beautiful prayer to a meaningless wave of the hand but to make it a real message to God, a means of communicating with Him, a signal to Him in which the hand speaks to Him, but in which the mind and heart also speak to Him. For all these reasons (because it is an effective and excellent prayer, because it is mentally elevating, because it is a source of edification to others, and because it is a sacramental let us begin with new fervour and increased devotion to use the Sign of the Cross. Of this I am certain, that after reflecting upon the excellence of the act as we have done in these pages, you will never again make the Sign of the Cross with complete thoughtlessness. No, your hand making it will always knock at the door of your mind and heart to elicit some one at least of the seven possible prayerful acts described, and you will henceforth put mind and heart into your signal to God, when, signing yourself, you say, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”
