

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

"The Sign of the Cross is probably the most often used prayer of Christians and most likely the first prayer we learned as children. Despite its simplicity, the Sign of the Cross is an ancient prayer rich in meaning. References to it appear in writings dating back to 240 AD, and it is believed that it was in use during the earliest days of Christianity.

Initially the Sign of the Cross was made with thumb, usually on the forehead but sometimes on the lips and chest. This small Sign of the Cross was in common use by the end of the 4th century and is still used today at every Mass, with the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Anointing of the Sick. It also is used for marking the forehead with ashes on Ash Wednesday.

By the 6th century, people were using the first two fingers, held together to make a large Sign of the Cross, touching the forehead, chest, and shoulders. The two fingers symbolized the divine and human natures of Christ.

The use of three fingers became popular in the 9th century. The thumb and first two fingers were held outstretched together to symbolize the Trinity, while the remaining two fingers were bent to signify Christ's two natures. This form of the large Sign of the Cross is still used in Eastern Christian churches, where the right shoulder is touched before the left.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Western Church had adopted the practice of making the large Sign of the Cross with an open hand and touching the left shoulder before the right. This is the form we Catholics continue to use today.

The Sign of the Cross is primarily a blessing. We use it to call God's blessing upon us. We also use it, in both large and small versions, to bless others or things, such as a rosary. When used in this way, the large Sign of the Cross is made in the air. Laypersons as well as clergy can use it to bless others. Parents, for example, may use the Sign of the Cross to bless their children.

When we make the Sign of the Cross upon ourselves, we are also expressing our belief in God and the Trinity. Through it, we remind ourselves of God's love for us, of the sacrifice Jesus made to give us eternal life, and of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

The Sign of the Cross also gives us a way to express our belief in Jesus' death and our hope in the Resurrection. We embrace the cross of Jesus and express our willingness to take up our own cross, all the while bursting with joyful hope in the Resurrection.

The routine at Mass of making the small Sign of the Cross on our foreheads, lips, and chest before the reading of the Gospel also has meaning. In doing this, we acknowledge our belief in the Word of God, our commitment to spread God's Word in our daily lives, and our awareness of God's presence in our hearts.

So while making the Sign of the Cross may sometimes seem like a routine action, it is not. It marks us as Christians and is a visible expression of our belief and hope in God."

