

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS: HOW IT IS MADE, ITS ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND USES

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine how the signing of the cross is to be made, the origin and development of it, its uses - which tend to overlap with its origin/development, and a contemporary sociological significance of it. One of the most ancient symbols known to humanity is the cross. It has been part of both ancient and modern cultures. The symbol of the cross can be traced back to records of early humanity where it was carved in stone, metal, shells, pottery and an assortment of other types of material.

Keywords: Augustine; Christian cross; cross of Horus; Lutherans; sign of the cross; Tertullian

One of the most ancient symbols known to humanity is the cross.¹ It has been part of both ancient and modern cultures. The symbol of the cross can be traced back to records of early humanity where it was carved in stone, metal, shells, pottery and an assortment of other types of material.² To presuppose the symbol of the cross as being exclusive to Christianity or to another particular religious tradition would be a gross misconception, to say the least. In line with this, is T. Jerome Overbeck's observation that "from existing records it is probable that the figures of crosses and circles were used as a game in antiquity."³ Nonetheless, the significance of the cross in pre-Christian era is rather ambiguous and interconnected. Overbeck further observes that, for instance, "among Egyptian hieroglyphs, a cross with a loop at the top

¹T. Jerome Overbeck, S.J., "Cross," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink, S.J. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 304.

² Overbeck, "Cross," 304.

³ Overbeck, "Cross," 304.

was known as the Cross of Horus, an Egyptian God.”⁴ Moreover, this same symbol was utilized by the Phoenicians to delineate their Goddess Astarte.⁵ The Greeks similarly adapted the same symbol to represent one of their Goddesses. However, for the Jews the cross was a symbol of shame and disgrace.⁶ A quite different significance attributed to the cross was the Swastika cross which is of Sanskrit origin; Overbeck notes that “it appears in early emblems of the Buddhists and is still used by some Hindu sects to represent meanings such as good fortune.”⁷ Interestingly, the inverse of the symbol was used as the Nazi Swastika. Undoubtedly, the meaning of the cross has evolved substantially over time. The cross is a central symbol to Christians of all denominations.⁸ Throughout the Christian era, the cross revolves around the life and death of Jesus and its significance to Christian beliefs. All of the representations through art and the development of legends regarding the cross over the past two thousand years are wholly centered on Jesus. This paper will focus on the ritual hand motion emulating the structure of the Christian cross - the gesture commonly known as the sign of the cross. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the signing of the cross is to be made, the origin and development of it, its uses - which tend to overlap with its origin/development, and a contemporary sociological significance of it.

An important issue that deserves some reflection is the question of how the sign of the cross should be performed. The actual gesture of the sign of the cross, typically involves the use of the right hand. The thumb, index and middle finger all being brought to a point. Pope Innocent III, in his book *De Sacro Altaris Mysterio* states that:

The sign of the cross is to be made with three fingers, because it is imprinted under the invocation of the Trinity... This is how it is done: from above to below, and from the right to the left,

⁴ Overbeck, “Cross,” 304.

⁵ Overbeck, “Cross,” 304.

⁶ Jose Aldazabal, “Gestos y simbolos,” *Oracion de las Horas* 29 (1987): 28.

⁷ Overbeck, “Cross,” 304.

⁸ Aldazabal, “Gestos y simbolos,” 27.

because Christ descended from the heavens to the earth, and from the Jews (right) He passed to the Gentiles (left).⁹

The three fingers are then placed on the forehead, then the sternum and then from one shoulder to another.¹⁰ Some have used and still persist to this day to use either the entire hand or three fingers.¹¹ Some authorities such as Nicolas Collin believe that the gesture should be made with the whole of the hand since it is intended to “represent the five wounds of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹² It seems as though over time it has become an issue of preference. Ernest Beresford-Cooke believes that it is best to “let ancient customs prevail,” namely that the thumb, index and middle finger be used to make the sign of the cross. As one performs the sign of the cross, one would recite “in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy Spirit/Ghost, Amen.” Variations among Christian denominations and practices exist between which shoulder is touched first. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and Oriental Orthodox touch the left shoulder first then the right¹³ whereas the Eastern Orthodox Church and the majority of Eastern Catholics touch the right shoulder then touch the left.¹⁴ Over time the western Church underwent a gradual change in making the sign of the cross from right-to-left to left-to-right. There are as many “mystical reasons” as there are minds - different views from different scholars exist as to why one should touch the left shoulder before the right shoulder and vice-versa. Cooke concludes that “the truth is that mystical interpretations of ceremonial actions should never be allowed to precede an attempt to arrive at an historical solution

⁹ Ernest Beresford-Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907), 21.

¹⁰ Jeremy Haselock, “Gestures,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul Bradshaw (Westminster John Knox Press), 229.

¹¹ Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 23.

¹² Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 23.

¹³ Haselock, “Gestures,” 229.

¹⁴ Haselock, “Gestures,” 229.

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of the problem *sub iudice*.”¹⁵ The reasons for the change are constantly disputed but it is generally accepted that in the West, when the priest made the Sign over the people to bless them, they imitated the direction of his hand, from left to right shoulder, Fr. William Saunders explains further the development of this custom:

While noting the custom of making the cross from the right to the left shoulder was for both the western and eastern Churches, Pope Innocent continued, “Others, however, make the sign of the cross from the left to the right, because from misery (left) we must cross over to glory (right), just as Christ crossed over from death to life, and from Hades to Paradise. [Some priests] do it this way so that they and the people will be signing themselves in the same way. You can easily verify this picture the priest facing the people for the blessing when we make the sign of the cross over the people, it is from left to right...” Therefore, about this time, the faithful began to imitate the priest imparting the blessing, going from the left shoulder to the right shoulder with an open hand. Eventually, this practice became the custom for the Western Church.¹⁶

This historical explanation is logical; a review of the literature indicates that this proposition was one that did not necessitate any “mystical” explanations.

It is worth noting that alongside the gesture of the sign of the cross, celebrants in the past, at points throughout the sacred ceremony, would extend their arms emulating the crucifixion of Christ on the cross with their body.¹⁷ Tertullian states in his work *De Oratione* that: “We

¹⁵ Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 23.

¹⁶ Fr. William Saunders, “The Sign of the Cross,” *The Arlington Catholic Herald*, 2003.

[http://catholicherald.com/News/The Sign of the Cross/](http://catholicherald.com/News/The_Sign_of_the_Cross/); see William P. Saunders, *Straight Answers: Answers to 100 Questions about the Catholic Faith* (Baltimore, MD: Cathedral Foundation Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 1.

however not only lift them up, but also spread them out, and, modulating them by the Lord's passion, in our prayers also express our faith in Christ."¹⁸ Paulinus, also in his work, *Vita Ambrosii*, describes St. Ambrose extending his arms out in the shape of a cross before dying.¹⁹ Overbeck notes that, "[f]rom some evidence as early as the second century, marking of one's body with the sign of the cross was a form of Christian devotion."²⁰ Textual evidence of this is found in the work of Tertullian: *De Corona* (translated in English as *The Chaplet*). Tertullian explicitly states the sign of the cross' use in daily living actions:

At every step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at the table, when we light the lamps ... in all ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.²¹

The sign of the cross is a demonstration of faith that indicates a unity with Christ through an affirmation one's baptismal identity and recognition of the cross' centrality to salvation.²² Jeremy Haselock believes that multiple signings of the cross in ordinary actions of daily life probably did not venture outside of Tertullian's community but that it definitely became accepted widely as a liturgical gesture.²³ During the period of Saint Augustine of Hippo, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the sign of the cross was being utilized frequently for practically every aspect of sacramental procedures, as Augustine observes in his Tractates of the Gospel of John:

¹⁸ Tertullian, *De Oratione* XIV, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_orat/evans_orat_04english.htm Last accessed February 10, 2016.

¹⁹ Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 1.

²⁰ Overbeck, "Cross," 306.

²¹ Tertullian, *De Corona*, III.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0304.htm> Last accessed February 10, 2016.

²² Haselock, "Gestures," 228.

²³ Haselock, "Gestures," 228.

Only when the sign of the cross is made on the foreheads of the faithful, as on the water itself with which they are regenerated, or on the oil with which they are anointed with chrism, or on the sacrifice with which they are nourished, are any of these things duly performed.²⁴

This claim made by Saint Augustine of Hippo endorsed a particular view that the sign of the cross was vital to the performance of sacramental acts. This view which according to Haselock appears to “reinforce an unacceptable *ex opera operato* system of sacramental operation, resulted in the rejection of the gesture”²⁵ by the majority of Protestant Reformers – at least outside of sacramental operation with the exception of the Church of England with baptismal ceremonies.²⁶

The use of the sign of the cross in blessing the Eucharistic elements is quite ancient²⁷, as Cooke explains: “St. Cyprian states that it is the authoritative use of the sign of the cross which works the effect in all the Sacraments.”²⁸ In addition to Augustine’s emphasis on its significance, St. John of Chrysostom is also known to provide testimony to its use in the Eucharistic service.²⁹ Haselock points out that, the making the sign of the cross on the forehead, lips and breast,

before the reading of the gospel at the Eucharist dates from the eleventh century and, together with signing the page of the book, remains a ceremonial gesture for the one proclaiming and for listening assembly in some traditions today.³⁰

²⁴ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Tractatus in Joannem*, 118.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701118.htm> Last accessed February 10, 2016.

²⁵ Haselock, “Gestures,” 228.

²⁶ Haselock, “Gestures,” 228.

²⁷ Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 6.

²⁸ Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 6.

²⁹ Cooke, *The Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies*, 6.

³⁰ Haselock, “Gestures,” 228.

Signings were heavily practiced in the Eucharistic prayer through-out the medieval rites. One of the medieval rites known as the Sarum Rite prescribed 26 signings of the cross but now in the modern Catholic Rite, only one invocation of the Holy Spirit is practiced.³¹

In our present day, with the celebration of the Eucharist in the modern Roman Catholic Rite, the sign of the cross is performed at the beginning of the Mass, before the reading of the gospel and upon receiving the final blessing.³² Lutherans do not shy away from the signing of the cross unlike most other protestant denominations aside from high Anglicans. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America recognizes the place of the sign of the cross in their liturgical history:

The sign of the cross is a treasured part of our liturgical heritage as Lutherans, because the practice was encouraged and used by Martin Luther himself. Luther made provisions for using the sign of the cross on at least four occasions.³³

A moment which is highly significant where one uses the sign of the cross is during baptism. Margaret Barker notes that the cross “was to become the mark of Christian baptism, as can be seen from the references in the Book of Revelation, where the redeemed have the Name on their Foreheads (Rev. 14.1).”³⁴ During the celebration of an infant’s baptism, the parents (sometimes godparents as well), sign the forehead of the infant after the priest. Balthasar Fischer suggests that this custom “is as old as the human race, a sign carried on the forehead is a sign of belonging. Slaves, especially, often had such a sign branded on

³¹ Haselock, “Gestures,” 228.

³² Aldazabal, “Gestos y simbolos,” 30.

³³ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Why Do Lutherans Make the Sign of the Cross?”

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Why_do_Lutherans_make_the_sign_of_the_cross.pdf Last accessed February 10, 2016.

³⁴ Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark LTD, 2003), 139.

their foreheads (or arms); it told others who their owner was.”³⁵ Fischer goes on to state the significance of the sacrament of baptism and correlation with the cross: “Jesus who suffered and died and conquered on the cross takes possession of the children whom their parents have brought to him.”³⁶ In the case of the baptism of adults, the priest makes the sign of the cross on the person’s forehead and says “receive the cross on the forehead: Christ himself strengthens you with the sign of His victory; learn to know Him and follow Him.”³⁷ Then later the sign of the cross is repeated on the ears, eyes, mouth, chest and back with words and prayers that clearly express the significance of the occasion including the expectations accompanied with Christian living.³⁸ According to Aldazabal there is a profound significance of the sign of the cross in baptism. It is not only the welcoming of an individual into a new community but a sign that acts as a reminder, to continue in the path of Christ.³⁹

Another instance where the sign of the cross is used frequently is when one enters the house of God. The sign of the cross with blessed water is a sign of the baptism one has already received, which has initiated that individual into the Christian community.⁴⁰ Following the entrance hymn, the priest and the entire congregation are to make the sign of the cross.⁴¹ Then, when one stands for the gospel, throughout mass, it is another instance where the sign of the cross is made. The celebrant makes the sign of the cross on the forehead, lips and breast, then the congregation does the same. Fischer explains that the significance of

³⁵ Balthasar Fischer, *Signs, Words & Gestures: Short Homilies on the Liturgy* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1979), 1.

³⁶ Fischer, *Signs, Words & Gestures*, 1.

³⁷ Aldazabal, “Gestos y simbolos,” 29. The original text is Spanish, I translated it myself.

³⁸ Aldazabal, “Gestos y simbolos,” 29.

³⁹ Aldazabal, “Gestos y simbolos,” 30.

⁴⁰ Fischer, *Signs, Words & Gestures*, 58.

⁴¹ International Commission on English in the liturgy – A Joint Commission of Catholic Bishops’ Conferences, *Documents on the Liturgy 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982), 476.

this gesture is one of attentiveness to the word of God and to the belongingness of individuals in God's church:

The sign of the cross on the forehead, lips, and heart also has to do with this Lord who is entering the assembly and will now speak. Everyone present is saying as it were: "Now I must pay attention. It is my Lord who speaks. Since my baptism I have belonged to him body and soul, in my thoughts, words and feelings."⁴²

Finally, there is an interesting contemporary sociological significance of the sign of the cross and its implications in secular culture, as it arose at a football match in 2006. About a decade ago, Celtic football player by the name of Artur Borac, during a game in Scotland, created an instant controversy when making gesticulations that were directed towards crowd members that were supporters of the opposition. He also blessed himself throughout the football match. The combination of his gesticulations and blessing himself was considered offensive. He was cautioned by the Crown Office. The Roman Catholic Church in Scotland issued a statement that a gesture of religious significance should not be considered offensive. The confusion over what was condemned was clarified by the Crown Office which made it abundantly clear that the player was cautioned for his other gestures not for blessing himself.⁴³ Nonetheless, the sign of the cross has embodied a symbolism of giving thanks to God for athletic victories whether it is through the scoring of goals, defense of goals, wining of games or entire tournaments.

The gesture of the signing of the cross has indeed evolved. In its earlier uses it was mainly carried forth on the forehead. Over time it was done from the forehead to the sternum and extending from shoulder to shoulder. It is also used as three smaller signs – one on the forehead, one

⁴² Fischer, *Signs, Words & Gestures*, 63.

⁴³ BBC News, "Alarm at 'cross' player's caution," August 26, 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/5288184.stm> Last accessed February 10, 2016.

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on the lips and on the chest, as is in the case before the reading of the gospel. Without a doubt many things have changed revolving around the signing of the cross including how it is performed and used. One thing that has not really changed from a Christian liturgical perspective is the significance attributed to the actual gesture. Aldazabal expresses this sentiment beautifully since he believes that every time we make the sign of the cross we are confessing as members of a new community; followers of Christ who have been saved by His death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection.⁴⁴

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