

Cross: The Sign of the Cross

By Steve Ray

Editor's note: This study was originally a part of a letter written to an "ecumenically-sensitive" Catholic who was part of a group that abandoned certain Catholic distinctives (such as crossing themselves, displaying the crucifix, venerating the Blessed Virgin, etc.) in an effort to "not offend the Protestant brethren". The end result was an emasculated Catholicism, a group of confused Catholics, and unsympathetic Protestants. Following is a short study on the Sign of the Cross which goes into depth on the practice and teaching of the Early Church and the Fathers.

Following my "study" you will find a Zenit interview on the Sign of the Cross with Bert Ghezzi.

“Sign of the Cross: The ritual gesture whereby we acknowledge the triune nature of God, that is, Three Persons in One God. We profess our faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With right hand cupped, we make the Sign of the Cross by touching first the forehead, then the breast, and finally both shoulders. This gesture is used privately as a devotional practice and is used publicly when the Church celebrates the Holy Eucharist, for example. The Sign of the Cross is also used in the Rite of Baptism (traced by celebrant, parents, and godparents) and Confirmation (the bishop or priest traces the Sign of the Cross with chrism on the forehead)” (Reverend Peter M.J. Stravinskas, Ph.D., S.T.L. *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Dictionary*. 1994, Our Sunday Visitor).

Dear Friend:

I appreciate Stravinskas' entry in the *Catholic Dictionary* but I think it is incomplete and therefore somewhat misleading. He needed more space to do the topic justice. I agree that the sign of the cross is not required for individual or corporate prayer to be effective, but that does not therefore mean it is unimportant or ineffective. Miracles have been performed with this simple gesture and parliaments and councils have opened under its sign. It may be considered superstitious in some circles, I know it was for us as Protestants. It was a great blessing to our family after we discovered the fullness of the faith in the Catholic Church. Notice how the Fathers speak about the "sign of the cross." It would be considered superstitious by today's standards.

I agree it is difficult to say what a Catholic should look like, but it is real easy to spot an Evangelical Protestant, even from a distance. They stand out like a sore thumb. I don't know that I could give a detailed description of what a Catholic should look like, but I don't think Catholics should desire to look like Protestants or like the world. Both are wrong and heading in the wrong direction. The Church has given us wonderful customs and traditions to mark ourselves and to acknowledge our participation in the whole

continuity of the Church. I get the same glee out of hearing Fr. Ed bless the parish in Latin—it ties us into our history, our heritage, our family, our Church, our Mother, our sacrament of salvation.

I am afraid that too many today are embarrassed about being Catholic. There is a certain stigma that probably started in earlier centuries that made Catholics feel inferior to their Protestant neighbors. When secularism became all the rage, it made admitting one's Catholicism even more painful for some. I *know* you don't think this way and I certainly know I don't. Crossing ourselves is a visible sign of our Catholicism and I think too many Catholics are embarrassed by the gesture and are quite willing to set it aside for the gestures and customs of the Protestants, which are usually invisible, like their unity and "ecclesiology".

I am passing on a few quotes from the early Church, besides the one mentioned by Stravinskis, to display the importance of crossing one's self in the mind of our Church Fathers. Paul said he would preach nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2), and "may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). There is also precedent in Ezekiel 9:4; 17:9-14; Rev 7:3; 9:4; 14:1. I don't think Ezekiel meant "signing" himself with the full understanding of Catholics today, but it certainly provided a support for the early Christians to use it as a "sacramental" to display their devotion. It is not only a sacramental, but also a matter of cultural literacy. Everyone associates Catholics (and Orthodox) with crossing themselves. The practical result of disregarding or ignoring the gesture is possibly to underemphasize or even deny our Catholicism, especially in the eyes of new Catholics, Protestants and the world. Be assured, I am not saying this applies to you for I know better. You are proud of your faith and not shy about it. But it *does* apply to many Catholics and I don't want to be numbered among them.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says in paragraph 2157: "The Christian begins his day, his prayers and his activities with the Sign of the Cross: 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.' The baptized person dedicates the day to the glory of God and calls on the Savior's grace which lets him act in the Spirit as a child of the Father. The sign of the cross strengthens us in temptations and difficulties."

"Signing" in the Fathers

This is an interesting introduction from *The Faith of Catholics*. I have included portions that I thought were appropriate.

"In the administration of the sacraments, and in other parts of her religious offices, the Catholic Church uses many rites and ceremonies which have been derived from the most ancient times. This alone would be a sufficient motive for their retention were there no other; as from that circumstance arises an additional proof of the antiquity of her faith and discipline. But these ceremonies, as they had in their primitive introduction, so in their retention they have, besides other advantages. They

*excite attention ; they impress the mind with a certain awe; to the unlearned they convey instruction ; and on all occasions, departing from the usages of common life, they give a peculiar dignity and character to whatever action is connected with the service of the Almighty. . . . For many of the practices in use in the Catholic Church, and which pass under the general name of ceremonies, I could adduce the authority, were it necessary, of early, if not of the primitive times. Of antiquity, the badge and glory of their Church, Catholics are sedulously retentive, even in things seemingly of little value, or not always agreeable to modern nations. ” [The topic then shifts to *The Sign of the Cross*.]*

“This sign [of the cross] is prescribed in our rituals to be frequently used, particularly in the administration of baptism and in the sacrifice of the altar; to signify, that all grace is derived from the Passion of Christ. The cross, furthermore, is marked on various parts of the dress of our ministers, and on the vessels appropriated to the divine service, to denote their destination. On the altar is raised a cross with the figure of our crucified Savior placed upon it, to bring to our minds that it was He who died for the sins of the world, and that there is no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved. Finally, we often sign ourselves with the sign of the cross, pronouncing the same time the words, “In the name of the Father, and of Son, and of the Holy Ghost”, thereby attesting our belief in the blessed Trinity, and in the incarnation and death of our Savior. ”

THE FATHERS ON THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

(emphasis in each quote is mine)

Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225 AD): “Your pearls’ [including “signing”] are the distinctive marks of even your daily conversation. The more care you take to conceal them, the more liable to suspicion you will make them, and the more exposed to the grasp of Gentile curiosity. Shall you escape notice when you *sign your bed*, (or) your body; when you blow away some impurity; when even by night you rise to pray?” (*To His Wife* 5).

Tertullian: “We feel pained should any wine or bread, even though our own, be cast upon the ground. At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, *we trace upon the forehead the sign*. For these and such like rules, if thou requires a law in the Scriptures, thou shalt find none: tradition will be pleaded to thee as originating, custom as confirming, and faith as observing them” (*The Chaplet* 3).

Tertullian: “The sick is visited, the indigent relieved, with freedom. Alms are given without danger of ensuing torment; sacrifices attended without scruple; daily diligence discharged without impediment: *there is no stealthy signing*, no trembling greeting, no mute benediction. Between the two echo psalms and hymns;[12] and they mutually challenge each other which shall better chant to their Lord. Such things when Christ sees and hears, He joys. To these He sends His own peace” (*To His Wife* 8).

Origen (c. 185-c. 284 AD): “This (the letter Tau) bears a resemblance to the figure of the cross; and this prophecy (Ezek. ix. 4) is said to regard *the sign made by Christians on the forehead, which all believers make whatsoever work they begin upon, and especially at the beginning of prayers, or of holy readings*” (T. iii. Select. in Ezek. c. ix).

St. Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236 AD): “When she had done as he had directed her, *she signed her whole body with the mystic sign (mystery) of the cross*, and went forth from the place uncorrupted” (De Viq. Corinthiaca, t. ii).

St. Cyprian (d. 258 AD): The heading of chapter xxii. of the second *Book of Testimonies* is, “That in this *sign of the cross is salvation* to all who are marked on their foreheads.”

St. Cyprian: “Ozias the king, when, bearing the censer, and contrary to God’s law, with violence assuming to himself to sacrifice, despite the opposition of Azarias the priest, he refused to be obedient and to give way, was confounded by the wrath of God, was polluted by the spot of leprosy on his forehead, in that part of his body marked by his offended Lord, *where they are signed who merit the Lord*” (De Unitate).

Lactantius (c. 240-320 AD) “Christ stretched out His hands death and measured the world; that even then He might show that, from the rising of the sun even to the going down of the same, a mighty people, assembled out of all tongues a tribes, would come under His wings, and *receive on their forehead that greatest and sublime sign*. [He then says that of this sign the marking of their door posts by the Jews, with the blood of the paschal lamb, was a type.] For Christ was a fair lamb without blemish, innocent, that is, and just and holy, who, sacrificed by those same Jews, is salvation to all who have marked the sign of blood, that is, who have marked on their foreheads the sign of the cross on which he shed his blood. . . . Let it suffice for the present to *explain what is the potency of this sign*. What a terror this sign is to devils He may know who sees how, when adjured through Christ, they flee from the bodies which they have obsessed. For as He, while living among men, put the devils to flight by a word, and restored to their former senses the troubled minds of those who had been driven to madness by their evil assaults, so now His followers expel those same foul spirits from men by the name of their master) and by the sign of His passion. Of this the proof is not difficult. For when they are sacrificing to their gods, *if there stand by one who has his forehead signed*, they cannot proceed with their sacrifices, And this has often been the chief cause why wicked kings have persecuted righteousness. For certain of ours, who were in attendance on their masters as they were sacrificing, *by making the sign upon their foreheads, put to flight their gods*, so that they could not describe what was to happen, in the bowels of the victims. . . . And as demons cannot come nigh unto those on whom they see the heavenly mark, nor hurt those whom the immortal sign fences round as an impregnable wall, they assail them by means of men, and persecute them by the hands of others” (Divin. Inst. c. 4, Oxon. n. 26-7).

Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340 AD): Eusebius narrates of Constantine that he was accustomed to “*sign his countenance with the saving sign*, and to glory in the victorious trophy” (De

Vita Constant. 1. iii. e. 2).

St. Anthony (c. 251-356 AD): “Neither ought we to fear these appearances (of evil spirits). For they are nothing, but quickly vanish, especially *if one defend himself by faith and the sign of the cross*” (*Oratio ad Monachos*, n. 8). This passage is quoted by St. Athanasius in his *Life of St. Anthony*, sec. 23. See also for similar mention of the use of the sign of the cross, in *St. Anthony’s Life*, by St. Athanasius, p. 642; n. 35, p. 656; n. 53, p. 667; n. 80, p. 683.

St. Athanasius (c. 296-373 AD): “*By the sign of the cross all magic ceases; all incantations are powerless; every idol is abandoned and deserted; all irrational voluptuousness is quelled, and each one looks up from earth to heaven*” (*De Incarn. Verbi*, t. I.).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-86 AD): “Let us not, therefore, *be ashamed of the cross of Christ*, but even though another hide it *do thou openly seal it on thy brow*, that the devils beholding that royal sign may flee far away trembling. But *make thou this sign* when thou eatest and drinkest, sittest or liest down, risest up, speakest, walkest; in a word, on every occasion, for He who was here crucified is above in the heavens” (*Catech.* iv. n. 14).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem: “Many have been crucified throughout the world but none of these do the devils dread, but Christ having been crucified for us, *when they see but the sign of the cross the devils shudder*” (*Catech.* xii. n. 22).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem: “Let none be weary: take up arms against the adversaries in the cause of the cross itself: set up the faith of the cross as a trophy against the gainsayers. For when thou art about to dispute with unbelievers concerning the cross of Christ, *first make with thy right hand the sign of the cross of Christ, and the gainsayer will be dumb*. Be not ashamed to confess the cross” (*Catech.* xiii. n. 22).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem: “Let us not then be ashamed to confess the crucified. Let the cross become our seal, *made with boldness by our fingers upon the forehead*, oil every thing on the bread we eat, and the cups we drink; in our comings in and goings out; before sleep, when we lie down and when we awake; when we are walking and when we are still. Great is that preservative; it is gratuitous, for the poor’s sake ; without toil for the sake of the weak ; since also its grace is from God; *it is the sign of the faithful and the dread of devils. For He has triumphed over them in it, having exposed there confidently in open show* (*Colos.* ii. 15). For when they see the cross they are reminded of the crucified: they are afraid of Him who has bruised the heads of the dragon. Do not despise the seal, because it is a free gift, but for this the rather honor the benefactor” (*Catech.* vi. n. 36).

St. Nino: “St. Nino began to pray and entreat God for a long time. Then she took her (wooden) cross and with it touched the Queen’s head, her feet and her shoulders, making the sign of the cross and straightway she was cured” (*Studia Biblica*, V, 32 in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 13: 786).

St. Ephraem Syrus (c. 306-73 AD): On *Ezekiel 9:11*: “*And mark a sign upon the foreheads of the men that sigh*, he says, for the circumcision of the flesh sufficed not unto salvation, and therefore has it been set aside, and *the sign of the cross* is substituted in its place” (T. ii. *Syr. Comm. in Ezek*).

St. Ephraem Syrus: “And having ended his prayer, as he withdrew, *he thrice made the sign of the cross* over the village” (T. ii. *Gr. in Vit. S. Abra. v. T.*).

St. Ephraem Syrus: “He *signed himself with the cross*, and thus addressed the evil spirit” (Ibid.).

St. Ephraem Syrus: “Let us crown our door posts with the honored and life giving cross, saying with the Apostle, *God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Gal. 4:14). *Let us sign that same life giving cross* upon our door posts, and on our foreheads, and on our breasts, and on our lips, and on every limb; and let us arm ourselves with this invincible weapon of Christians; the conqueror over death; the hope of the faithful; the light of the earth’s boundaries; that opens paradise; that destroys heresies; faith’s support ; the mighty safeguard, and salutary boast of the orthodox. *This, O Christians, let us not cease, day and night, each hour and moment, to bear about us; without it do nothing*; but in going to bed, and rising up, and working, and eating, and drinking, and journeying, and voyaging, and crossing rivers, adorn all your members with the life giving cross, *and there shall no evil come to thee, nor shall the scourge come near thy dwelling* (Ps. 90:10). *The adverse powers, on beholding this sign, depart trembling*. This too has sanctified the world; this has dispelled darkness, and brought back light; this has destroyed error; this from the sun’s rising to its setting, and from north to south, has gathered together the nations, and linked them in love into one Church, one faith, and one baptism. This is the impregnable wall of the Orthodox. What mouth, or what tongue, shall worthily sing the praises of the invincible weapon of Christ the king? . . . And this and more than this (might be) said concerning the honored cross” (T iii. *Gr. in Secund. Adv. Dom.*)

St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-c. 395 AD): In the dying address of St. Macrina we find the following: “Thou, O God, hast given unto those that fear Thee a sign, the form of Thy holy cross, for the destruction of the adversary, and for the safeguard of our life’ . . . And at the same time that she was speaking these words *she formed (laid) upon her eyes and mouth, and heart the sign* (or seal)” (T. ii. *De Vita S. Macrinae*).

St. Gregory of Nyssa: “Having entered the temple with his attendants, he (*St. Greg. Thaum.*) at once filled with dread the evil spirits, by invoking the name of Christ; and *with the sign of the cross* be purified the air defiled with vapors” (T. iii. *De Vita S. Greg.*).

St. Gregory of Nyssa: “Let the sheep hasten unto the seal (character) and that *sign of the cross which is a remedy against evils*” (T. iii. *App. De Baptismo*).

St. Gregory of Nazianzum (329-89 AD): “But when, as this man (Julian) proceeded in his

career, fears began to assail him, he flies unto the cross, and to his old remedy, and *with this he signs himself against his terrors*, and Him whom he had persecuted he makes his helper. And what follows is more fearful. The *sign of the cross prevailed*; the demons are vanquished; his fears cease; and then? He again breathes forth evil; he recovers his audacity; he dares again; and again the same fears, and *again the sign of the cross*, and the quiescent demons” (*Contr. Julian. Orat. iii. T. I.*). For the custom of blessing bread with the sign of the cross, see *T. I. Orat. xix.*

St. Gregory of Nazianzum: “Avaunt, demons lest I smite thee with the cross; the cross before which all things tremble. *I bear the cross* upon my limbs; the cross accompanies me on my journeyings; the cross is my heart; the cross is my glory” (*T ii. Carm. xxi.*)

St. Basil (c. 330-79 AD): “Gordius having thus spoken and *signed himself with the sign of the cross*, advanced to receive the stroke” (*Hom. in Gord. Mart. T. ii. P. I. n. 81.*)

St. Macarius of Egypt (c. 300-c. 390 AD): “After *the sign of the cross*, grace immediately thus operates, and composes all the members and the heart, so that the soul from its abounding gladness seems as a youth that knows not evil” (*Rom. ix. p. 481.*)

St. Epiphanius (c. 315-403 AD): He says of a woman exposed to sin that she *signed herself in the name of Christ*; for she was Christian. [He then mentions recourse being had to magic to seduce her, and observes:] This was the third circumstance that taught him that the power of magic availed not against the name of Christ, and *the sign (seal) of the cross*” (*T I. Adv. Haeres.*) He also mentions a case of madness described as being *cured by the sign of the cross.*

St. Ambrose (c. 339-397 AD): “But now there is no need of the slight pain of circumcision for a Christian people, which bearing about the death of the Lord, inscribes at every instant, *upon its own forehead*, the contempt of death as knowing that it cannot have salvation without the cross of the Lord” (*T iii. Ep. lxxi. Constanzo, n. 12.*)

St. Ambrose: “The catechumen believes also in the cross of our Lord Jesus, with which (*cross*) *also he is signed*” (*T. ii. de Xyster. e. iv. n. 20.*)

Nilus the Ascetic (d. c. 430 AD): “Certain Christians whilst seeking for the bodies of some who had been martyred, were terrified, and *each of them impressed the sign of the cross upon their foreheads*, when there appeared to them a brilliant cross which they seemed to see emit a flash of fire from the eastern side; and they immediately bent the knee to pray towards the place where the cross appeared to them” (*Martyr, St. Theodot. Ancyra. n. 17.*)

Nilus the Ascetic: “When he had said this, Theodotus made *the sign of the cross over his whole body*, and proceeded, without turning to the stadium” (*Ibid. n. 21.*)

St. Jerome (c. 342-420 AD): “Let the banner of the cross be planted *on thy forehead's*” (*T. I. Ep. xiv. ad fleliod. n. 6.*)

St. Jerome: “At every action, at every step, *let thy hand depict the cross of the Lord*” (*Ib. Ep. 23*).

St. Jerome: “To enter into a Church that is not the mark of a true Christian, seeing that many unworthy person enter with us, nor *the making the sign of the cross*” (*Galland. T. vii.*) 529.

St. Jerome: “Keep the door of your heart shut, and *frequently defend your forehead with the sign (seal) of the cross*, lest the exterminator of Egypt find some (unguarded) spot in you” (*Ep. cxxx. n. 9*).

St. Chrysostom (c. 347-407 AD): “And how wilt thou enter into the (Jewish) synagogue ? For if thou shalt *sign thy forehead*, instantly will the wicked power that dwells in that synagogue flee away; but if thou sign not thyself, thou wilt at once, at the very doors, have flung away thy weapons; and then the devil, taking thee naked and weaponless, will load thee with ten thousand evils” (*T. I. Or. viii. Adv. Jud. n. 8*).

St. Chrysostom: Reflect why the whole world hastens to look, upon a grave that now contains no body: what power draws men from the very extremities of the earth, to gaze on where He was born, where buried, where crucified. Contemplate the cross itself, what a sign of power it is. For that cross was previously an accursed thing, a shameful death; yea a death of all others the most disgraceful. But lo! now it has become more honored than life ; more resplendent than diadems; *and we all bear it about on our foreheads* not merely not ashamed of it but even glorying in it. Not private individuals only, but even they that wear the diadem, bear it on their foreheads in preference to that diadem: and justly. For better is that than countless diadems. For the diadem adorns indeed the brow, but the cross protects the mind. This is that which repels demons; this the diadem that removes the soul’s diseases; this an invincible weapon; this an impregnable wall; this an unconquerable safeguard; this not only repels the irruptions of barbarians and the incursions of hostile troops, but the phalanxes of pitiless demons” (*T. v. Expos. in Ps. cix. n. 6*).

St. Chrysostom: “Wherefore let no one be ashamed of the venerable symbols of our salvation, and of the chiefest of good things, whereby also we live, and whereby we are; but as a crown so let us bear about the cross of Christ. For indeed by it all things are perfected amongst us: whether one is to be regenerated the cross is there; or to be nourished with that mystic food; or to be ordained; or to do anything else soever, everywhere this our symbol of victory is present. For this cause, both on house, and walls and doors, *and on the forehead and on the mind*, do we inscribe it with much care. For of the salvation wrought for us; and of the common freedom; and of the goodness of our Lord ; this is the sign. For, *>as a sheep was He led to the slaughter*’. Whensoever, therefor thou signest thyself, reflect on the whole purport of the cross, and quench anger and all the other passions. *When thou signest thyself, fill thy forehead with great confidence; make thy soul free. . . .* For not merely are we to engrave it with the finger; but before this, with the will with much faith. If thou shalt thus fashion it on thy face,

none of the unclean demons will be able to come near thee, seeing the blade from which he received his wound, seeing the sword from which he had his mortal wound. . . . This is the sign which for our forefathers and for us has opened closed doors; this has quenched poisonous drugs; this has taken away the power hemlock; this has healed the bites of venomous beasts” (T. vii. liv. in *Matt. n. 4*).

St. Chrysostom: “If you perceive thy heart burning within you, *seal thy breast placing on it the cross*” (*Ib. Hom. 87 n. 2*).

St. Gaudentius of Brescia (4th-5th cent.): “Let the word of God and ***the sign of Christ*** be in the Christian’s heart, in his mouth, on his forehead, at his food, at the bath, in his chambers, at his coming in and going out, in joy, in sorrow, that agreeably to the doctrine of St. Paul, *Whether we eat or drink, etc.*” (*Scrm. viii. De lect. Evang. t. v. Bib. Maxim. 88*).

Andrew of Caesarea: Commenting on Rev 7:3: “At the coming of antichrist, *the sign of the vivifying cross* will distinguish the faithful from the faithless. For the former shall, without fear and without shame, *bear the sign of the cross of Christ* in the sight of the impious” (*Comm. in Apoc. c. xix. lb. p. 601*).

Severus, Rhetor: “A sign, which, they say, is that of the cross of Christ; *this sign, placed on their foreheads*, was the certain safety of all the flocks” (*Carm. Bucol. De Virtu. Signi Crucis*).

St. Augustine (354-430 AD): “What is the sign (or seal) of Christ, but *the cross of Christ*? Which sign, unless it be applied, whether *to the foreheads* of believers, or to the water itself whereby they are regenerated, or to the oil wherewith they are anointed with chrism, or to the sacrifice by which they are fed, none of these things is rightly performed. How then can it be, that by that which the wicked do no good thing is signified, when by the cross of Christ, which the wicked made, every good thing is signified to us in the celebration of His sacraments” (*T. iii. Tract. cxviii. in Toan. n. 5*).

St. Augustine: “Not without cause did Christ wish *His sign to be impressed upon our foreheads*, on the seat as it were of shame, lest the Christian might blush at the indignities offered to Christ” (*T. iv. in P8. xxx. Serm. iii. n. 7*).

St. Augustine: “Whatsoever thou mayest suffer, thou wilt not approach those insults, those scourgings, that disgraceful robe, that thorny crown; thou wilt not, in fine, come to that cross, because now it has been removed as a punishment by the Human race. For whereas, under those of old, criminals were crucified, now no one is crucified. It was honored and ceased. It ceased as a punishment, it remains as a *glory*. From the places of punishments it has passed to the *foreheads of emperors*” (*T. iv. in P8. xxxvi. Serm. 2*).

Sulpicius Severus (c. 360-c. 420 AD): “He (St. Martin of Tours) having lifted on high the *sign of the cross* upon those who were opposite to him, and commanded the crowd not to stir, but to lay down their burdens then might be seen those miserable men in a wonderful

manner grow rigid as stones” (*Galland t.viii. De ViN.B. Xartini*, n. 12).

Sulpicius Severus: “Against the (visible assaults of the) devil he always protected himself by the sign of the cross and the help of prayer” (*R. n. 22*).

Sulpicius Severus: “Worshipper of God, remember that thou hast, under the hallowed dew of the font and of the laver, been signed with chrism. Let, when sleep summons thee to thy chaste couch, *the sign of the cross be imprinted on thy forehead*, and on thy heart. The cross drives far away all crime; darkness flees before it; the mind consecrated by that sign cannot fluctuate” (*Lib. Hymn. 6 per horas, Ente Somnum*).

St. Maximus (d. 408/23 AD): “When we rise in the morning we ought to give thanks to God, and to do *every action throughout the day in the sign of the Savior*. While thou wast yet a Gentile, was it not thy custom to seek for signs, and to ascertain with great care what signs were favorable to certain things? Now I would not have thee be mistaken in their number; know then that, in the one sign of Christ there lies undoubted success in ever thing. He who, *in this sign*, begins to sow, will reap as fruit life everlasting; *he who in this sign* begins his journey, will reach heaven in this name, therefore, are all our actions to be regulated” (*Homily ii. De Non Timendis Hostibus*).

Paulus Orosius (d. c. 380 AD): “Theodosius narrowing himself without friends, but that he was surrounded by enemies, with his body prostrate on the earth, but his mind fixed on heaven, prayed alone to Christ alone, who is able to do all things. Having spent a sleepless night in uninterrupted prayer . . . he confidently, though alone, seized his weapons, conscious that he was not only to be *protected by the sign of the cross*, but thereby even to be victorious; fortifying himself with that sign, he gave the signal for battle” (*Histor l. vii. c. 55*).

St. Cyril of Alexandria (c. 315-86 AD): Explaining Is. xix. 19: “He, in this place, calls the *sign of the holy cross*, with which it is the custom of believers to be fenced round, a *pillar*. For this we have ever used ; overthrowing every assault of the devil, and repelling the attacks of evil spirits. For an impregnable wall is the cross unto us, and our glorying in it is truly salutary. *God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Christ*” (*T. I Comm. in.Isa. lib. ii*).

Theodoret (c. 393-c. 466 AD): Having narrated a miracle performed by St. James of Nisibis, he says: “Such was the miracle performed by this new Moses, effected not by a stroke with a rod, but a power manifested by *the sign of the cross*” (*T iii. Relig. e. I. p. 1111*). For other miracles ascribed to the same cause, see *Ibid. e. ii. p. 1125*; *e. iii. p. 1140*; *c. viii*).

Theodoret: The well-known account of Julian, after his apostasy, using inadvertently *the sign of the cross*, when under terror front evil spirits, is found also in Theodoret See also in that same history the account of a miracle ascribed to water blessed by the sign of the cross. “All Christians honor the sign of the cross” (*T. iv. Or. vi. De Prov.*)

Pope St. Leo I (d. 461 AD): “*The sign of the cross* makes all who have been regenerated in Christ kings, but the unction of the Holy Spirit consecrates priests” (*T. I. Serm. iv. in Natal. Ordin. c. I*).

Pope St. Leo I: “They who are ashamed to proclaim with the lips what they have received to be borne on their foreheads, will show that they have derived no virtue from *the sign of the cross*” (*Ep. cxxiv. ad Monachos Palcestinus, c. viii*).

Cassian (c. 360-435 AD): He narrates a miracle performed by a monk, “by giving a cup of water which he had *signed with the sign of the cross*” (*Collat. xv. Abbat. Nestor. c. iv*).

Arnobius Junior (d. c. 330 AD): “For He, having risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven, we His Apostles and disciples will, together with all believers, have *the sign of His cross* for good; that our enemies, whether visible or invisible, may see the sign upon our foreheads, and be confounded. For in that same sign thou aidest, and in it thou comfortest” (*Comm. in P8. lxxxv*).

Arnobius Junior: “Applying Ps. 144 he says: “He has therefore taught our fingers to fight, that when we feel the encounter of foes, whether visible or invisible, we may with *our fingers arm our foreheads with the victorious cross*” (*In Psa.. cxliv*).

St. Peter Chrysologus (c. 400-450 AD): Let Christ be your helmet, *let the cross on your forehead* be your unailing protection” (*Sermon 108*).

St. Nilus (d. c. 430 AD): “It is useful to pray for the most part, *signed with the cross*, for thus are we blessed by God; and thus again do we bless others. Yea, for the divine Moses, when consecrating the tabernacle, and anointing his own brother as a priest, having stretched forth his hands towards heaven *in the form of a cross*, blessed him” (*L. I. Ep. 87*).

St. Nilus: “If thou continually seal, with the sign of *the cross of the Lord*, both thy forehead and heart, the demons will flee away from thee, for they tremble exceedingly at that blessed seal” (*L. ii. Ep. 304*).

St. Nilus: “If thou wouldst destroy the evil remembrances which have been left in the ruling part (of the mind), and the multiform snares of the enemy, arm thyself readily by the memory of our Savior, and by the fervent invocation of the venerable name, both by day and night, *frequently sealing both thy brow and breast with the sign of the cross of the Lord*. For when the name of the Lord is uttered, and *the seal of the Lord’s cross is placed upon the brow*, and heart, and other members, the power of the enemy is undoubtedly destroyed, and the wicked demons fly trembling away from us” (*L. iii. Ep. 288*).

Bridgettine Nuns of Sion (Middle Ages): “And the you bless you with *the sign of the holy cross*, to chase away the fiend with all his deceits. For, as Chrysostom said, wherever the fiends see *the sign of the cross*, they fly away, dreading it as a staff that they are beaten

with. *And in thy blessing you begin with your hands at the head downwards*, and then to the left side to show our Lord Jesus Christ came down from the head, that is from the Father into earth by his holy Incarnation, and from the earth into the left side, that is hell, by his bitter Passion, and from thence into his Father's right side by his glorious Ascention" (*Myroure of our Lady* in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 13:786).

Conclusion

This is just a quick collection of the Fathers (mostly gleaned from *Faith of Catholics* in three volumes, ed. by Monsignor Chapel [New York and Cincinnati: Fr. Pustet & Co., 1885]) as they address the issue of the "sign of the cross" and the Christian practice of "signing themselves". There is no question that the early Church, as recorded by the Church Fathers, held the "sign of the cross" in much higher esteem than modern Catholics. They even seem to be a bit "superstitious" by modernist terms." I wouldn't call it superstitious, but *effectual* and *sacramental*, expecting it to have power and effectiveness due to the grace and involvement of God, and based on the power of the cross which is being appropriated, by faith through the signing.

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Significance of the Sign of the Cross

Bert Ghezzi on the Meaning Behind the Ancient Gesture

LAKE MARY, Florida, NOV. 22, 2004 (Zenit.org).- The simple gesture that Catholics make thousands of times in their lives has a deeper meaning most of them don't realize.

Now, the multifaceted significance of the sign of the cross has been investigated and explained by Bert Ghezzi, author of "Sign of the Cross: Recovering the Power of the Ancient Prayer" (Loyola Press).

He told ZENIT how the sign came about, what six meanings it has and why making it reverently can enhance one's life in Christ.

Q: When did the sign of the cross originate?

Ghezzi: The sign of the cross is a very ancient practice and prayer. We don't have any indication of it in Scripture, but St. Basil in the fourth century said that we learned the sign from the time of the apostles and that it was administered in baptisms. Some scholars interpret St. Paul's saying that he bears the marks of Christ on his body, in Galatians 6:17, as his referring to the sign of the cross.

In the book, I note that the sign originates close to Jesus' time and goes back to the ancient Church. Christians received it in baptism; the celebrant signed them and claimed them for Christ.

Q: How did it become such an important liturgical and devotional practice?

Ghezzi: I speculate that when adult Christians were baptized, they made the sign of the

cross that claimed them for Christ on their forehead proudly.

Tertullian said that Christians at all times should mark their foreheads with the sign of the cross. I can imagine that Christians would make a little sign of the cross with their thumb and forefinger on their foreheads, to remind themselves that they were living a life for Christ.

Q: Beyond the words themselves, what does the sign mean? Why is it a mark of discipleship?

Ghezzi: The sign means a lot of things. In the book, I describe six meanings, with and without words. The sign of the cross is: a confession of faith; a renewal of baptism; a mark of discipleship; an acceptance of suffering; a defense against the devil; and a victory over self-indulgence.

When you make the sign, you are professing a mini version of the creed -- you are professing your belief in the Father, and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. When you say the words and pray in someone's name you are declaring their presence and coming into their presence -- that's how a name is used in Scripture.

As a sacramental, it's a renewal of the sacrament of baptism; when you make it you say again, in effect, "I died with Christ and rose to new life." The sign of the cross in baptism is like a Christian circumcision, which united Gentile converts to the Jewish nation. The sign links you to the body of Christ, and when you make it you remember your joining to the body with Christ as the head.

The sign of the cross is a mark of discipleship. Jesus says in Luke 9:23, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." The word that the Fathers of the Church used for the sign of the cross is a Greek word that is the same as what a slave owner put on a slave, a shepherd put on a sheep and a general put on a soldier -- it's a declaration that I belong to Christ.

Self-denial is not just giving up little things; to be a disciple you are under Christ's leadership and you don't belong to yourself. By doing the sign of the cross, you're saying to the Lord, "I want to obey you; I belong to you. You direct all my decisions. I will always be obedient to God's law, Christ's teachings and the Church."

When suffering comes, the sign of the cross is a sign of acceptance. It's remembering that Jesus became a man and suffered for us and that we participate in Christ's suffering. The sign of the cross says, "I am willing to embrace suffering to share in Christ's suffering."

When you're suffering, when you're feeling like God is not there, the sign of the cross brings him there and declares his presence whether you feel it. It is a way of acknowledging him at that time of trial.

One of the main teachings of the early Church Fathers is that the sign of the cross is a

declaration of defense against the devil. When you sign yourself, you are declaring to the devil, "Hands off. I belong to Christ; he is my protection." It's both an offensive and defensive tool.

I've found that the sign of the cross is a way to put to death self-indulgence -- those big problems we have, the stubborn things we can't get rid of. The Church Fathers say if you are angry, full of lust, fearful, emotional or grappling with fleshly problems, make the sign when tempted and it will help dispel the problem.

I began to make it to gain control with a problem with anger. Signing myself is a way of destroying the anger, putting on patient behavior, imitating Jesus' practice of virtue.

Q: Do non-Catholics use the sign of the cross?

Ghezzi: Yes, the sign of the cross is used by Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterians, particularly in baptisms. In his small catechism, Martin Luther recommends making the sign of the cross at bedtime and first thing in the morning.

It's a shame that many non-Catholics see it as something they shouldn't be doing; it comes from an ancient Church that we all share. One of my hopes in writing this book is that non-Catholics will read it and share in the sign of the cross.

Q: Why do Catholics use the sign of the cross with holy water upon entering and exiting a church?

Ghezzi: In order to participate in the great sacrifice of the Mass, you need to be baptized. Using holy water to sign yourself is saying "I am a baptized Christian and I am authorized to participate in this sacrifice."

When you make the sign of the cross when you leave, you say that the Mass never ends -- your whole life is participating in Christ's sacrifice.

Q: Why should Christians learn more about this prayer?

Ghezzi: I think that it's not something to be taken casually. The sign of the cross has enormous power as a sacramental; it does not cause the spiritual thing it signifies but draws on the prayer of the Church to affect us in our lives. The sign of the cross is the supreme sacramental.

When I see professional athletes make the sign of the cross during games, I'm not critical of them. It says that everything I do, I do in the name of Christ -- even games can be played in the presence of God.

When people make the sign of the cross casually, I pray that they will recognize how serious it is -- that they are declaring that they belong to Christ, they want to obey him and accept suffering. It's not a good-luck charm.

Q: Why is the sign of the cross significant today, especially in areas where laws are becoming less tolerant of public displays of faith?

Ghezzi: They can tell us that we can't have the Ten Commandments in a public building, but they can't stop us from making the sign of the cross publicly. We need to remember what Jesus said: If we are ashamed of him, he'll be ashamed of us.

We should feel confident in letting people know that we are Christians and that we belong to Christ.

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