

THE CROSS

“Lord, by thy Cross and Resurrection thou has redeemed the world”

SCRIPTURES:

Take up your Cross and come follow me.

No one who does not carry his cross and come after me can be my disciple.

The message of the cross is fully for those who are on the way to ruin, but for those of us who are on the road to salvation it is the power of God.

In the symbol of the Cross we can see the magnitude of the human tragedy, the ravages of original sin, and the infinite love of God. Lent is a particularly appropriate time to attempt to penetrate the true meaning of this sacred image represented through prayerful contemplation; and to study the traditions surrounding the Christian symbol of the Cross.

History of the Cross: This Christian sign is a very ancient one, mentioned by the early Fathers of the Church as being a habitual practice by the second century. Tertullian recounts that “in all our travels in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.” This sign or mark on the forehead of consecration to Christ has an antecedent in Ezekiel’s prophetic vision of judgment, in which the Lord commands that a “mark be set upon the foreheads” of the Israelites who cry out against the evil which surrounds them, so that by this mark God’s people were identified as belonging to Him and saved from annihilation [Ezekiel: 9:4-6]. Other biblical references to “sealing” god’s people with a sign on their heads are found in the Apocalypse (or Revelation 7:4, 9:4).

Sacramental Mark of the Cross: This sacramental “mark” is important to Catholic people to this day. We are anointed, at baptism and at confirmation, by the priest making the sign of the cross on our foreheads with the Oil of Chrism (the oil blessed by bishops at the Mass of Chrism on Holy Thursday). The sign and the chrism are also used at the ordination of a priest or bishop. In administering the sacrament of the sick the priest anoints the person with the sign of the cross made with blessed oil. Also, on Ash Wednesday, our foreheads are marked by the priest with the sign of the cross made with blessed palm ashes.

Mass and Absolution Use of Cross: Another form of the sign of the cross is made by the priest several times during the celebration of Mass and when he grants absolution and gives other priestly blessings, by making an invisible cross with the first two fingers and thumb of his right hand extended. A similar gesture of blessing is made when a priest blesses religious objects (these objects used in worship are also called sacramentals), such as rosaries, medals, vestments and articles used in connection with mass.

The Great Sign of the Cross: (This is the one most people think of, and the one people use most often). A cross is traced with the right hand, touching the forehead, the chest, then the left and right shoulder. [In Orthodox churches, from right to left.] The Doxology is said aloud or silently as the sign is made.

The season of Lent is a most appropriate time for all ages to learn more about one of the most distinctive Catholic prayers: the **sign of the cross**. It is a visible sign (sacramental) of one’s belief in Christ and of one’s hope in the redemption which flows from His Cross. Accompanied by the invocation of the Trinity (Doxology), “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy spirit”, making a sign of the cross is a simple and beautiful form of Christian devotion. By making this sign both in public and in private we affirm our faith in Christ crucified and ask for His blessing and protection. It is also a gesture of reverence to the Blessed Sacrament



The Little Sign of the Cross: A cross is made on the forehead with the thumb or index finger (this form is used by the priest when anointing or administering ashes). Or a cross is traced with the thumb on one’s own head, lips and heart, a gesture which asks Christ to instruct our minds, aid us in our witness, and renew our hearts. (This sign is made at the reading of the Gospel by both priest and people.)