

THE CATHOLIC PARISHES OF NEW KENSINGTON
MARCH 15, 2020



THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT



WHY WE MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Catholics often make the Sign of the Cross casually, just as a nice gesture for beginning and ending their prayers. But when we learn to take this act seriously, signing ourselves frequently with faith and reverence, remarkable results can take place. We find ourselves doing measurably better in our Christian life: praying with more passion, resisting our bad inclinations more effectively, and relating to others more kindly.

The Sign of the Cross, after all, is not merely a pious gesture. It is a powerful prayer, a sacramental of the Church. Scripture, the Church Fathers and saints, and Catholic teaching offer six perspectives on the Sign of the Cross that reveal why making it opens us to life-transforming graces. Once we grasp them, we can make the gesture with more faith and experience its great blessings.

Six Reasons to Make the Sign

1. It's a mini-creed.

The Sign of the Cross is a profession of faith in God as He has revealed himself. It serves as an abbreviated form of the Apostles' Creed. Touching our forehead, breast and shoulders (and in some cultures, our lips as well), we declare our belief in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are announcing our faith in what God has done — the creation of all things, the redemption of humanity from sin and death, and the establishment of the Church, which offers new life to all. When we sign ourselves we are making ourselves aware of God's presence and opening ourselves to His action in our lives. That much alone would be enough to transform us spiritually, wouldn't it? But there is much, much more.

2. A renewal of baptism.

First-century Christians began making the Sign of the Cross as a reminder and renewal of what happened to them when they were baptized. It still works the same way for us. When we sign ourselves, we are declaring that in baptism we died sacramentally with Christ on the cross and rose to a new life with Him (see Rom 6:3-4 and Gal 2:20). We are asking the Lord to renew in us those baptismal graces.

We are also acknowledging that baptism joined us to the Body of Christ and equipped us for our role of collaborating with the Lord in His work of rescuing all people from sin and death.

3. A mark of discipleship.

At baptism the Lord claimed us as His own by marking us with the Sign of the Cross. Now, when we sign ourselves, we are affirming our loyalty to Him. By tracing the cross on our bodies, we are denying that we belong to ourselves and declaring that we belong to Him alone (see Lk 9:23).

The Church Fathers used the same word for the Sign of the Cross that the ancient world employed to indicate ownership. The same word named a shepherd's brand on his sheep, a general's tattoo on his soldiers, a householder's mark on his servants, and the Lord's mark on His disciples.

Signing ourselves recognizes that we are Christ's sheep and can count on His care; His soldiers, commissioned to work with Him in advancing His kingdom on earth; and His servants, dedicated to doing whatever He tells us.

4. An acceptance of suffering.

Jesus promised us that suffering would be a normal part of a disciple's life (see Lk 9:23-24). So when we mark our bodies with the sign, we are embracing whatever pain comes as a consequence of our faith in Christ. Making the sign is our taking up the cross and following Him (Lk 9:23).

At the same time, however, it comforts us with the realization that Jesus, who endured the Crucifixion for us, now joins us in our suffering and supports us.

Signing ourselves also announces another significant truth: with St. Paul, we are celebrating that our afflictions as members of the body of Christ contribute to the Lord's saving work of perfecting the Church in holiness (see Col 1:24).

5. A two-edged move against the devil.

When the devil watched Jesus die on the cross, he mistakenly believed he had won a great victory. Instead, the Lord surprised him with an ignominious defeat (see 1 Cor 2:8). From the first Easter morning through the present, the Sign of the Cross makes the devil cower and flee.

On one level, then, making the sign is a defensive move, declaring our inviolability to the devil's influence. But, more importantly, the sign is also an offensive weapon, helping us reclaim with Christ all that Satan lost at the cross. It announces our cooperation with Jesus in the indomitable advance of the kingdom of God against the kingdom of darkness.

6. A victory over the flesh.

In the New Testament, the word flesh sums up all the evil inclinations of our old nature that persist in us even after we die with Christ in baptism (see Gal 5:16-22). Making the Sign of the Cross expresses our decision to crucify these desires of the flesh and to live by the Spirit.

Like tossing off a dirty shirt or blouse, making the sign indicates our stripping ourselves of our evil inclinations and clothing ourselves with the behaviors of Christ (see Col 3:5-15).

The Church Fathers taught that the Sign of the Cross diffused the force of powerful temptations such as anger and lust. So, no matter how strongly we are tempted, we can use the Sign of the Cross to activate our freedom in Christ and conquer even our besetting sins.

Apply These Truths Now

Right now, you can imprint in your heart these six truths about the Sign of the Cross by making it six times, each time applying one of the perspectives.

- + First, sign yourself professing your faith in God.
- + Second, mark yourself remembering that you died with Christ in baptism.
- + Third, make the sign to declare that you belong to Christ as His disciple and will obey Him.
- + Fourth, sign yourself to embrace whatever suffering comes and to celebrate your suffering with Christ for the Church.
- + Fifth, make the Sign of the Cross as a defense against the devil and as an offensive advance of God's kingdom against him.
- + Finally, make the sign to crucify your flesh and to put on Christ and His behaviors.

Go through these six signings often in your morning prayer — and watch the grace flow through this ancient sacramental in the days to come.

*Bert Ghezzi is the author of numerous books, most recently
"The Sign of the Cross: Recovering the Power of the Ancient Prayer" (Loyola, 2006).*

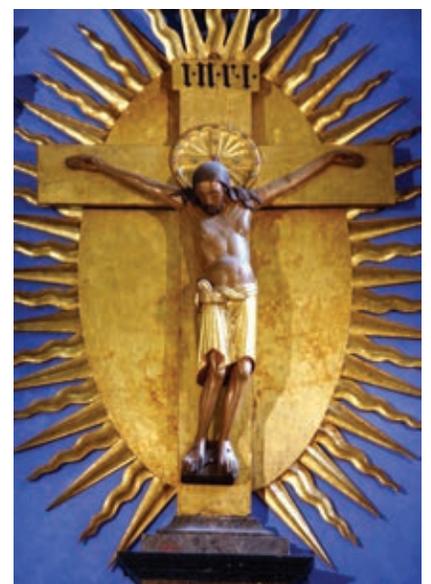
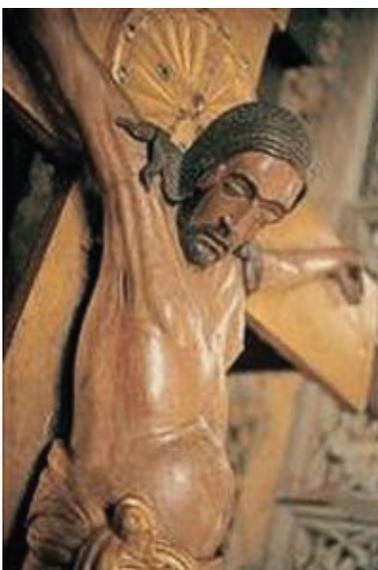
The Gero Crucifix

Monsignor Michael recently visited the city of Cologne in Germany, famous for its towering medieval cathedral which houses the Shrine of the Magi and the oldest surviving monumental sculpture of the crucifixion to date. Known as the *Gero cross* after the name of the Archbishop who commissioned it in the 10th century, this 6 ft. x 5 ft. sculpture was carved from oak, painted and partially gilded.

In addition to the sensationalism of its size, the image is noted for its realistic treatment of the crucified Christ. Prior to this time in Christian art, icons and illustrations of the crucifixion depicted a type of crucified Christ that suggested the dual natures of Christ: the crucified body, his humanity; his non-suffering serene expression, his divinity.

But, in the *Gero cross*, we see a very human Christ who actually hangs upon the cross, his body sagging from dead weight. The muscles and skin are stretched from the shoulders across the chest. The stomach bulges out from the weight of the torso pressing down from above. The eyes of Christ are closed in death and blood streams down across His forehead. The lips are contorted and the mouth at the corners hangs down. Between the bottom lip and the chin a deep cup indicates that the head fell down onto the chest at the moment of death. This is not a serene image, rather one that invites our reflection during Lent on the suffering and sacrifice the Savior made for each of us.

The *Gero cross* is currently preserved in a chapel near the sacristy in the cathedral. It has undergone restoration work to keep its vibrant colors alive, but its structure has remained faithful to its original one, except for the Baroque sunburst, which was added in 1683.





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