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# Doing Rite!™

The Institute for Christian Formation, Inc.

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Sign of the Cross

## The Sign of the Cross

Because of the Paschal Mystery - the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into Spirit-filled Glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ - the Cross, once a symbol of torture, death and defeat is now a symbol of Triumph and Exaltation. The Sign of the Cross is a major, perhaps *the* major, symbol of our Christian faith. We are signed with the Cross at our baptism, and usually begin and end our prayers with the Sign of the Cross.

Yet something we do so often can become so rote - so familiar - so automatic, if you will - that we can lose sight of what it is we are doing and what it means. That is why it is good to pause from time to time and reflect on the meaning behind our symbolic, ritual actions.

The Sign of the Cross is a very ancient ritual gesture in our Christian faith. Tertullian, who lived in the last half of the second century and the first part of the third century, writes about the prominence of this gesture. Perhaps the earliest way of making the Sign of the Cross was tracing the cross on the forehead with the thumb or finger. This resembles what we do today in tracing the cross on the forehead of a child being received for baptism, or how we trace the cross on our forehead, lips and breast before the proclamation of the Gospel at Mass. Yet throughout the centuries, there have been variances in the way Christians have made the Sign of the Cross. We will look at a few of these in this issue of *Doing Rite!*™

Not only does the Sign of the Cross remind us of the Paschal Mystery, it also reminds us of the Trinity. The words we pray in making the Sign of the Cross, *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*, remind us that we believe in three persons in one God and that we are praying in the name of our Triune God.

Knowing the importance of the Cross in our Christian life, let's slow down and reflect on what it is we are doing in word and action.



## The Cross

- \* The Cross is one of the major symbols of our Christian faith.
- \* We are first signed with the cross at our baptism.
- \* The Sign of the Cross is a Trinitarian Prayer - we are praying in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- \* The manner in which we make the Sign of the Cross can remind us of central teachings of our faith.



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## Doing Rite!™

A rite or a ritual is a set or established way of doing something. Rites and rituals involve actions and words and gestures. Rites and rituals are not passive; we are active participants.

We often hear people speak about their morning ritual, which may involve anything from the order in

which they comb their hair and brush their teeth, to what they eat for breakfast.

We have rites and rituals in our Church, as well. These include prescribed words, actions and gestures, as well as practices and traditions we have received through the ages.

*Doing Rite!*™, by its very name, refers to these words, actions and gestures that we are called to fully, actively and consciously enter into in our liturgy. It is in immersing ourselves in these rites and rituals that we are formed in faith.

## Up and Down and All Around...

A cross † is constructed so it has an upright beam and a crossbar. The upright beam is vertical, while the crossbar is horizontal. A basic shape, yet one which holds so much meaning. While heaven is not a *place*, per se, and therefore is not *up* somewhere, in our metaphorical language of faith we do speak in terms such as ascending and descending. Looking at the upright beam of the cross can provide us with a visual for the lan-

guage in our Nicene Creed. The top of the upright beam points upward, while the bottom is anchored in the earth. We are reminded that Christ *came down from heaven... suffered death and was buried....rose again...ascended into heaven.*

The crossbar, being horizontal, can remind us of all on this earth to the horizon's end. And taken together, the four points of the cross can remind us of north, south, east and west - all directions, the four points of

the compass, the four corners of the earth. *Jesus came down from heaven for us and for our salvation.* Jesus came to save all humankind everywhere on earth throughout time.

In our Roman Catholic tradition, when we make the Sign of the Cross we begin by touching the fingers of our right hand to our forehead, then to our heart/chest, then to our left shoulder, and finally to our right shoulder. We are visibly reminded that Jesus died upon the cross for the salvation of all the world!



The cross reminds us that Jesus came for the salvation of all the world.

## Seeing Red!



At Mass we hear the presider invite us to pray. At the words, *Let us pray...*, the altar server brings a large "prayer book" to the presider. That same book is placed on the altar for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This book is called the *Roman Missal*. The main body of this prayer book contains the prescribed words, actions, and gestures that are

used by Roman Catholics in our greatest prayer - the celebration of the Eucharist.

If you have never paged through the *Roman Missal*, ask someone who is familiar with liturgy to give you a "tour of the *Roman Missal*."

One thing you will notice is that on the pages of the Missal there are directives printed in red ink. These are called *rubrics* from the

Latin word for red. The rubrics give direction not only to the presider, but also to the assembly. As you read through the rubrics you may be surprised at what is prescribed ritual action and gesture, and what is not. Become familiar with how we as Catholic Christians pray the Mass. *Let's get it Rite!*

## The Beginning and the End

As Catholic Christians, we begin and conclude most of our prayers with the Sign of the Cross. It is a constant reminder that we are praying in the name of our Triune (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) God. And our greatest celebration, the Mass, is no different.



If you look at the rubrics in the *Roman Missal* (see article above), you will note that the Introductory Rites of Mass begin with all of us, presider and faithful, making the Sign of the Cross. And at the Concluding Rites of Mass, the presider blesses us in the name of the Triune God.

What you might find interesting to note is that while there is the rubric or directive that we make the Sign of the Cross to begin Mass, nowhere in the rubrics are we told *how* we make the Sign of the Cross. Just compare this to how specific the rubrics can be regarding certain rituals and gestures.



Since the exact manner of making the Sign of the Cross is neither prescribed (required) nor proscribed (forbidden), articles on the next page will take a look at some of our received tradition from the ages which can prove quite formational for us today.

## Human and Divine

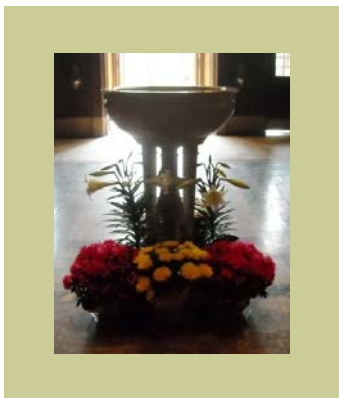
As we know, and as was mentioned on the previous page, in our Roman Catholic tradition, when we make the Sign of the Cross, we begin by touching the fingers of our right hand to our forehead, then to our heart/chest, then to our left shoulder, and finally to our right shoulder. Recalling all that this ritual gesture symbolizes, we should sign ourselves with the cross slowly and reverently.

If you look around you at the beginning or conclusion of Mass, you might be hard pressed to find many people making the Sign of the Cross in a truly reverent manner. This is not intentional - and therein lies the problem. The Sign of the Cross has become so commonplace to many of us that we have lost sight of all that it symbolizes.

One received tradition from the ages has been to make the Sign of the Cross using two fingers to touch our forehead, chest/heart, and shoulders. This is a very visible reminder that Jesus is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, and that Jesus is true God and true Human - Jesus has two natures. Our other three fingers recall the Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we slow down to do this, it can be a wonderful faith formation tool for both children and adults - a ritual catechism of sorts!



## Signed with the Cross



The first time we were signed with the cross was at our baptism. In our Roman Catholic Church, as a child is received for baptism, a cross is traced on his/her forehead. At the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, a person of catechetical age preparing for baptism is signed with the cross in a very profound way. In the celebration of the sacrament of confirmation, which is a sealing of our baptism, we were once again signed with the cross on our forehead, with chrism.

Through this signing with the cross we are claimed for Christ. You might say we are “branded” as Christians.

You may have seen animals, such as

cattle, that have been branded. They bear the mark of their owner, so everyone knows to whom they belong. In times and places where slavery was practiced, slaves were often branded, as well.

And we, too, carry the mark of Christ, the cross. Perhaps it is not visible in the same way as the mark of an animal that has been branded, but it is there just the same. Each time we make the Sign of the Cross, we are reminded who we are and whose we are. We belong to Christ. Indeed, we are the Body of Christ. Let us proudly and reverently make the Sign of the Cross so all will know our true identity.

## The New Adam

Most of us learned at an early age that Jesus died on Calvary. If you know Spanish, you know that the Spanish word *calavera* means *skull*, from the Latin *calvaria*. Jesus died at the Place of the Skull (see Mt 27:33; Mk 15:22; Lk 23:33; and, Jn 19:17).

When we look at the cross or crucifix in most of our Catholic churches, or in our homes, we don't see a skull or immediately think of a

skull. But in traditional iconography, the skull is usually visible in the crucifixion icon. Ancient tradition holds that the Place of the Skull was where Adam (as in Adam and Eve) was buried. The skull in the icon, according to this tradition, is Adam's skull. According to this tradition Jesus Christ (the new Adam) is crucified and dies over the place where Adam is buried awaiting resurrection. Adam, who brought

about the fall, is redeemed by the saving blood of Jesus.

This symbolism becomes even more powerful when you realize that in traditional iconography, the resurrection icon shows Christ pulling Adam out of the grave. Through death, Christ defeats death.

So in making the Sign of the Cross we recall that Jesus died to save all, including Adam and Eve!

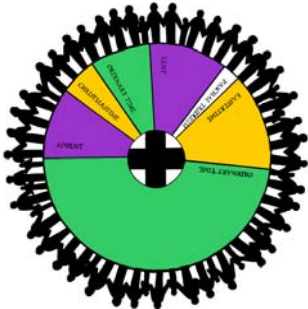


Crucifixion; 18th Century  
Iveron Monastery, Mt. Athos



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The Institute for Christian Formation, Inc. (ICF) is a non-profit corporation that assists the faithful – families, catechists, parishes, schools, etc. – with holistic faith formation centered on Jesus Christ revealing himself to us in Word (Scripture), Sacrament, and the Liturgical Calendar. Founded in 2004, the ICF strives to assist Catholic Christians in celebrating and handing on faith in a manner authentic to our Roman Catholic tradition.

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## Sign Language

We have all heard it said that actions speak louder than words. And we also know that facial expressions and hand gestures can “speak” volumes. There is standard signing, such as American Sign Language, but there are also hand gestures that are part of our popular culture, some positive and some not so nice.

Our language of faith also uses sign language. For example, we learned on page 3 of this publication what two fingers extended in blessing means. And we have also learned how we, as Roman Catholics touch our forehead, heart, left shoulder and then right shoulder in making the Sign of the Cross.



**Christ Great High Priest**  
15th Century Byzantine Icon  
Iconographer: Andreas Ritzos

Eastern Christians also make the Sign of the Cross, but slightly differently than we do in the Latin Rite. Eastern Christians hold the fingers of their right hand in a very distinct manner, mimicking how Christ is holding his fingers as he extends his right hand in blessing in the icon pictured here. Christ is telling us who he is - he is using a manual alphabet of sorts. The Greek letters in the icon, IC and XC, are the abbreviation for *Jesus Christ* in the Greek language. It is these letters which Jesus forms with the fingers of his right hand. If you look at traditional Byzantine icons, Christ and the Saints usually have the fingers of their right hand in this position.

When Eastern Christians bless themselves with the Sign of the Cross, fingers positioned as Jesus' in this icon, they begin as we do by touching their forehead and then their heart/chest. But then they touch their right shoulder *before* their left shoulder, opposite of what those of us who are Latin Rite Christians do.

So when someone tells you to watch your language, they may not just be referring to the words that come out of your mouth!