

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

Scott Ventureyra

One of the most ancient symbols known to man is that of the cross.<sup>1</sup> It has been a 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.<sup>2</sup> To presuppose the symbol of the cross as being exclusive to Christianity or to another particular religious tradition would be a misconception to say the least. “For example, from existing records it is probable that the figures of crosses and circles were used as a game in antiquity.”<sup>3</sup> The significance of the cross in pre-Christian era is rather ambiguous and interconnected. For instance, “among Egyptian hieroglyphs, a cross with a loop at the top was known as the Cross of Horus, an Egyptian God.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this same symbol was utilized by the Phoenicians to delineate their Goddess Astarte.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> A quite different significance attributed to the cross was that of the Swastika cross which is of Sanskrit origin, “it appears in early emblems of the Buddhists and is still used by some Hindu sects to represent meanings such as good fortune.”<sup>7</sup> Interestingly the inverse of the symbol was used as the Nazi Swastika.

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<sup>1</sup>T. Jerome Overbeck, S.J., “Cross,” *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990)551.

<sup>2</sup> Overbeck, *Cross*, 551.

<sup>3</sup> Overbeck, *Cross*, 551.

<sup>4</sup> Overbeck, *Cross*, 551.

<sup>5</sup> Overbeck, *Cross*, 551.

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

<sup>7</sup> Overbeck, *Cross*, 551.

Undoubtedly the meaning of the cross has evolved substantially over time. The cross is a central symbol to Christians of all denominations.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the Christian era, the cross revolves around the significance of Jesus. 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 an interesting 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...”<sup>9</sup> The three fingers are then placed on the forehead, then the sternum and then from one shoulder to another.<sup>10 11</sup> Some have used and still persist to this day to use either the entire hand or three fingers.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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 amongst Christian denominations/practices exist between which shoulder is touched first. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and Oriental Orthodox touch the left shoulder first then the right.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the Eastern Orthodox Church and the majority of Eastern Catholics touch the right shoulder then touch the left.<sup>15</sup> Over time the western Church under went a gradual change in making the sign of the cross from right-to-left to left-to-

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<sup>8</sup> Aldazabal, *Gestos*, 27.

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

<sup>10</sup>Sign of the Cross: Online: Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sign\\_of\\_the\\_cross](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sign_of_the_cross)> This page was last modified 07:42, 25 February 2007. The reason I used Wikipedia was because none of the other encyclopedias or dictionaries I had referenced contained information explaining the gesture this explicitly and I wanted to at least put some sort of reference for it.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Haselock, “Gestures,” *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. by Paul Bradshaw. (Westminster John Knox Press),229.

<sup>12</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 229.

<sup>15</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 229.

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 of the problem *sub iudice*.”<sup>16</sup> The reasons for the change are constantly disputed but “the most accepted is that in the West, when the priest made the Sign over the people to bless them, the people mirrored the direction of his hand, rather than copying the motions, thus, they moved their hand left-to-right, the direction that priest’s hand moved from the point of view of the congregation.”<sup>17</sup> Although the source may seem as an unreliable one, it seems to be a quite logical proposition. Throughout a review of the literature 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 through out the sacred ceremony would extend their arms emulating the crucifixion of Christ on the cross with their body.<sup>18</sup> Tertullian mentions “Christians of his time not only raising their hands in prayer, but also extending them”<sup>19</sup> in his work *De Orat*. Paulinus also in his work, *Vita Amrosii*, describes St. Ambrose extending his arms out in the shape of a cross before dying.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, “in a tract containing passages” that were printed in Roman Missals predominantly in France between 1507 and 1546, the gesture of “modum crucis” is ordered.

“From 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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 ever 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.”<sup>22</sup> The sign of the cross is a demonstration of faith that signifies a unity with Christ through an affirmation one’s baptismal identity and recognition of the cross’ centrality to salvation.<sup>23</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Sign of the Cross: Online: Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sign\\_of\\_the\\_cross](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sign_of_the_cross)> This page was last modified on 9 August 2015, at 09:51.

<sup>18</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Overbeck, *Cross*, 552.

<sup>22</sup> Tertullian, *de Corona* (3): << [Http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian04.html](http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian04.html)>>.

<sup>23</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 228.

accepted widely as a liturgical gesture.<sup>24</sup> During the period of Saint Augustine of Hippo, in the fourth and fifth centuries of the common era, the sign of the cross was being utilized frequently for practically every aspect of sacramental procedures: “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.”<sup>25</sup> This claim made by Saint Augustine of Hippo promulgated a particular view that the sign of the cross was vital to the performance of sacramental acts. This view which appears to “reinforce an unacceptable *ex opera operato* system of sacramental operation, resulted in the rejection of the gesture”<sup>26</sup> by the majority of Protestant Reformers – at least outside of sacramental operation with the exception of the Church of England with baptismal ceremonies.<sup>27</sup>

The use of the sign of the cross in blessing the Eucharistic elements is quite ancient.<sup>28</sup> “St. Cyprian states that it is the authoritative use of the sign of the cross which works the effect in all the Sacraments.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as aforementioned in the preceding paragraph St. Augustine also emphasizes its importance. St. Chrysostom is also known to provide testimony of its use in the Eucharistic service.<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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 these have been reduced to one at the invocation of the Holy Spirit in the modern Roman Catholic rite.”<sup>32</sup>

In our present day in the modern Roman Catholic rite in the celebration of the Eucharist, 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.<sup>33</sup> Lutherans do not shy away from the signing of the cross unlike most other protestant denominations aside from high Anglicans: “The sign of the cross is a treasured part of our liturgical heritage as

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<sup>24</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 228.

<sup>25</sup> Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Tractatus in Joannem*, 118:  
<<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701118.htm>>>.

<sup>26</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 228.

<sup>27</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 228.

<sup>28</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Cooke, *Western Liturgies*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 228.

<sup>32</sup> Haselock, *Gestures*, 228.

<sup>33</sup> Aldazabal, *Gestos*, 30.

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.”<sup>34</sup>

A moment which is highly significant where one uses the sign of the cross is during baptism. 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).”<sup>35</sup> 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 their foreheads (or arms); it told others who their owner was.”<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> According to Aldazabal there is a profound significance of the sign of the cross in baptism. It is not only the welcoming of one to a new community but a sign that is supposed to remind us in our daily lives to continue in the path of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

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 received which has initiated that individual into the Christian community.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, “After the entrance song, the priest and the whole assembly make the sign of the cross.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Why Do Lutherans Make the Sign of the Cross? Online: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. << [http://www.elca.org/worship/faq/liturgy/sign\\_of\\_cross.html](http://www.elca.org/worship/faq/liturgy/sign_of_cross.html)>> Revised January 2003.

<sup>35</sup>Margaret Barker, The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy(London: T&T Clark LTD, 2003),139.

<sup>36</sup>Balthasar Fischer, Signs, Words & Gestures: Short Homilies on the Liturgy (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1979), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Fischer, Signs Words,1.

<sup>38</sup> Aldazabal, Gestos, 29. The original text is Spanish, I translated it myself.

<sup>39</sup> Aldazabal, Gestos, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Aldazabal, Gestos, 30.

<sup>41</sup>Fischer, Signs Words, 58.

<sup>42</sup>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.

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 the congregation then does the same. Fischer explains that the significance of this gesture is one of attentiveness to the word of God and to the belongingness of individuals in God's church: "Lord who is entering the assembly and will now speak... Since my baptism I have belonged to him body and soul, in my thoughts, words and feelings."<sup>43</sup>

An interesting contemporary sociological significance of the sign of the cross and its implications in secular culture arose at a football match in 2006. Last year a 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.<sup>44</sup>

The gesture of the signing of the cross has indeed evolved. In its earlier uses it was mainly done 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 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 its uses. 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 - he believes that every time we make the sign of the cross we are confessing as members of the new community, of the followers of Christ who have been saved by His death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Fischer, Signs Words, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Online: BBC NEWS. "Alarm at 'cross' player's caution."  
<<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/5288184.stm>>> Saturday, 26 August 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Aldazabal, Gestos, 29.

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