

Sign of the Cross and Greeting

The Roman Missal (2000)

Priest: *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*
People: *Amen.*
Priest: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*
People: *And with your spirit.¹*

Scripture

The “Mark” on the Forehead

And the Lord said to him [the angel], “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and *put a mark* (Hebrew *taw*) *upon the foreheads of the men* who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it. (Ezekiel 9:4)

The Great Commission

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. (Matthew 28:19)

St. Paul’s Greeting

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Tradition

The Sign of the Cross in Apostolic “Tradition” (4th Century)

St. Basil the Great: Of the dogmas and proclamations that are guarded in the Church, we hold some from the teaching of the Scriptures, *and others we have received in mystery as the teachings of the tradition of the apostles...* For if we attempt to reject unwritten customs as insignificant, we would, unaware, lose the very vital parts of the Gospel... For instance—I will mention the first and most common—who *has learned through the Scripture that those who hope in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ are marked with the sign of the cross?*²

St. Peter and the Sign of the Cross (6th Century)

¹ Roman Missal, *Order of Mass*, no. 1-2. In *The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by the Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II* (3rd typical ed.; New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing, 2021).

² Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66. In St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* (trans. Stephen Hildebrand; Popular Patristics 42; Yonkers, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 104-106 (slightly adapted).

Liber Pontificalis: He [Peter] was the first to lay down that mass be celebrated to commemorate the Lord's passion in bread and wine mixed with water, using only the Lord's prayer and *hallowing with the holy cross; this the other holy apostles copied when celebrating it.*³

The Sign of the Cross in the Roman Mass (Late 7th Century)

Ordo Romanus I: Here begins the order of ecclesiastical ministry of *the Roman Church or how Mass is celebrated...* [T]he pope... bows his head to the altar, getting up and praying and *making the sign of the cross on his forehead...*⁴

Mystery

The Mystery of the Cross

St. Augustine (5th Century): Most clearly is *Christ's passion* prefigured in that people when they were commanded to slay and eat the lamb, *to mark the doorpost with its blood*, and to celebrated this every year and call it the Lord's Pasch. *Today you, like the doorposts, are marked on the forehead with the sign of his passion and cross, as all Christians are thus marked.*⁵

The Mystery of the Trinity

Innocent III (13th Century): The sign of the cross is made with three fingers, because the signing is done together with *the invocation of the Trinity ...* This is how it is done: from above to below, and from the right to the left...⁶

The Sign of the Cross

Pope Francis (2017): Then there is the *sign of the Cross*. The presiding priest traces the sign on himself and all the members of the assembly do likewise, knowing that the liturgical act is performed “in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. And here I will mention another tiny subject. Have you seen how children make the sign of the Cross? They do not know what they are doing: sometimes they make a design, which is not the sign of the Cross. *Please, mom and dad, grandparents, teach the children, from the beginning — from a tender age — to make the sign of the Cross properly. And explain to them that it is having Jesus' Cross as protection. The Mass begins with the sign of the Cross. The whole prayer moves, so to speak, within the space of the Most Holy Trinity — “In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”*

³ *Liber Pontificalis* 1.6. In Davies, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 2.

⁴ *Ordo Romanus Primus* no. 1, 49. Translation by John F. Romano, in *A Commentary on the Order of Mass of The Roman Missal* (ed. Edward Foley et al.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 118.

⁵ Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 20.34. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:16.

⁶ Innocent III, *The Sacred Mystery of the Altar*, 2.46; cf. Durandus, *Rationale Divinorum*, 5.2.13.

—, which is the space of infinite communion; it has as its beginning and end the love of the Triune God, made manifest and given to us in the Cross of Christ. In fact his Paschal Mystery is the gift of the Trinity, and the Eucharist flows ever from his pierced Heart. When we make the sign of the Cross, therefore, we not only commemorate our Baptism, but affirm that the liturgical prayer is the encounter with God in Jesus Christ, who became flesh, died on the Cross and rose in glory for us.⁷

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Why does the Mass begin with the sign of the Cross? How is the Greeting and Sign of the Cross a “Trinitarian gateway to the whole Mass” (Joseph Jungmann)?⁸

2. How has the sign of the Cross changed over the centuries? How was it done in ancient and medieval times?

For Further Reading

1. Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*. 2 vols.; trans. Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R.; repr.; Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012 [orig. 1951]. 1:296.

⁷ Pope Francis, General Audience, December 20, 2018.

⁸ Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* (2 vols.; trans. Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R.; repr.; Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012 [orig. 1951], 1:296.