

## Sign of the Cross and Greeting

In the Introductory Rites of the Mass, one of the first things that happens is that the priest makes the Sign of the Cross while saying the words "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,"<sup>1</sup> and the people reply, "Amen." And then the priest also gives a greeting where he says, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." And the people reply, "And with your spirit." Now, these words and actions are, of course, very familiar, right? But the fact that they are the way in which the mass begins begs a few questions, right? Number one, why do we begin with the sign of the cross, right? Where's that from in the Bible? Where is it from in tradition? Second, why does the priest use these words in particular, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Why are those the words of the greeting? And then third, what do these words and actions reveal to us about the mystery of what's actually happening in the Mass. As I'm going to show over and over again throughout the course of this series, all of the words and actions in the Mass are not just, you know, ritual gestures that have some kind of basic meaning, but they actually point us back to both the Bible and tradition as keys to unlocking the mystagogy of the liturgy, the mystery of what's happening here.

So in this case, let's just begin first of all with the sign of the cross. Where does the sign of the cross come from in the Bible? Well, if you look for a description of the sign of the cross in any kind of detailed way in the Old or New Testament, you're not going to find it. But what you will find is a kind of biblical root for both the words of the sign of the Cross and the action in the Old and New Testaments. So, for example, the words of the sign of the cross are very obvious, they're very easy to identify in terms of their scriptural root; they come from the Great Commission when Jesus appears in Matthew 28 to the Apostles and he says:

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<sup>1</sup> 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* (3<sup>rd</sup> typical ed.; New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing, 2021).

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*.<sup>2</sup>

That's in Matthew 28:19. So that's where the words of the sign of the cross come from. But what about the action, the kind of symbolic gesture of the priests making the sign on his forehead, on his breast, and on his shoulders? Well, that gesture, that shape of the cross, again, is not explicitly described in Scripture, but it too is in a sense prophesied or kind of prefigured in the Old Testament. If you go back to the book of Ezekiel 9:4, there's a mysterious passage where Ezekiel has a vision of God sending an angel to put a protective sign on the foreheads of all of the Israelites living in the city of Jerusalem who moan and groan, who are dismayed over the abominations and sins being committed in the city. And in Ezekiel 9:4 it says this:

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.

Now, if all you had was your English Bible, you might just blow right by that and say, oh well, he just puts some kind of mark on the forehead of the people in the city. But if you know a little bit of Hebrew, you'll know that the actual word there from Mark in Hebrew is a *taw*. It's basically the name of the letter T in ancient Hebrew script. Now what's fascinating about that is though in later and contemporary modern Jewish Hebrew script, the “t” doesn't have the shape of a cross, in paleo Hebrew script, in the older script that would have been used at the time of the exile, the shape of a Hebrew “t”, the Hebrew *taw*, is actually a long vertical line and then a short horizontal line. It would be the shape of a cross. And this passage was interpreted since ancient times in Christian circles as a kind of prefiguration of the sign of the cross, which is why in the early centuries of the Church, the sign of the cross was actually not made on the forehead, breast and shoulders, but was made primarily on the forehead. So the sign of the cross would

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

be made in a small mark on the forehead, as a fulfillment of this prophecy of those who are protected by the angel of the Lord in the book of Ezekiel. So it's fascinating. From the very beginning of the Mass, we're using the words of Jesus in the Great Commission and the ancient Hebrew sign of spiritual protection in the shape of a cross. So that's the first point.

With regard to the greeting, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Those words are also straight from Scripture. They are from the end of Second Corinthians, the letter of St. Paul to the Church of Corinth. This is his final greeting to the people to whom he's writing. So if you are familiar with Paul's letters, you'll know that he frequently will begin his letters with a greeting. “Paul, servant of Jesus Christ”, or “Paul, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the church at Corinth”, “to the church at Galatia”, whatever it might be. And then he'll also often end with a final greeting at the end of the letter. And in this case, St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 13 uses a greeting which is the most explicitly Trinitarian greeting in all of his letters, when he says:

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship [or you can translate it “communion”] of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)*

So notice, we're not even into Mass already, and we've already got three illusions to three different scriptural passages. This is what I've talked about elsewhere, that the Mass is a kind of tapestry of scriptural quotations and scriptural illusions. It's kind of an intertextual wonderland for a biblical scholar, because every line, every moment, every action, every word is echoing some passage or another from the Old and New Testaments. And in this case, we're taking the words of Jesus from the Great Commission and the words of St. Paul from his letter to the church at Corinth, as well as this mysterious mark of the Cross and we're fusing them into one in order to open up the liturgy of the Mass. Now that's the scriptural roots of the greeting and sign of the Cross.

What about the traditional roots of them? Where do they come from in ancient tradition? When were these added to the Mass? Well, there are a few elements here that are interesting. First, with regard to the sign of the Cross itself, the gesture, St. Basil the Great actually identifies this part of the liturgy in the 4th century AD. He

was a Bishop in Asia Minor, Cappadocia, who identifies this as one of the things we do in the Mass that isn't explicitly taught in Scripture but actually comes from Apostolic Tradition. So listen to this quotation from St. Basil the Great. He says this:

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?*<sup>3</sup>

That's from Basil the Great, his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*. Basil's really clear that if you look at the New Testament, there's no description of any of the Apostles using the sign of the cross, right? Rather, this is something that was passed down in the unwritten traditions, the unwritten customs of Apostolic traditions, something we got from the Apostles. And he's giving us an important principle we're going to see over and over again as we study the history and mystery of the Mass. It is that the Mass is not just based on Sacred Scripture, the Mass is also based on Sacred Tradition. If you don't look at both Scripture and Tradition, you're really not going to be able to understand the rites, the ceremonies, the words, the actions, the gestures that make up the liturgy of the Church, that make up the liturgy of the Church as a whole, but of the Roman Church in particular—although Basil's of course writing in the East, he's not reflecting the Latin form of the liturgy, but he would be using the Greek form later known as the Byzantine Rite. So we see here in a basic way, in the 4th century, Basil the Great saying the sign of the cross comes from Tradition.

But there is another book, another writer, that actually talks about specifically which Apostle contributed the sign of cross the cross to the liturgy, not just in the

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

East, but in the Roman Church itself. So this is a very important source. This comes from a very important source on the tradition of the Roman church, this book known as the *Liber Pontificalis*, or the *Book of Pontiffs*. Basically, this is a collection of the ancient biographies of the first 90 popes, going from St. Peter all the way up to the 8th century AD, in about the year 715. And what this book does, it goes through successive stages and it's kind of expanded over the centuries. Some of its roots go back to the 6th and 7th centuries, and then it continues to be edited and expanded as you have more and more popes over the centuries. So it actually consists of several volumes. So just a quick note about the *Liber Pontificalis*. Some scholars, many scholars, have reservations about some of the claims that the *Libra* makes about the earliest popes, like St. Peter or Pope St. Telesphorus and others in the 1st through 3rd centuries AD. However, even if scholars are skeptical about the claims about those early popes, it's still an absolutely crucial witness to the Roman tradition about how the liturgy developed. So as we look at and give quotes from the *Book of Roman Pontiffs*, remember that this is a witness to some of the earliest traditions about how the Roman liturgy developed, and that's how we're going to be using it as a source over the course of our study. But in this first volume of the *Book of Pontiffs*, there's a section, a little biography of St. Peter that tells us about Roman traditions about Peter and the liturgy. And in this first biography of Peter, the *Book of Roman Pontiffs* tells us that in the Roman tradition it was Peter in particular who added this on to the cross to the Mass. So listen to this quote from the *Book of Pontiffs*. It says this:

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.*<sup>4</sup>

So notice here, according to the Roman tradition, Peter's distinctive contribution to the liturgy is both the Our Father, the Lord's Prayer—we'll come back to that in another video—and hallowing the sacrifice of the Eucharist with the Holy Cross. So one of the things you're going to see in the liturgy as we move through it is that at several moments the priest is going to make the sign of the cross, sometimes

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<sup>4</sup> *Liber Pontificalis* 1.6. In Davies, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 2.

over the very gifts themselves. And according to this Roman tradition reflected in the *Book of Pontiffs*, it was St. Peter who added the Our Father and the Sign of the Cross to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and that the other apostles copied it. So this is very significant for us in the Roman rite, in the Roman Catholic Church, who celebrate the Roman liturgy to recognize that at the very beginning of the Roman Mass, what do we do? We use the words of Jesus from the Great Commission, the action attributed to St. Peter, the sign of the Cross, and the words of St. Paul in his letter, 2 Corinthians. So who are the figures that stand at the head of the Roman Mass? Jesus, Peter and Paul. Which is particularly significant because one of the distinctive aspects of the Church of Rome is that its two founders are identified as St. Peter and St. Paul, who were both martyrs in the middle of the 1st century under Caesar Nero, probably in the 60s of the 1st century AD, and whose martyrdom we actually celebrate on the same day every year in the liturgical calendar. So how fitting is it that at the beginning of the Roman Mass we take the words of St. Paul and the gesture of St. Peter and fuse them into one as the priest, acting in the person of Christ, greets the congregation, who have gathered in the name of the Father and of the Son, and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

So you can already see by looking at the biblical and traditional roots of the liturgy and of the words and actions of the Mass, we can deepen our understanding of the mystery that is taking place. But just to show that this tradition continues and how it develops, I would point to one other important source about the Roman liturgy in particular, and that is the first edition of a Roman order of Mass known as *Ordo Romanus I*. There's some debate about exactly when to date this particular description of the Roman Mass, but many scholars would date it to the 7th century sometime, and it's a description of the Papal Mass that would have been celebrated in Rome. And as the oldest description of the Papal Mass that we possess, it's a very, very important source. And in this source we learn that the sign of the cross at the beginning of mass goes back at least to the time of this ancient papal mass in the late 6th or 7th century. And so if you look here, here's a quote. So I want you to imagine it's the 7th century AD and you're going to a mass celebrated by the Pope himself. How would that mass begin? What would be the sign that Mass was beginning? Well, it would be the sign of cross. Listen to these words from *Ordo Romanus I*:

Here begins the order of ecclesiastical ministry of *the Roman Church or how Mass is celebrated...*

So there we see an ancient reference to the to the Roman liturgy as the Mass, the Missa, the sending forth, the dismissal. At the beginning of liturgy, it says:

[T]he pope... bows his head to the altar, getting up and praying and *making the sign of the cross on his forehead...*<sup>5</sup>

So notice there, we see both continuity and some development. How does the Mass begin? It begins with the sign of the cross. How was the ancient sign of the cross made? It wasn't yet on the forehead, breast and shoulders, it was just on the forehead. So the Holy Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ, the successor of St. Peter, would begin the liturgy with the sign of the Cross. So you can see that when we come to Mass and the priest comes and begins with the words in the greeting, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And then we say "Amen." And then he says, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." And we respond "And with your spirit." We are doing something that is very, very ancient. We're taking the words of Christ, the gestures of St. Peter and the early ancient popes, as well as the words of St. Paul writing to the Church, and in a sense, synthesizing all of them as our doorway into the prayers and rites of the Roman liturgy.

I think that from a mystagogical point of view this is not insignificant, that the Church has chosen these words with which to begin the Mass. Because if you think about it, what the sign of the cross and the greeting of St. Paul do is introduce us into the two central mysteries of the Christian faith. The Mystery of Calvary, the mystery of the Cross, and the mystery of the Trinity. Why begin with the sign of the cross and the greeting of St. Paul? Because when we come to Mass, we are coming to Calvary, and through Calvary, entering into the love of the Most Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. And as I've said many, many times, you don't have

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<sup>5</sup> *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.

to take my word for it. Just listen to the Saints and their descriptions of the Mass, how they understand the mystery of the liturgy and the signs and symbols of the greeting.

So, for example, all the way back in the 5th century, the sign of the cross had made it into the liturgy, and St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the great doctors of the Church, says to his congregation. he's trying to explain to them, why do we make the sign of the cross? What does it signify? This is what he says:

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.*<sup>6</sup>

Wow, so notice, this is really interesting. Augustine says that when you mark yourself with the sign of the Cross at the Mass, it reveals that you are entering into the mystery of His passion. And he even likens it not just to the Passover of Christ, you know, and His Last Supper and his death, but actually to the Passover of ancient Egypt, the Passover of the ancient Israelites in Egypt. Just as they put the blood of the lambs on the doorpost and the lentil of their homes, right, on the top and sides— if you drew a line between that it would make a cross—so too Christians in the liturgy make the sign of the cross over themselves, because Christ is going to enter into the home, so to speak. He's going to come into their very bodies in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. So the Sign of the Cross is a constitutive part of the liturgy. It reveals to us the mystery of Christ's Passion, that the Mass isn't just a meal, but it's actually a sacrifice. We'll come back to that later, but we can already see a sign or a shadow that with the sign of the Cross. That's on the one hand.

On the other hand, it also means we're entering into the mystery of the Trinity. And here I would actually cite a text from Pope Innocent III, who wrote a treatise on the

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 20.34. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:16.



sacred mysteries of the Mass in the 13th century. And in this treatise on the Mass, this is what he says about the sign of the cross at the beginning of Mass:

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..<sup>7</sup>

So notice the development here. By the 13th century, the sign of the cross isn't just made with the thumb or forefinger on the forehead, it's made with three fingers on the head, the breast, and the shoulders. And what Innocent is saying is that the three fingers represent the three persons of the Trinity. So that the sign of the cross becomes not just an entry into the mystery of the Passion, but a revelation of the invocation of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So once again, by beginning the Mass with the Sign of the Cross, we're entering into the mystery of Calvary and the mystery of the Trinity. You'll notice there that Innocent III, the Pope they're actually describes making the sign of the cross from the right to the left instead of from the left to the right, as is commonly done in the West today. Well, that's because by his day, by the early 13th century, the tradition had not actually settled down. There was still diversity about which direction the sign of the cross would be made in. So, for example, in the later 13th century, William Durandus in his book on the Mass talks about how some people, some Catholics, some Latin Roman rite Catholics, will make the sign of the cross starting on the forehead, going to the breast and going right to left, as the Orthodox do to this day. And then others will go top, down, left to right. There was a diversity of customs with regard to the sign of the cross in the 13th century. Now that's in the 13th century.

Let me fast forward to today, one last insight into the mystagogy of the cross. This actually comes from the Holy Father, Pope Francis, who in 2017-18 actually had a series of catecheses on the Mass. So this was during his general audiences, his general Wednesday audiences. Now many people are familiar, for example, with the general audiences of Pope John Paul II on the Theology of the Body, whereby he spent I think 129, something like over 100 general audiences working through

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<sup>7</sup> Innocent III, *The Sacred Mystery of the Altar*, 2.46; cf. Durandus, *Rationale Divinorum*, 5.2.13.

the biblical theology of the human body and of human love, the sacrament of marriage, consecrated life and virginity, all those different things. Well in 2017 and 2018, Pope Francis did a series of general audiences on the Holy Mass, and he has a lot to say, in particular, about the sign of the cross . On more than one occasion he emphasizes the importance of this gesture. So here, one last point about the mystery of the Cross. This is what the Holy Father says:

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” —, 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.*<sup>8</sup>

Beautiful reflection there. And you see, not only is the Pope talking about the mystagogy of the cross, he's also just talking about the practicality of making sure that we don't make the sign of the cross casually or in an uninformed way, but that from a young age we should teach children. Here's the things we already said, that the sign of the cross is the mystery of the passion, that it's the mystery of the Trinity, and that when we make our three fingers, they can represent the three persons of the Trinity, and that through this, this is really powerful, we not only ask

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, December 20, 2018.

for the protection of Christ— like the sign of the Cross gave protection in the Old Testament—but we also enter into the space of the Most Holy Trinity, which has its beginning and end in the love of the Triune God that is revealed on Calvary. So the whole Mass begins with the act that reveals not only the mystery of the Cross and the mystery of Trinity, but the mystery of God's love, which is going to be shown to us through the Liturgy of His Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.