

# The Mass In Slow Motion

## The Sign of the Cross

*The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.*

*This series will follow the Mass in order.*

Now comes a gesture that is very familiar to Catholics but to the uninitiated may also seem odd. To someone who does not understand, the Sign of the Cross may look more like a shoeing away of flies or something. And, interestingly enough, the words we say are grammatically incorrect! But more on that later.

**Standing at the Chair the celebrant begins the Mass with the sign of the cross.** This gesture is perhaps one of the most recognizably Catholic traditions in any ecumenical gathering. You can always tell the Catholics immediately by this instinctive gesture deeply ingrained in any Catholic.



**The origin of this gesture** goes back to the earliest days of Christianity where it seems to have been more of sign of the cross traced on one's forehead. Tertullian is said to have remarked in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, "*We Christians wear out our forehead with the sign of the cross!*"

**This practice probably developed from Scriptural** allusions to the Thau or "T" marked on the forehead of those to be saved from destruction. For example, we read in the Book of Ezekiel that, when God was about to hand the city of Jerusalem over to destruction, God summoned an angel: *Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem: and mark 'Thau' upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and mourn for all the abominations that are committed in the midst thereof."* (Ezekiel 9:3-4). When the destruction came on the city, those with the mark of the "Thau" were spared (Ez 9:6). The Hebrew letter Thau is the rough equivalent of a "t" in English. And this, of course reminds us of the Cross.

We also see in the book of Revelation (7:3, 9:4, 14:1) a similar action wherein the Angels are sent to put a seal on the foreheads of those who were to be saved from the great tribulation coming on the earth.

**Adding fingers to this tracing action** seems to have developed during the first centuries of the practice. Two fingers representing the two natures of Christ were added as an act of faith against the Monophysite controversy which denied his full human nature. Further developments took place to enhance the gesture.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> Century three fingers (thumb, index and middle finger) are used to represent the Trinity and the other two fingers are folded back to the palm to represent the two natures of Christ.

**With all these symbolisms going on with the blessing hand it was next decided that a larger area than the forehead should be crossed.** Now the downward motion tended to extend to the breast and eventually the whole chest was signed by reaching out to the shoulders. By the 9<sup>th</sup> Century the way to make the Sign of the Cross was pretty well spelled out by legislation from Rome and the Popes.

As you can see the Sign of the Cross became more than a way to bless oneself, it also became a statement of faith in the Trinity and in the two natures of Christ.

In the western Church as the Monophysite controversy died down the Trinitarian faith has tended to take precedence and came to be spelled out with these words: “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” to which all respond, “Amen.”

Have you noticed that this is not grammatically correct? Grammatically, one should say, “In the names of the Father...Son and Holy Spirit.” But here too, going back to Scripture itself, the grammatical “error” bespeaks the truth that there is only ONE God, therefore one Name, but there are three Persons in the One God.” So aren’t we clever here! It is not a grammatical error; it is a statement of faith. And the Faith cannot be perfectly stated by something so simple as human language, so the strict grammatical rules must give way to the bigger truth that God is One and has one Name: LORD. But there are three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**So, the Sign of the Cross is an act of, and a sign of, Faith in the Triune God.** It thus gives significance to all who follow the Mass, placing it within the context of Faith.

**The Sign of the Cross is also a recollection of the Crucifixion.** In this regard, the Mass, which makes current the sacrifice made for all of us by the Lord Jesus on Calvary, is especially suited to open with the Sign of the Cross.

**Lastly, and by extension, it is a visible movement into the *Holy* by all present since it puts demons to flight.** Many of the Fathers of the Church speak of this aspect of the Sign of the Cross. For example, St. Cyril states that at the Sign of the Cross *demons tremble and angels recognize it. Thus the former are put to flight, while the latter gather about it as something pertaining to themselves.*” (From his Catechetical Lectures).

**Historically, the number of the Signs of the Cross throughout the Mass increased** especially during the gothic period of the middle ages. The Old Latin Mass has a large number of Signs of the Cross. In the New Mass there has been a reduction of this number to two, one at the beginning and the other at the end.

**The last thing we should say about all this is that to make the Sign of the Cross is a bold gesture!** In effect we are glorying in the Cross of Christ. We are not ashamed of it. Is this true for you? Many today are actually embarrassed by the cross. How is this? you say. Well notice how many protest any time the Church articulates the demands of the Gospel. For example that we should turn away from sin, that babies should be brought to birth, and never aborted, that euthanasia is wrong and that we cannot simply do whatever we please and call it good. Many immediately protest and speak of the need for greater compassion and less strict norms, etc. And many Catholics, far from defending the demands of the Gospel, refuse to hold up the cross for others to see. Instead, embarrassed by the demands of the cross they refuse to affirm its power and its demands.

Be careful before you make that Sign of the Cross! It means something. It means that we cannot simply refuse the demands of being a disciple but rather glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.