

SIGNS OF LIFE

*20 Catholic Customs
and Their Biblical Roots*

SCOTT HAHN

*An abridged version of
Signs of Life: 40 Catholic Customs
and Their Biblical Roots*



To Veronica Margaret Hahn,
my first grandchild



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Introduction



SIGNS OF LIFE

No matter what line of work we're in, no matter the circumstances of our personal life, we all come to days when we face a wall—a wall too sheer to climb, too high to vault, too strong to topple. These walls can arise, for instance, as problems on the job or in relationships. We try everything humanly possible to get over, around, under, or through them. But we reach a point where there's nothing left to try.

I've faced many of those moments, and one I recall vividly. I was a young scholar, with a young family. I was working on my doctoral thesis, the crowning work of my studies in theology, and I came upon a problem in the interpretation of a certain verse of the Bible. It was a small passage, but it was a big problem, and the verse itself was a key to my argument. So I had to work out all the interpretive kinks before I could defend my thesis before the interrogators on my doctoral committee. In fact, *unless* I worked out the kinks, I was almost sure to fail.

I read all the available commentaries and found nothing useful—not a single glimmer of light, except the sympathy of scholars who had faced the same wall before I did. I dithered and puttered and pondered and paced—for months—but I couldn't find a way forward. This was a real problem, as I had already invested several years in my research. If I abandoned the project now, I faced a long, hard, and humiliating trek back to the beginning of the thesis-approval process.

Then the wall got even higher.

My adviser, a Jesuit priest, called to inform me that he had been transferred to Rome, Italy, to the Gregorian University. I had to complete my dissertation immediately, he said, or search out a new adviser, who might or might not find my thesis plausible.

I stopped sleeping and intensified my efforts, poring over tomes and making late-night calls to scholars I had never met.

Nothing. The wall loomed higher now than ever. On the far side of the wall stretched a professorial career . . . the possibility of tenure . . . open doors for honors, jobs, and publications. On this side, at least as I saw it: professional ruin.

I put myself through several weeks of this when something truly remarkable happened. My adviser called again. He just wanted to make sure I was prepared for *anything* that could happen when I showed up to defend my thesis. And so he went through a list of potential difficulties and obstacles I had not considered before, but that I should expect to encounter on the big day.

I recognized defeat. But I could not admit it. I was too proud. Yet I recognized that, too, as a problem. On top of all that, I was sleep deprived and overcaffeinated, which made my mind a tangle of moral and academic problems of biblical proportions.

There was nothing left for me to do. So I had to do *something*.

CROSS PURPOSES

I had been Roman Catholic only a short while by the time of this crisis—a little less than a decade—but my memory and imagination were already stuffed full of incidents from the lives of the saints, as any ten-year-old's should be.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I'm a Francis of Assisi or Ignatius Loyola. Nor am I trying to turn up the melodrama. In the great sweep of history, my thesis mattered little. In my professional life, however, it was make or break. The biographies of the saints, I've learned over the years, are made to serve as models for precisely this sort of crisis.

The wall was very high. Yet, very late one night, and quite suddenly, I knew of something much higher than that wall, and I knew what I must do. I put on my jacket and set off into the night, not even bothering to comb my hair.

The neighborhood streets were still and dark. The quickest way to the campus where I teach is straight up the street and through the woods, so that's the way I went.

My goal—the thing so much higher than my wall—was always before me on the horizon. Towering above the dorms and library and labs of Franciscan University of Steubenville is a sixty-foot steel cross, illuminated and visible from the interstate highways, and even from across the Ohio River in West Virginia.

I made my way hastily across the silent campus. If anyone had seen me, they would surely have concluded that too much studying had made me crazy (see Acts 26:24). My mind was surely vexed, but probably as sound as it had ever been, as I found myself at the foot of that shining, colossal cross.

There I didn't have to think hard. I knew what the saints of history had done. I needed to do something. I needed to do what they did.

I kissed the cross, and then I lay flat, face down at the foot of the cross, and I cried.

By then I had filled myself up with all the best the world had to offer. I had consulted the most respected research libraries and personally called upon the top rank of scholars. None of that was enough. And I told that to Jesus: my wall was far too high. Yet I knew, no matter what I was going through, his cross was still higher.

For he had at his disposal a lot more than I had. Nevertheless, even *though he was God*, “he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6–8).

Lying there with my face in the dirt, I gave him everything, in the way I knew from St. Francis and countless others. I told him that if I had to fail, so be it: I would be emptied as he was.

HERE'S MUD IN YOUR EYE

What happened next?

I'll get to that in a few minutes. First I'd like to stop and consider the beauty of the Catholic life.

Sometimes we find that we've arrived at a wall. Sometimes we find that we've just hit the wall, at high speed—and we've left our crash helmet at home. When that happens, something in our nature cries out to us: *Don't just stand there. Do something!* God created us that way. He created us with bodies built for action, and he set us to work in a world full of things to do.

All through history, he has acknowledged this natural tendency and given us things to do. When the people were thirsty, God instructed Moses to strike a rock so that water would gush forth. Why did he do that? Not because he needed to. He could have dropped canteens from the clouds, or installed a great lake in the midst of the desert, or even had angels serve up pitchers of margaritas. Yet he knew human nature, and he knew our need to *do something*. So he gave Moses something to do.

From the time of Moses to the time of Jesus, nothing about human nature had changed. Jesus could have cured the blind with a simple nod or a word, but he didn't. He made a paste of mud and spit, and then he sent the blind man off to wash in a nearby pond.

Still another time, Jesus made the healing of lepers contingent on their going to show themselves to the Temple priests. "And as they went they were cleansed" (Lk 17:14).

The Catholic life—the great Christian tradition—is a tremendous inheritance from two millennia of saints in many lands and circumstances. Being Catholic means never having to say we have nothing left to do. Our prayer is enriched by sacred images and incense, votive candles and rosary beads, waters and oils, gestures and postures, blessings and medals, customs and ceremonies.

Because I was learning to live a Catholic life, I was able to say that even alone at three o'clock in the morning in my study, even in the midst of a professional crisis—even when there was nothing more to do—I could do something.

I could leave immediately and make a pilgrimage.

I could prostrate myself in prayer.

I could venerate the holy cross.

I could invoke the Scriptures.

In fact, I could do all these things, and no one was awake to stop me. So I did.

PUTTING THINGS IN ORDER

The Catholic life is full of such things. Yet we don't always understand why they're in our tradition. Even devout Catholics can treat these many and diverse customs as if they're disconnected and random acts—superstitions that have somehow gained the Church's approval.

For this reason, you'll sometimes hear Catholic intellectuals sneer at popular piety. That's the last thing I want to do, first of all because Jesus had greater praise for simple believers and children than he had for the intellectuals of his day, and I assume the same rules of human nature still apply. Second of all, because I know that Catholic popular devotions are indeed well-grounded in Scripture—as I hope to show in the course of this book—and that they were practiced by the leading lights of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Finally, because I know many people who are holier than I am but have had no opportunities for theological education. In fact, many canonized saints had no formal education whatsoever. So intellectuals would do well to pray their beads along with the pious sodalities in the parish. It beats sneering any day of the week. Louis Pasteur was one of the intellectual giants of the modern age; yet he prayed his Rosary like a child.

What's more, it's a mistake to treat *intelligence* and *piety* as if they're mutually exclusive terms. The best thing we can do is to offer our devotions with understanding. Jesus instructed us not to pray like theologians who are hypocrites (Mt 6:5); but neither does he want us to pray like pagans who don't have a clue what they're

doing (Mt 6:7). A saint of the twentieth century, St. Josemaría Escrivá, put the matter very well. He urged Catholics to have both the wisdom of theologians and the piety of children.

As Catholics, we are free to cultivate a rich life of piety, drawing from the treasures of many lands and many ages. “But,” as St. Paul said, “all things should be done decently and in order” (I Cor 14:40).

This book, then, is a celebration of all things Catholic, and the biblical doctrine that makes them Catholic. But it’s more than that. It’s a handbook, a how-to, a good-natured defense, and a gentle nudge for all of us to do better, no matter where we are in our spiritual development.

One of my goals in writing this book is to show how Catholic customs and devotions fit into the larger scheme of Christian faith. Our first order of business is to develop a new way of seeing, a new way of growing in wisdom and knowledge. That way is traditionally called *mystagogy*.

READING THE SIGNS

The English word *mystagogy* comes from the Greek *mystagogia*, which means “guidance in the mysteries.” In the mystagogical instruction of the early Church, a clergyman (usually the local bishop) would take the time to explain the small details of the liturgy and how they corresponded symbolically to the events that played out in the Bible. This method reaches back to the New Testament itself, where St. Paul and St. Peter spoke of baptism and Eucharist as the fulfillment of Old Testament foreshadowings (see, for example, I Cor 10:2–17; I Pet 3:18–21).

Mystagogy enables new believers to see beyond the signs to the

things signified—to see beyond the here and now and glimpse the divine mysteries that will one day be fully visible to us in heaven (I Jn 3:2) but even now are truly present in the Church.

We may hear the story of the great flood and, through instruction, prayer, and meditation, discern the saving waters of baptism. But further, we may see beyond the sign of baptism and discern the work of the Holy Spirit, because the third person of the Blessed Trinity *is* the ultimate reality signified and conveyed by the waters of baptism.

For even Jesus' miracles—great as they were—served primarily as “signs.” That is the word St. John used to describe them (see, for example, Jn 2:11 and 4:54). They were real events, and they were momentous, but still they pointed beyond themselves, to a divine and transcendent reality. Consider Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man (Mk 2:3–12). Our Lord made it clear that curing paralysis was a lesser deed than the forgiveness of sins. The physical healing was simply an outward sign of the greater healing, the inner, spiritual healing. The physical cure, after all, was a temporary reprieve; eventually the man's life would run its natural course, and he would suffer and die. The spiritual healing, however, could last even beyond death; it made for a new creation, an act possible by no one but God (Mk 2:7).

Jesus has given us the privilege of sharing in the life and saving actions of God. At the Last Supper, he spoke of his miraculous signs and then promised his apostles: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do” (Jn 14:12). Though the apostles did perform miracles during their ministry, they did nothing that exceeded Jesus' miracles in grandeur. So what could he have meant?

He meant the sacraments.

The early Christians believed in the sacraments. They believed

that the sacraments not only spoke *about* Jesus' divine power—but rather they *spoke Jesus' divine power*. All words signify things. Yet, in the Gospels, Jesus' word brought about the realities it signified. He spoke and demons were cast out, people were cured of their illnesses, raging winds and waters were stilled, the dead were raised. That same divine Word still has the power to transform the things of creation and the moments of our lives. It does so through the ministry of the Church, which uses the stuff of the earth—bread and wine, gestures and postures, oil and water—to bring holiness into our lives. This happens in the sacraments, which the ancient Church referred to as “mysteries.” In the fifth century, Pope St. Leo the Great said: “What was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries.” Thus, mystagogy is rooted in God's grace: his power to change us.

That power is hidden to our natural senses. Mystagogy, on the other hand, is the Church's traditional way of revealing it to our mind and spirit. It is the saints' way of revealing the divine love that abides behind the symbols, the divine life that lives beyond the signs. In the holy things of our tradition, material objects show us immaterial realities—temporal events disclose eternal mysteries.

Mystagogy means leading believers into a real communion, a real sharing, in the saving mysteries celebrated in the symbols and rituals of the Church's worship. Pope Benedict XVI once said: “The mature fruit of mystagogy is an awareness that one's life is being progressively transformed by the holy mysteries being celebrated . . . mak[ing] him a ‘new creation.’”

LIVING THE MYSTERIES

For the early Christians, the mystery of Christ was not limited to the sacramental rituals. It touched also upon morals and everyday

life. It was God's "plan for the fullness of time," after all, "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph I:10). In Christ "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things were created through him and for him . . . and in him all things hold together" (Col I:16–17).

Thus, in Christ, all the things of the earth become signposts pointing us to God. The things of the earth are not to be despised, but rather sanctified, raised up, made holy by holy use. In the Mass we offer God the "work of human hands." In our work we do the same. We do no less in our devotion. We pray, according to our customs, as the early Christians did, with sacraments as well as *sacramentals*.

What is a sacramental?

It is any object set apart and blessed by the Church to lead us to good thoughts and increase our devotion. A sacramental is *like* a sacrament in that it is a means of grace and an outward sign of an invisible mystery of faith. It is also *unlike* a sacrament in many ways. Sacraments were instituted by Christ, while sacramentals are established by the Church. Sacraments convey grace *directly* in our souls, while sacramentals do so *indirectly*, by leading us to devotion and providing us an occasion when we may respond to God's grace.

This idea is as old as the Church. In the fourth century St. Gregory of Nyssa preached a splendid homily about this *sacramental principle*. He began by praising God for the power he gave to ordinary things: water in baptism, bread and wine in the Mass, oil in anointing, the press of the bishop's hands in ordination. "There are many things that appear to be contemptible," he said, "but accomplish mighty works." Drawing from the Old Testament, he noted the common items that God had invested with miraculous power: Moses' wooden staff, Elijah's mantle of rough cloth, and the bones of the dead Elisha.

St. Gregory saw that such a dispensation of power had not only continued in his own day, but increased many times over. So it continues into our times, too, offering us manifold graces. In fact, those three examples he gave are the remote ancestors of practices that continue into our own day, practices we'll examine in this book: the veneration of the cross, the wearing of the brown scapular, and the honor we give to the relics of the saints.

DISTINCT POSSIBILITIES

For Catholics, sacraments and sacramentals are unmistakable signs of life. Both are part of this book, as both should be part of our everyday living and loving.

Jesus' own devotional life was very rich. He took part in pilgrimages and festivals. He prayed spontaneously and formally. He prayed kneeling and standing and prostrate. He worshipped alone, with congregations, and with friends. He recited the Scriptures. He went on silent retreats, away from the bustle and distractions of the world.

It is our privilege to imitate him in that beautiful variety, and our tradition gives us many ways of doing so. It's true that not all prayers and devotions are created equal. As we take up the customs of our Catholic faith, it's important that we distinguish between those that are essential and those that we may choose or reject with Christian freedom. We have a strict obligation to be baptized and go to Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation (see Jn 3:5 and 6:53). We are not obliged, however, to say the Rosary, use holy water, or pray novenas. Nevertheless, sometimes it's the nonessentials that transform a house into a true home. Yes, we need the bricks and mortar to build up a functional shelter; but life is a whole lot richer when we can also smell the aroma of dinner cooking in the

kitchen and hear the babbling of small children in the living room. These time-tested devotions really do help to make our faith a *life* and our Church a *home*.

Still, I know that some people will dismiss all habits of piety, objecting that they're just rote and routine habits. They are indeed habits, and we can indeed make them rote and routine. But those qualities, by themselves, are not bad. Rote and routine are quite good, in fact, when we apply them to lawn care, car care, musical performance, or personal hygiene. I maintain, with Catholic tradition, that routines of prayer, when offered from the heart, can be very good for the soul. They are like beautiful music or gardens tended with care—rote habits rooted in love.

Others will object that these actions are medieval superstitions or attempts to manipulate God. But that's simply not so. By offering our prayers, we're not getting God to do our bidding; we're allowing God to have his way. These ways of prayer are divine mercies, a language God fosters so we will speak with him regularly and often, whether we feel like it or not. Our devotions are not primarily what we do for God—he does not need our praise or our incense—but rather what he does for us. These modes of communication conform remarkably well to the human mind and body, which God himself created for his glory.

HOW THE BOOK WORKS

In this book, we'll examine different traditional practices of the Church.

In each chapter we'll look at the deep biblical and historical roots of a particular Catholic custom. We'll find answers to common objections raised by non-Catholics, and we'll try to clear up some common misconceptions. Each chapter concludes with a

“Ponder in Your Heart” section. The title refers to Luke’s description of the Blessed Virgin: “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). I’m hoping that you and I can imitate her as we ponder the words of Christian history’s great teachers, thinkers, and saints. I chose these “Ponder” passages from the tradition. I’ve included these passages from many of the centuries from Jesus’ to our own. Taken all together, they make an important point: that these doctrines and devotions are not my inventions, that they have been confirmed by tradition, and that they work. They’ve helped other Catholics, many Catholics, down through the centuries, mark their way to heaven. I chose passages from a variety of authors. I chose the passages I have found most helpful.

The idea here is to heighten our awareness of our faith, to make our devotions as *everyday* as possible. We want to form good *habits* of prayer—or, to use the more intimidating modern term: *disciplines* of prayer. The sacramental principle works so well because it presupposes the fundamental reality of human nature: we are composed of body and soul, a material body and a spiritual soul. What we do to one component profoundly affects the other. What we do with our body, our senses, provides the foundation for our spiritual growth. Grace builds on nature.

There are many good, natural reasons to take up the traditional methods of prayer. Physiologists recognize that they relax our bodies, reduce our stress levels, and unfurrow our brows. They also burn durable neural pathways. Anyone who has spent time by the deathbeds of faithful Catholics can testify, as I can: there are certain devotions that seem fairly consistently to remain to the very end of consciousness, even when much else has vanished from memory. I have a dear friend whose mother survived a stroke with little left but the ability to recite the Rosary—a habit ingrained

over a long lifetime. It proved to be her path to recovery. I could tell hundreds of stories like this one.

So it makes no sense to defer the disciplines of prayer till we're older. First, we may not have the luxury of getting older. But even if we do, we may not have the health, memory, or freedom necessary to establish new habits.

It may sound cliché, but we don't know what lies ahead for us. We do know that we'll suffer, you and I, because that's part of life, even life in Christ. But God has provided for those times. He and his Church have given us a storehouse of tradition—methods and counsel that have proven reliable over the course of millennia, through the lives of countless ordinary Christians, through economic depression and natural disasters, through persecution and war. Now that's what I call research and development!

In every trial, God will “provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (I Cor 10:13). Even amid the most extraordinary circumstances, we can escape to God, we can endure, and we can prevail, using the most ordinary means of prayer. It is a very good thing if all we need to do is touch a bead or feel the wool of a scapular in order to turn our thoughts to God, because we may come to moments when that's all we *can* do.

I pray you'll pray these prayers, as well as you can, and ask the Holy Spirit and your guardian angel to make up for whatever you lack.

As you pray, please remember to pray for this author—who promises to pray for his readers!

BACK TO THE CROSS

Oh, yes, I promised to finish my story about my dissertation.

I returned home saying the Rosary, by way of my neighbor-

hood's darkened streets, but I felt as if it was broad daylight. Once back in my office, I returned to the biblical text—which I had read hundreds and possibly thousands of times—and read it as if for the first time. In fact, I encountered it as if I were the first person reading it. In the original Greek I saw connections that had not made it cleanly into the English and Latin translations.

To cut to the chase: I found a solution that, till then, had appeared nowhere else in the commentaries. I finished my dissertation and defended it successfully. I wrote up my findings and published them in a major scholarly journal.

Twelve years after that fateful, faithful night, I was attending a professional conference, the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, when a scholar I respect took me aside and asked: “How does it feel to have nailed it?”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“How does it feel,” he asked, “to have found the interpretation that had been lost to the ages?”

Then I knew what he meant, and my eyes welled up.

I told him the story about a night long ago, a wall too high for me to scale. I told him of my journey to the cross. I wanted him to know the way, in case he, too, should find himself at a wall.

I want the same for you, and that's the reason for the rest of this book.



I

Life Begins



I.

HOLY WATER

We begin in water.

That's how the book of Genesis poetically depicts the creation of the universe: "darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters . . . And God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters'" (Gen 1:2, 6).

As it was in the cosmic, so it is in our personal beginnings: we assume our human form in the amniotic sac, "bag of waters," in the womb. In the order of nature, birth begins when a mother's "water breaks."

So with water we begin our visits to church. We dip a hand into a holy-water font, and we bless ourselves.

There has been a watermark on Christian prayer since the earliest days of the Church. At the end of the second century, a North African theologian named Tertullian mentions the custom of symbolically cleansing one's hands before lifting them in prayer. It was a Jewish custom that predated the coming of Our Lord, and it may

be what St. Paul was referring to when he wrote to Timothy: “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands” or “pure hands” (I Tim 2:8). The historian Eusebius, writing around A.D. 320, describes a church in Tyre that had flowing fountains at its entrance, where the faithful might purify their hands.

We use water to mark our beginnings because God does. We find ample evidence of this in both nature and Scripture. When the world was lost to sin and needed cleansing and rebirth, God sent a great flood, and from that flood the family of Noah found new life. When Israel emerged from slavery as a unified nation, it first had to pass through the waters of the Red Sea. When the chosen people established their places of worship—first the tabernacle and then the Temple—they constructed them with bronze basins for washing upon entry.

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that water has been a natural sacrament since the dawn of creation. In the age of nature—from Adam through the patriarchs—water refreshed and cleansed humankind. In the age of Law—the time of Moses—water provided a spiritual rebirth for Israel as the nation began its journey to the promised land. With Jesus, however, came the age of grace; and from that time onward water received the divine power of the Word made flesh. Though babies had always been born through “water,” now grown men and women could be “born of water and the Holy Spirit” (Jn 3:5). The Church Fathers taught that Jesus, by descending into the waters of the River Jordan, had sanctified the waters of the world. He made them living and life-giving (see Jn 4:10–14). He made them a source of *supernatural* regeneration, refreshment, and cleansing.

While we are on earth, we know spiritual things by means of

sensible signs. It is only in glory that we will see divine things as they are, without their sacramental veils. According to St. Thomas, water ultimately “signifies the grace of the Holy Spirit . . . For the Holy Spirit is the unfailing fountain from whom all gifts of grace flow.” The book of Revelation confirms this, as it presents the Spirit’s grace as a “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev 22:1).

Through history and through the cosmos, God has spoken with a voice that is “like the sound of many waters” (Rev 1:15). All the many sacred meanings of water we take for our own and claim as our inheritance—whenever we bless ourselves with holy water.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now,” born of water and the Spirit. “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 Jn 3:2-3).

This simple action, which even the smallest children love to do, is a reminder and a renewal of our baptism. It is a refreshment, too, providing relief from the oppression of evil. St. Teresa of Avila wrote that “there is nothing the devils flee from more—without returning—than holy water.”

Holy water is ordinary water that has been blessed for devotional use by a priest. We bless ourselves with holy water at church. Most churches also provide a dispenser so that parishioners can draw water to take home with them. Some Catholic families keep a little holy-water font at the entryway to every bedroom. I keep a bottle of the stuff in my office at all times.

We need do no more with it than splash a few drops on ourselves. It is customary to pronounce a blessing in the name of the Holy Trinity, too, and trace the outline of a cross with our right hand.

That’s enough for now. We’ll save the rest for the next chapter.

Ponder in Your Heart

King and Lord of all things and maker of the world: you gave salvation freely to all created nature by the descent of your only-begotten Jesus Christ. You redeemed all that you created by the coming of your ineffable Word. See now from heaven, and look upon these waters, and fill them with the Holy Spirit. Let your ineffable Word come to be in them and transform their energy and cause them to be generative, as being filled with your grace . . . As your only-begotten Word coming down upon the waters of the Jordan rendered them holy, so now may he descend on these and make them holy and spiritual.

—Blessing of Water, from the sacramentary of
St. Serapion of Egypt, fourth century

2.

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

What water is to elements, the Sign of the Cross is to gestures. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI) once wrote: “The most basic Christian gesture in prayer is and always will be the Sign of the Cross.”

This is the most common prayer of Christians, and it has been since the founding of the Church. St. Paul speaks of the cross in almost all his New Testament letters: “But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

We could fill a book with the early Christians’ testimonies to this practice. It was their favorite devotion as it required no special knowledge or skill. You didn’t have to be literate to make the Sign of the Cross, or rich enough to own a book of instructions. All you needed was one working finger. Martyrs made the Sign as they were taken to their death. Even Julian, the notoriously ex-Christian emperor, fell back to tracing the Sign whenever he felt oppressed by demons.

It is mentioned everywhere because it was practiced everywhere. At the end of the second century, Tertullian proclaimed: “In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever task occupies us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross.” Tertullian praised his wife for her virtues, her beauty, and her wardrobe, but preeminently because she made the Sign of the Cross over her body and over her bed before retiring for the night.

The earliest accounts suggest that Christians traced the cross with their thumb upon their forehead. They also traced it on objects, such as food, and over the sacramental elements: bread, wine, oil, and water.

Over the centuries the faithful have developed many ways of doing it. In the Western churches, we bless ourselves with our open right hand, touching our fingertips to the forehead, then the breastbone, then the left shoulder, and finally the right shoulder. Some interpret the five open fingers as a sign of the Five Wounds of Christ.

In the Mass, just before the Gospel, we use another form as well: a “Small Sign of the Cross,” in which we trace with our thumb a cruciform on our forehead and lips, and over our heart. When the priest or deacon does this, we can sometimes hear him say quietly: “The Lord be in my heart and on my lips that I may worthily proclaim his holy Gospel.” People who use the Small Sign in private devotions sometimes offer it with the Latin prayer *Per signum crucis de inimicis nostris libera nos Deus noster* (“By the sign of the cross, our God, deliver us from our enemies”).

Christians of the Eastern churches have their own way of making the Sign. Their placement of fingers turns the hand into a virtual catechism. They join the thumb, index, and middle finger at the fingertips. The three fingers together represent the Trinity in

unity. The remaining two fingers—pinky and ring—are pressed together against the palm, and they together symbolize the hypostatic union: the unity of Jesus' human and divine natures.

Some people, in the East and the West, keep the custom of kissing their fingers at the conclusion of the Sign.

Worldwide and throughout history, there are countless variations on the practice and its interpretation. One of my favorite explanations comes from my patron saint, Francis de Sales:

We raise the hand first to the forehead, saying, "In the name of the Father," to signify that the Father is the first person of the Most Holy Trinity, of whom the Son is begotten and from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds. Then saying, "And the Son," the hand is lowered to the breast, to express that the Son proceeds from the Father, who sent him down to the womb of the Virgin. Then the hand is moved from the left shoulder or side to the right, while saying, "and of the Holy Spirit," thereby signifying that the Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Holy Trinity, proceeds from the Father and the Son, that he is the love that unites both, and that we, through his grace, partake of the fruits of the passion. Accordingly the Sign of the Cross is a brief declaration of our faith in the three great mysteries: of our faith in the Blessed Trinity, in the passion of Christ, and in the forgiveness of sin, by which we pass from the left side of curse to the right of blessing.

The Trinity and the cross: it's not an accident of piety that these two themes converge in the words and gesture of the Church's most fundamental and most popular prayer.

The cross is an image in time of the Trinity's life in eternity. On the cross, Jesus Christ gave himself entirely. He held nothing back.

Such is the self-giving of the Son for the Father, the Father for the Son. Each makes a complete and loving gift of his life to the other, and that gift, that life, that love, is the Holy Spirit. The sign of that love in the world is the Sign of the Cross.

At the end of his struggle, Jesus gave up his Spirit (Jn 19:30) as he pronounced his work “finished,” accomplished, fulfilled. When we make the Sign of the Cross, we correspond to that grace. We receive the love he gives. We take on that Spirit as we take up his cross. We see Jesus give himself in love, and we say “Amen!” We accept that life as our own.

It’s no small thing we do when we make the Sign of the Cross. It should take our breath away—but only so that we can be filled up with another wind, another breath: the Spirit of God.

This is the life we received in baptism, when we were marked with the Sign and saved from our sins. The early Christians compared this to the mark on the brow of Cain (Gen 4:15), which protected him from the punishment he deserved. They saw it foreshadowed also in the mark of blood on the doorposts that saved the firstborn sons of the Israelites at the Passover (Ex 12:7). They saw it even more vividly depicted in the oracle of the prophet Ezekiel, who saw that the righteous in Jerusalem would one day be saved because of a “mark upon the foreheads” (Ez 9:4). What was that mark? According to the ancient rabbis, it was *tav*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which in ancient times was drawn as a cross. In the New Testament, in the book of Revelation, St. John saw the faithful in heaven distinguished by this Sign on their foreheads (Rev 14:1, 22:4).

The custom has passed down through the ages, and indeed it will always be with us. In his groundbreaking work on Sacred Tradition, St. Basil the Great identified it as a hallmark of the apostolic faith. It is honored even in heaven, and even by the greatest of

saints. At Lourdes, France, in 1858, when the Virgin Mary first appeared to little Bernadette Soubirous, before she uttered a single word, she made the Sign of the Cross.

This simplest gesture is the richest of creeds. It encompasses the infinite. It proclaims the Trinity, the incarnation, and our redemption. It is, in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, a “summing up and re-acceptance of our baptism.” As Pope Benedict XVI, he added: “Making the Sign of the Cross . . . means saying a visible and public ‘yes’ to the One who died and rose for us, to God who in the humility and weakness of his love is the Almighty, stronger than all the power and intelligence of the world.”

Ponder in Your Heart

When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real Sign of the Cross. Instead of a small cramped gesture that gives no notion of its meaning, let us make a large unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us, our thoughts, our attitudes, our body and soul, every part of us at once, how it consecrates and sanctifies us . . .

Think of these things when you make the Sign of the Cross. It is the holiest of all signs . . . Let it take in your whole being—body, soul, mind, will, thoughts, feelings, your doing and not-doing—and by signing it with the cross strengthen and consecrate the whole in the strength of Christ, in the name of the triune God.

—Romano Guardini, twentieth century
