

The sign of the cross is not simply a way to begin praying. It is itself a powerful prayer that is meant to pour out tremendous blessings on our lives.

Whenever we make the sign of the cross—whether at Mass or in our private devotions—we enter a sacred tradition that goes back to the early centuries of Christianity, when this ritual was understood to be a source of divine power and protection.

In making this sign, we invoke God’s presence and invite him to bless us, assist us, and guard us from all harm.

It is not surprising that the early Christians made the sign of the cross quite often, desiring to tap into the power that lay therein.

Other early Christians saw the sign of the cross as demarcating God’s faithful people, helping souls fight temptation, protecting them from all evil, and even bringing terror to the devils.

St. John Chrysostom (A.D. 347–407), exhorted God’s people to turn constantly to the power of Christ found in the sign of the cross:

“Never leave your house without making the sign of the cross. It will be to you a staff, a weapon, an impregnable fortress. Neither man nor demon will dare to attack you, seeing you covered with such powerful armor. Let this sign teach you that you are a soldier, ready to combat against the demons, and ready to fight for the crown of justice. Are you ignorant of what the cross has done? It has vanquished death, destroyed sin, emptied hell, dethroned Satan, and restored the universe. Would you then doubt its power?”

What did these early Christians see that we so often miss? Why did they so eagerly make the sign of the cross at the crucial turns in their daily lives, while we sometimes perform this ritual merely out of routine and sometimes even take it for granted?

There are two principal aspects of the sign of the cross: the actual tracing of the cross over our bodies, and the words we recite while doing this. Let us first consider the sign itself.

O.T. Ezekiel Not everyone in Jerusalem, however, went along with the wicked ways of the city. There were some who sighed and groaned over the abominations in Jerusalem and chose to remain faithful to God. These righteous ones would receive a mysterious mark: the Hebrew letter tau—

The tau X was a sign of divine protection and as a mark distinguishing the righteous from the wicked.

This spiritual mark was to set them apart from the rest of the corrupt culture and would serve as a sign of divine protection (Ez 9:4-6). Like the blood on the doorposts that protected Israelite families from God’s punishment on Egypt at the first Passover, this mark on the foreheads in Ezekiel 9 would protect the faithful ones in Jerusalem when judgment fell on the city.

The New Testament saints are sealed with a similar mark. Drawing on imagery from Ezekiel, the book of Revelation depicts the saints in heaven as having a seal upon their foreheads (Rv 7:3). As in Ezekiel’s time, this seal separates the righteous people of God from the wicked and protects them from the coming judgment (Rv 9:4).

Just as the faithful people in Ezekiel’s time were protected by a cross-like mark on their foreheads, so Christians are guarded by the cross of Christ traced over their bodies. And this signing has tremendous significance.

From a biblical perspective, every time we trace the sign of the cross over our bodies, we are doing **two things**. **First**, we are expressing our desire to be set apart from the corrupt ways of the world in our own day.

As in Ezekiel’s time, there are many among God’s people who do not want to go along with the empty ways of living prevalent in the world.

In our own age, characterized by greed, selfishness, loneliness, troubled marriages, and disrupted family life, making the sign of the cross can express a firm commitment to live according to Christ's standards, not the world's.

While the secular world holds up money, pleasure, power, and having fun as the essential marks of a good life, Christians pursue a higher path to true happiness, which is found only in the sacrificial love of Christ on Calvary—the love symbolized by the sign of the cross.

Second, when we sign ourselves with the cross, we are invoking God's protection for our lives. In the sign of the cross, we ask him to guard us from all harm and evil.

Many Christians throughout the centuries have turned to the sign of the cross for strength to fight against temptation. Others have done so in order to seek God's help in the midst of suffering and great trials. Many parents trace the sign of the cross on their children's foreheads, asking the Lord to bless and protect them.

Now let us consider the words we recite—words which also have deep roots in Scripture. The Power of God's Name. While signing ourselves, we call on God's name, saying, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In Scripture, to call on the name of the Lord denotes worship and is often associated with prayer and sacrifice.

In Scripture, a name is not merely a conventional way of referring to a particular person. A name mysteriously represents the essence of a person and carries the power of that person. Therefore, to call upon God's name is to invoke his presence and his power.

This is what we do at the start of every Mass: we gather in the name of God's Son. We invoke his presence among us as we confidently bring our needs and petitions before him.

But we call upon the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, echoing Jesus' great commission to the apostles: "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" (Mt 28:19).

These were the words spoken when we were baptized, when our souls were first filled with the divine life of the Holy Trinity.

By repeating these words at the start of every Mass, we acknowledge the profound fact that we are approaching Almighty God in the liturgy, not because of our own merit, but by virtue of the supernatural life God graciously bestowed on us at our baptism. We come not merely in our own name, but in the name of the Triune God who dwells within us.

We also are praying that this divine life within us might grow. In the sign of the cross, we pray that our whole lives may be lived in ever greater harmony with God—that all that we do, we may do in his name.

This is why we should make every sign of the cross with careful attention and reverence. Given all that this ritual means, we should avoid signing ourselves in a hurried, sloppy way.

As Romano Guardini once wrote: "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...Make a large cross, taking time thinking what you do. 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.