



**Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass
Do This in Remembrance of Me, Part 6:
Sign of the Cross
By FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL**



“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Once we have finished the entrance hymn or antiphon at the beginning of Mass, there is a familiar gesture we do at every Mass and frequently with our prayers: we make the Sign of the Cross. Why? As Dr. Edward Sri writes, “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. When we make the Sign of the Cross...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” (*A Biblical Walk Through the Mass*, p. 17).

Sri goes on to quote the early Christian writer Tertullian (A.D. 160-225), who said, “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 employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the Sign of the Cross” (*A Biblical Walk Through the Mass*, p.17-18).

A Holy Gesture

Since we use the Sign of the Cross so frequently, it is important to recall what a meaning-packed gift it really is. The gesture itself points us to the Cross of Jesus—it reminds us of his saving sacrifice—the place where Jesus gave everything out of love for us to conquer sin and death. The words we say remind us that we have been brought into the life of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is important to notice that we pray “in the name” and not “names.” Praying in the singular “name” recalls that God is One God in Three Persons. In addition to reminding us of the Trinity and the Cross of Christ, the Sign of the Cross also reminds us of our Baptism, when we were brought into God’s family and given a share in the life of God: we are literally baptized “... in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”! We are reminded that the Father loved us so much that he sent the Son to save us and that the Holy Spirit was sent to guide us on our way home to heaven. That’s a lot of meaning for a little action that only takes a couple of seconds!

When I think of the Sign of the Cross, one of my favorite meditations is imagining how it looks when Our Blessed Mother Mary makes it. I remember hearing a story about how St. Bernadette would sometimes comment to the other sisters that their Signs of the Cross needed more reverence. I was always struck by the thought that St. Bernadette saw Mother Mary make the Sign of the Cross as she followed along with the Rosary beads (during Our Lady’s appearance to St. Bernadette at Lourdes). It must have made a powerful impression on her! Although for now we might have to imagine this scene, we can review the classic steps in making the Sign of the Cross in the Roman Rite: using the right hand and touching the forehead (saying: “In the name of the Father”), the middle of the chest (saying: “and of the Son”), the left shoulder (saying: “and of the Holy”), and right shoulder (saying: “Spirit. Amen.”)

A Grace-Filled Gift

Like almost anything in our lives, frequent repetition of the Sign of the Cross can sometimes lessen our attention to what we are doing and what it means. However, as we noted, the Sign of the Cross is an incredibly powerful prayer and gesture full of meaning. Next time you are starting a prayer or at Mass, I invite you to pause for a brief moment and really make the Sign of the Cross a true prayer from your heart. Maybe imagine what it looked like when Mother Mary, St. Bernadette, or one of the saints made it. Consider moving your hand and saying the words more slowly. Think about the love Jesus has for you as you trace the shape of the cross. Thank God that you have been given a share in the life of the Trinity through Baptism. What a grace-filled gift the Sign of the Cross truly is!