



# Liturgical Thought

## EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY<sup>1</sup>

### Making the Sign of the Holy Cross

I would guess that for many Lutherans, especially among those who attend congregations who have exchanged the historic liturgy for what is deemed a more “relaxed” and therefore “friendlier” form of worship, pastors and congregants making the sign of the Holy Cross in worship is probably the first liturgical action that really catches one’s eye. Many find the idea of making the sign of the Holy Cross in a Lutheran setting offensive because they judge it to be “Catholic.” Indeed, they judge rightly; it is catholic, but not strictly Roman Catholic. The term “catholic” understood properly, means that which is universally Christian and is, therefore, a term which encompasses far more than any one church body or denomination, but is indeed, a designation for the whole of the Christian Church. Making the sign of the Holy Cross may be one of the oldest of liturgical actions in the history of the Christian Church and there is evidence that it may even date to the time of the apostles.

The sign of the Holy Cross is mentioned no less than four times in the Evangelical-Lutheran Confessions.<sup>2</sup> The most famous is this rubric from the Small Catechism penned by the Rev. Fr. Martin Luther, himself: **“In the morning when you get up, make the sign of the Holy Cross....”** But that begs several questions: How is this sign of the Holy Cross to be made? By whom? And under what other circumstances?

Liturgically, the sign of the Holy Cross is made in two distinctly different ways: by a person him or herself at the mention of the Triune Name (or at some other customary point), and by the pastor over the people when giving a blessing. Blessing oneself or crossing oneself<sup>3</sup> is very simply done. Using the fingers of the right hand, one touches first his forehead, then breastbone, then right shoulder, then left shoulder. Whether this touching is done with an open palm facing the person, with the thumb crossed over the forefinger, or with only two or three fingers held together

<sup>1</sup> Much of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman’s Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.), and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Small Catechism, Prayers (Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch Lutherischen Kirche [BKS], 521.18; 522.3 = Tappert, 352, 353); Small Catechism, Baptism Booklet (BKS, 538.20); and Large Catechism, Second Commandment (BKS, 578.50 = Tappert, 374).

<sup>3</sup> The description by Charles Evanson in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (p. 405) is both helpful, and gives a little prayer to be said when making the sign of the holy cross.

is a matter of choice. Some have also been taught to complete the motion by returning to the chest though the last motion is not necessary. The Lutheran manner of crossing oneself is opposite of the Roman and Anglican rites where crossing oneself is done in reverse. Lutherans cross themselves in the same manner as the Eastern Orthodox rite. We Lutherans cross ourselves in such a manner because we consider the crossing of ourselves a faithful response to God's activity among us. In addition, since when the pastor makes the sign of the Holy Cross over the congregation with his right hand, he makes the cross motion from his own left to right, the congregant mirrors that motion with his or her motion from right to left over the heart.

Consider then, Baptism where the pastor makes the sign of the Holy Cross for the first time and in the stead of Christ on the baptismal candidate with the words: ***“Receive the sign of the Holy Cross, both upon the forehead and upon the heart, in token that you have been redeemed by Christ, the Crucified.”*** In Baptism, the candidate is given ***“Christ the Crucified”*** and the sign of the Holy Cross is a ***“token”*** or sign of this truth. From Baptism until our Lord calls the Christian home, the Christian continually returns to the font where one was first called into the family of God, faith was born, and forgiveness given. For this reason it is appropriate for the baptized faithful to make the sign of the Holy Cross upon themselves in remembrance of the sign and faith first received in Baptism.

During the liturgy of the Divine Service or the various Divine Offices such as Matins and Vespers etc., there are several opportunities for the faithful to make the sign of the Holy Cross. One need only pay particular attention to the times the pastor signs the congregation. At such times it is appropriate for the congregant to sign oneself also. Other such appropriate times are at the Invocation, at the words ***“Our help is in the Name of the Lord”*** during the confession of sins, when the pastor pronounces Absolution, at the end of the Gloria in Excelsis, the conclusion of the Creed, at the words ***“deliver us from evil”*** in the Lord's Prayer, during the Sanctus at the words ***“Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord,”*** at the elevation of the Body and Blood of Christ, at the Pax Domini (***“Peace of the Lord”***), before receiving both the Body and the Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar, and at the Benediction. Making the sign of the Holy Cross on oneself is also appropriate when the Cross passes by during any procession, and at the mention of the Triune Name during any doxological stanza or hymn.

During the Divine Offices, a person may also bless himself with the sign of the Holy Cross at the words ***“Make haste, O God, to deliver me,”*** at the beginning of any canticle (the Venite, Te Deum, Benedictus, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, etc.), at the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer, and when the Blessing is given (or at the Benedicamus, if there is no blessing).

The Pastor also blesses himself at the points mentioned, as well as when he enters the chancel as the Introit is sung. **But please note:** the Invocation at the beginning of the Divine Service, or preceding and following the sermon, is not a blessing over the people. Hence, the Pastor does not turn toward the people to make the sign of the Holy Cross over them, but should join the congregation in making the sign of the Holy Cross over himself.<sup>4</sup>

There are also points during the Liturgy at which one may make a smaller sign of the Holy Cross. During the Divine Service, when the Holy Gospel is announced, one may make a triple sign of the Holy Cross on the forehead, lips and chest. That cross imitates the cross made by the ordained man who, before reading the Gospel, makes the triple cross while praying, ***“The Lord be in my heart and on my lips that I may worthily and with dignity proclaim His Holy Gospel.”*** (When the hearers make the triple cross, they may say the same prayer substituting *“hear”* for *“proclaim.”*) This smaller cross is made with the fleshy part of the right thumb while the fingers are extended. In the same way, a single small sign of the Holy Cross may be traced on the lips during the Divine Office at the words ***“O Lord, open my lips.”***

Just like the words of the Lord's Prayer or the entrance into the church, so also, making the sign of the Holy Cross can become either a prideful show or a meaningless routine. However, when employed as a remembrance of Holy Baptism and in thanksgiving for our Lord's Gospel, the sign of the Holy Cross is profound prayer and, at the same time, a clear and (at times) wordless confession not only to others but also to oneself of Our Lord's sacramental gifts.

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<sup>4</sup> During the Invocation, the Pastor is not liturgically the voice of God, but is joining the voice of the Faithful (i.e., he is employing what has unfortunately been called the *“sacrificial”* posture, rather than the *“sacramental”* posture.)