

OUR PRAYERS: The Sign of the Cross

Deep in every human heart is a desire for the living God that expresses itself in prayer. In the Catholic tradition, some prayers have become classic expressions of what the human heart seeks. *Words of Faith: Our Prayers* explores prayers that for centuries have revealed a faith that fosters a deep, personal, growing, and loving relationship with Jesus Christ. These prayers teach us much about who we are and about the God to whom we belong.

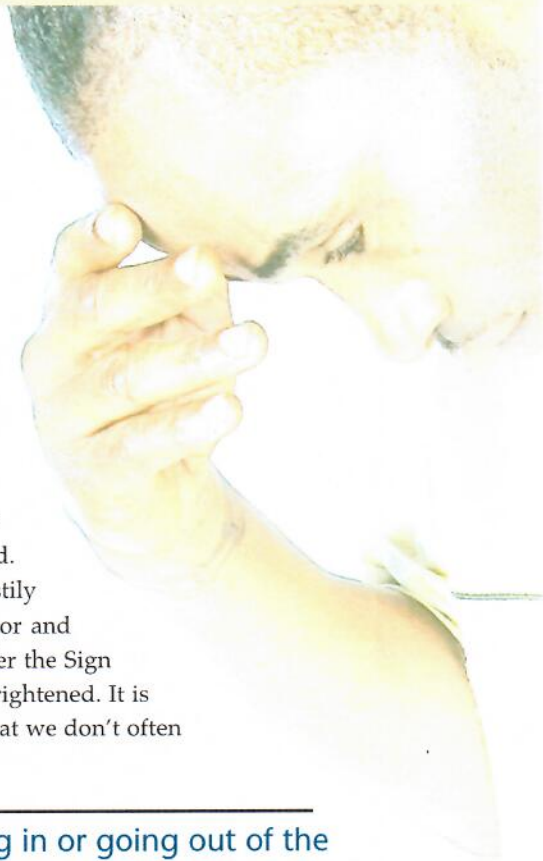
—Keith J. Egan, Series Editor

We Pray

† In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

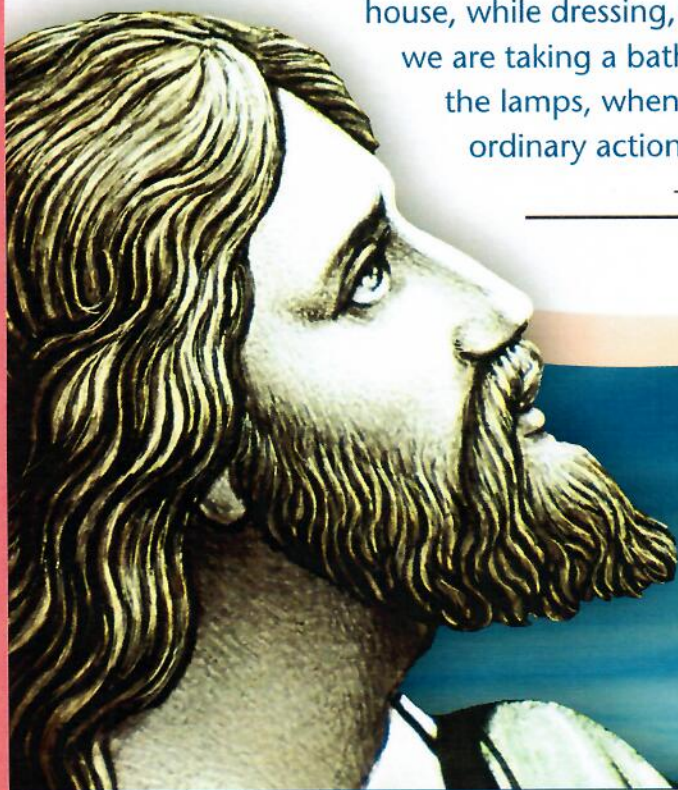
We Practice

From the day of our baptism as infants or our welcome into the Church as older children or adults, the gesture and prayer that together make up the Sign of the Cross have followed us almost everywhere we go within the Catholic community. Upon entering a church building, we dip fingertips into holy water and make the Sign of the Cross, recalling our baptism. Mass begins and ends with the Sign of the Cross. It marks the beginning of the gospel reading, and is made over the bread and wine as they are consecrated. The Sign of the Cross opens and closes meal prayers. Some of us hastily rub it on the foreheads of our children when they walk out the door and Catholic athletes make it at crucial moments in competition. We offer the Sign of the Cross in gratitude and blessing, and rely on it when we are frightened. It is a simple gesture, so much a part of our everyday life as Catholics that we don't often give it much thought.



[We sign ourselves] at our coming in or going out of the house, while dressing, while putting on our shoes, when we are taking a bath, before or after meals, when we light the lamps, when we go to bed or sit down, and in all the ordinary actions of daily life.

—Tertullian, third century Christian writer



DID YOU KNOW?

Each year on September 14, we celebrate the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross (also called the Exaltation of the Cross). This feast has been celebrated by Christians since the fourth century, commemorating the pilgrimage of St. Helena to Jerusalem in search of relics of the original cross of Jesus. It reminds us that, even when things appear otherwise, in the end, life always overcomes death and love always conquers evil.

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We Believe

The Sign of the Cross is first and foremost the sign of Jesus of Nazareth, who died by crucifixion outside of Jerusalem some two thousand years ago, but who, on the third day, rose again. We believe that in his death and resurrection (the paschal mystery) is the purest crystallization of how God is at work in the universe—exalting the outcast, making great the lowly, turning the impossible into possible, transforming what looks like the *end* of life into ever more abundant life.

When we make the Sign of the Cross on our bodies, we are proclaiming that we belong to this Jesus. He is our shepherd and the cross given to us at baptism is like a branding, reminding us and letting the world know that we are members of his flock who enjoy his care and protection. We are saying that our lives, like his, have a paschal character to them, marking our lives with cycles of dying and rising. We constantly have to let sin and suffering die away from us so that more abundant life can emerge. Each time we sign ourselves with the cross, we acknowledge this fundamental mystery of the universe. Only through death can there be new life.

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.

—Pope Benedict XVI
Angelus, September 11, 2005

By adding the words “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” to our gesture, we proclaim something even more. These words and gesture together say that the paschal dimension of our lives takes place within the embrace of the Trinity—the greatest mystery of all.

Many mistakenly visualize the Holy Trinity as three separated divine persons, each with a unique function and existing distinct from the others. This is not Christian doctrine. When we say that God is Trinity or three-in-one, what we try to convey is that the very essence of God’s being *is* relationship. Being in relationship is not merely an attribute of God, but God *is* relationship. Or, to use the language of the evangelist John: “God *is* love” (1 John 4:8, 16).

Calling upon the Trinity while making the Sign of the Cross reminds us that undergirding the mystery of “life then death then more life” is the mystery of love. The trials and suffering that we face do not occur in isolation, at the whim of unknown forces. Our ups and downs are not meaningless. Everything we are and experience ultimately beats to the rhythm of love, is shaped by love, and is made holy by love.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Making the gesture of the cross on one’s body existed as a practice for several centuries before the words of the prayer were added somewhere around the fifth century—perhaps to make an even stronger connection to the sacrament of baptism. By calling upon the Trinity, Christians remembered the sign by which they were first welcomed into the Church and the formula with which they were baptized.

We Live

The apostle Paul urged Christians to “put on Christ” (Romans 13:14). This is precisely what we do when we pray the Sign of the Cross: we express through a rich symbolic gesture and profound words our deep desire to “put on Christ.” When we do that, we discover that the meaning of life is truly not found in the pursuit of pleasure, comfort, and security, but in surrender, letting go, and taking risks on behalf of love. Rather than defending and buffering ourselves against the world, we open our arms and become part of its transformation. When we live what we say and do in making the Sign of the Cross, we find the courage of Jesus as we face our own suffering and death, rather than running away. Our grief and anger give way to a steady, unquenchable hope.

- Practice slowing your gesture of the Sign of the Cross, making it with greater intentionality and greater awareness of what you are praying.
- Mark the key moments of your day—waking, eating, lying down at night—with the Sign of the Cross, remembering that all aspects of your life belong to and are being transformed in Christ and the power of the Trinity.
- Place a small holy water font by the door you use most often in your house. Use it to bless yourself on your way in and out as you do on entering and leaving church.

With Children

- Observe with your child(ren) signs of the cross in the world around you—in churches, at home, the shopping mall, in nature. Note that the sign of Jesus permeates the world.
- Teach children to make the Sign of the Cross when confronted with situations that make them ponder the mystery of life and death and the mystery of love (when an ambulance passes, in times of illness, as a way of expressing affection for a sibling, etc.).
- Model the above when you feel the parental gush of loving affection for your child. Try saying softly to him or her, “God is love” as you make the Sign of the Cross. Tell your child that you know God exists because of the love present in your home.

