

Anglicans worship with their bodies and all their senses, as well as with their voices. Generally we:

- sit for instruction
- stand for praise
- kneel for prayer

Individual practices vary. Anglicans frequently genuflect, bow at the Holy Name and at the invocation of the Trinity, kneel during the Creed at *incarnatus* (the reference to Christ's taking human form), genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the Aumbry, etc. However, there is no compulsion to engage in any practice that you do not find meaningful. The purpose of this brochure is to introduce the background of one frequently used gesture.

It is increasingly common to see Christians of all traditions making the Sign of the Cross. Now a frequent accompaniment to acts of worship and private prayer, what does it mean, how and when do we do it, how did the practice originate, and why would we do it?

### What does it mean?

For Christians, to look on the cross is to identify ourselves with the Christ who died there, and to trace it on ourselves is a reminder that we are incorporated into Christ at our baptism and are sharers in his death and resurrection. To make the Sign of the Cross is to profess faith in the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Besides identifying us as Christians, the Sign of the Cross helps to concentrate the mind, marking the starting point of a time when we are focused on God.

### How?

Generally, the right hand is used. The thumb, index, and middle finger are brought to a point. They are then placed on the forehead, then moved down to the breast, and then from one

shoulder to the other. In the Western tradition the left shoulder is touched first and in the Eastern tradition the right shoulder is first.

### When?

The Sign of the Cross both initiates and punctuates our worship. In our printed services at Holy Trinity, the suggested places for making the Sign of the Cross are indicated by the symbol ✠.

The main places where it is often used include:

- ✠ On dipping the hand in holy water when entering a church that has a holy water stoup adjacent to the door— a reminder of our baptism.
- ✠ At the invocation of the Trinity: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' such as at the beginning of the Eucharist.
- ✠ At the absolution.
- ✠ At the end of the *Gloria* and the Creed, and at the beginning of the *Benedictus*.
- ✠ When the Gospel reading is announced: three small crosses made with the thumb on the forehead, lips and chest. This action embodies a prayer that we may embrace the message of the Gospel with our minds, proclaim it with our lips and believe it deeply in our hearts.
- ✠ At the elevation of the host and chalice.
- ✠ Before receiving Holy Communion.
- ✠ At the blessing.

Some of these occasions also occur frequently during Morning and Evening Prayer, in other occasional services and in private prayer. It is equally appropriate to make the Sign of the Cross at those times at the beginning of the Gospel canticles: *Benedictus* (Blessed be the Lord God of Israel), *Magnificat* (My soul doth magnify the Lord), and *Nunc Dimittis* (Lord now

lettest thy servant depart in peace).

The Sign of the Cross is also often used at other times, for example, before meals, at the beginning and end of private prayer, at times of danger or anxiety, first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

### Origins

The Sign of the Cross is an ancient prayer rich in meaning. References to it appear in writings dating back to the second century, and it is believed that it was in use during the earliest days of Christianity in the universal (catholic) church. It was originally traced only on the forehead with the thumb of the right hand. This was meant as an encouragement in times of trial and as a means of mutual recognition among Christians. From very early times the Sign of the Cross was used in baptism and confirmation, and was traced over people and objects when they were blessed.

'In all our travels and movements,' says Tertullian (c.160-c.225), 'in all our coming in and going out in whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the Sign of the Cross.'

And St Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315-c.387) says, 'Let us then not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the cross our seal, made with boldness . . . in everything; over the bread we eat and the cups we drink, in our comings and goings; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we awake; when we are travelling, and when we are at rest.'

The symbol of the cross is common to Christians of all traditions, and has been since the beginning of Christian history. It is to be seen in art, in and on our churches, and as ornaments on our bodies. The Sign of the Cross is prescribed in the *Book of Common Prayer*

and the defence of the Sign of the Cross has been in Anglican canon law since 1604.

### Why?

The Sign of the Cross is primarily a blessing. We use it to call God's blessing upon us. When we make the Sign of the Cross upon ourselves, we are also expressing our belief in God and the Trinity. Through it, we remind ourselves of God's love for us, of the sacrifice of Jesus made to give us eternal life and of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

The Sign of the Cross also gives us a way to express our belief in Jesus' death and our hope in the Resurrection. We embrace the cross of Jesus and express our willingness to take up our own cross, all the while bursting with joyful hope in the Resurrection.

So while making the Sign of the Cross may sometimes seem like a routine action, it is not. It marks us as Christians and is a visible expression of our belief and hope in God.

May I never  
boast of  
anything,  
except the cross  
of our  
Lord Jesus Christ,  
by which the  
world has been  
crucified to me,  
and I to  
the world.

Galatians 6: 14, NRSV

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# The Sign of the Cross



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