

# The Sign of the Cross in the Eastern Church

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In the course of history no symbol has expressed the mentality of Christians more faithfully than the cross. The cross is the concrete expression of the Christian mystery, of victory through defeat, of glory through humiliation, of life through death. It is the symbol of a God who became man to die as a slave to save creatures. It is the symbol of a life that is not afraid to look to the height and breadth and depth of things because in every direction its arms remain outstretched.

It is interesting to note that long before Christ the symbol of the cross was held in high esteem and venerated by many pagan cultures as a sacred sign of the stability and the integrity of the universe pointing to the four directions of the compass and gathering to itself the entire cosmos. More amazing still this ancient symbol would in the “fullness of time” become the instrument of redemption and the means of the glorification of the Son of Man as St. John Chrysostom says: “I call him king because I see Him crucified: it belongs to the king to die for his subjects.” Crucifixion, death, salvation, kingship, glory – the cross!

Because the pagan world could not and would not understand such a deep mystery, such “foolishness,” the early Christians hesitated to use the cross openly as the sign of the new faith. When it did appear it was usually disguised as an anchor or was intertwined amid vines. With the liberation of the Church from persecution under the Emperor Constantine, however, the cross slowly emerged as the sign of the Christians. Eusebius related that the cross even supplanted the Roman eagles on the military standards – *En touto nika* (Gain the victory with this).

Despite their reticence to use the cross as a public symbol before the fourth century, the Christians did make wide use of it as early as the second and third centuries to sign themselves on the forehead. In the second century

Tertullian reports: "In all of our travels and movements, in all of our coming in and going out . . . whatever employment occupies us; we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross." "Let us not be ashamed to confess the Crucified."

St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes in the fourth century: "Let the cross be our seal, made with boldness by our fingers on our brow and in everything..."

By the sixth century in the East, probably due to the raging Monophysite heresy which denied the double nature of Christ as both God and man, two fingers began to be used to trace the sign of the cross, now no longer only on the forehead but more boldly with a larger sign made on the body. The succeeding centuries saw further modifications emanate from the Eastern tradition because of a desire to profess more explicitly the belief in the triune God and the double nature of Christ. The thumb and two fingers were extended to symbolize the Trinity while the ring finger and little finger were folded back on the palm to profess the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

This newer usage also spread to the Western Church where we read Pope Leo IV writing in the middle of the ninth century instructing the clergy: "Sign the chalice and the host with a proper cross . . . with two fingers outstretched and the thumb hidden within them, by which the Trinity is symbolized. Take heed to make this sign rightly." In the thirteenth century Pope Innocent III directed most explicitly that the sign of the cross be made with three fingers from the forehead to the breast and from the right to the left shoulder, the actually way it is still done by the majority of Eastern Christians. The Western Church retained this ancient form until about the fourteenth century when gradually the open hand was introduced and the sign began to be made in an inverted fashion from left to right, perhaps mistakenly following the lead of the priest who in blessing inverts his movement so it would be seen correctly by the congregation before him.

Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholics place great emphasis on the sign of the cross as a profession of faith in the three basic doctrines of Christianity: the Holy Trinity, the double nature of Christ, and the mystery of redemption. This act of faith in the teaching of Christianity is also an act of consecration to God of all human activities thoughts, affections, and actions.

The gesture is presently made by joining the fingers (thumb, index and middle finger down on the palm) and lifting the hand first to the forehead, then to the heart, to the right and left shoulder. In the scriptures right always represents good and left evil, and in the Creed, the Son is said to sit at the right hand of the Father—thus the signing of the right shoulder first. Eastern Christians sign themselves often especially at every mention of the name of the Holy Trinity and in conjunction with the metany (signing the cross over the full length of the body reaching the floor) or bow made to reverence holy things such as the altar or an icon.

The sign of the cross is a symbol of faith, a sign that shall be contradicted, a standard to lead on toward final victory as St. John of Damascus teaches: “For wherever the sign shall be, there also shall he be.”

## **The Historical Background of the Holy Cross and Its Veneration**

Apart from many other occasions on which the precious Cross of Christ is venerated in the Orthodox Church, there are two particular Feasts completely devoted to its veneration. The first is the Third Sunday of Great Lent, the second is the Feast of the raising (Exaltation) of the Holy Cross (September 14).

On the third Sunday of Great Lent, the anniversary of the finding of the Cross by St. Helen is commemorated. St. Helen was the mother of the first Byzantine emperor Constantine the Great. She was a devout Christian and supported the Christian cause with great zeal. In 326, at the age of 71, St. Helen visited the Holy Land where she discovered the Cross on which our Lord was crucified, according to the tradition widely circulated at the time and quoted by highly respected historians. She founded there the basilicas on the Mount of Olives and at Bethlehem, as well as other Churches in both Constantinople and Rome.

Originally, the anniversary of the finding of the Cross was set to be celebrated on March 6, but since March 6 usually falls within Great Lent and no Eucharist can be celebrated unless it falls on a Saturday or Sunday, the celebration of the anniversary was shifted to the Third Sunday of Lent.

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14) is one of the twelve major feast days of the Orthodox Church. The evidence of the Cross found by Saint Helen in the fourth century was followed by after it being taken by the Persians. It was later recovered by the Emperor Heraclius in the seventh century at which time it was returned and “elevated” in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, when healings were reported to also have taken place. From this historic event the “universal exaltation” of the Cross was celebrated annually in all of the churches of the Christian Empire. The day of the exaltation of the Cross became, as it were, the national holiday of the Eastern Christian Empire similar to the fourth of July in the United States. The Cross, the official emblem of the Empire which was placed on all public buildings and uniforms, was officially exalted on this day by the bishops and priests. They blessed the four directions of the universe with the Cross, while the faithful repeated the chanting of “Lord, have mercy.” This ritual is still done in Orthodox churches today at the end of the Divine Liturgy on September 14. The Troparion of this feast is “O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance. Grant victory to the Orthodox Christians over their adversaries; and by the virtue of Thy Cross, preserve Thy habitation.”