

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

—from the writings of Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite—

A universal and sacred custom that exists amongst Orthodox Christians is to make the sign of the Cross using their right hand before they begin anything.

This is consistent with what Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (†386 AD) teaches in his fourth catechetical lecture: “Do not be ashamed of the Cross of Christ. If others conceal the Cross, you should nonetheless seal yourself by making the sign of the Cross on your forehead. So that when the demons see this Regal emblem they start to tremble and flee far from you. Make the sign of the Cross when you eat and drink, when you are standing, when you lie down, when you get up, when you speak, when you walk—simply stated, before you do anything.”

Saint John Chrysostom (†407 AD) similarly encouraged Christians: “When you are about to exit the doors of your home, say this first: ‘I renounce you Satan, along with all your pomp and worship, and I unite myself to You, O Christ.’ Never leave without saying this first. And in following, make the sign of the Cross upon your forehead. In this manner, not only will no person be able to harm you, but not even the devil will be able to harm you when he sees you armed with such a weapon.”

The sign of the cross shields and protects us from demonic influence. Saint Athanasios (†373 AD) says: “With the sign of the Cross, all sorcery comes to an end.” And Saint Epiphanius (†403 AD) agrees: “Wherever there is the name of Christ and the sign of the Cross, the power of sorcery cannot prevail.”

If the demons ever try to stir up the passions within you and push you to sin, do not be afraid. Make the sign of the Cross, just as Saint John Chrysostom advises: “Do you believe in Christ? Seal yourself with the sign of the Cross and say, ‘*This* is my only weapon. *This* is the only medicine I have.’”

Have a Cross above the door of your home, and over your bed, both inside and outside your home, so that the demons flee when they see it. Thus Saint

John Chrysostom advises: "Instead of a sword, hang the Cross next to your bed; instead of a lock, have the Cross on your wall; instead of a fortress, embellish your home with a Cross." The truth of these words is confirmed by the following account: Once, a certain Jew was journeying by foot through a remote location. As the day came to a close and night started to set in, he decided to spend the night in an abandoned temple of the idols. However, he was afraid to stay alone in that deserted area. Knowing that Christians would make the sign of the Cross frequently to protect themselves from harm and evil spirits, he also made the sign of the Cross over his body and then laid down to sleep. When the demons who dwelled in that abandoned temple noticed that this person had the nerve to reside in their temple, they decided to go terrify him. But as soon as they approached him, frustrated, they started saying to each other, "He sealed himself with the sign of the Cross... we can't do anything to him!" After hearing this admission of the demons, this Jewish man became a Christian.

Referring to the sign of the Cross, the Prophet David says to the Lord: **"Thou hast given a sign unto them that fear Thee, that they may flee from before the face of the bow" (Ps. 59:6).** And in another verse the Prophet asks God the following: **"Work in me a sign unto good, and let them that hate me behold and be put to shame" (Ps. 85:17).** Foreseeing the power of Christ's Cross, the prophet Ezekiel speaks thus: **"Put a mark on their foreheads" (Ezk. 9:4).** And in the book of Revelation it is stated: **"Do not harm the earth... till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads" (Rev. 7:3).** "They were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth... **but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads"** (Rev. 9:4).

All this shows that the sign of the Venerable Cross is not a simple shape, but an instrument that transmits the energies of God. The great power of the Cross is not due to the shape itself, but to Christ who was crucified upon it. It is from Him whom the Cross draws its strength and grace.

Saint John Chrysostom advises parents to teach their children how to make the sign of the Cross from very early on. And even before they are able to

do this on their own, the parents should take the hand of the child and make the sign of the Cross on their forehead and the rest of their body.

When making the sign of the Cross with our right hand, we first unite our first three fingers (thumb, index, and middle fingers) and place our last two fingers to the palm of our hand. In doing so, with our three fingers united we confess the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God; and with the other two fingers we confess the doctrine of the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. Then, we raise our right hand and with our three fingers we touch our forehead; then we lower our hand and touch our belly; then we raise our hand to our right shoulder; and finally we move it horizontally to our left shoulder. In doing so, we confess our entire Christian Orthodox faith. We proclaim that God Who is without beginning and without end (just as a sphere, in this case our head) and Who was up in Heaven descended upon the earth and became incarnate within the womb of the Virgin Mary, and He then ascended back into Heaven after His Resurrection, and He will come again to judge the living and the dead. Saint Kosmas the Aitolos (†1779 AD) gives the following explanation: “Just as the Holy Trinity is glorified in heaven by the angels, in the same manner unite the three fingers of your right hand. And since you cannot ascend into heaven to worship God, raise your hand to your forehead (because your head signifies heaven) and say: ‘Just as the angels glorify the Holy Trinity in heaven, I Your servant also glorify and worship the Holy Trinity.’ Then lower your hand to your belly and say, ‘I worship and glorify you my Lord, for accepting to be incarnate in the womb of the Theotokos on account of our sins.’ Then place your hand on your right shoulder and say, ‘Please, My God, forgive me and place me on Your right along with the righteous.’ Then placing your hand on your left shoulder say, ‘I beg you my Lord, do not place me on your left with the sinners.’”

Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite says that all Christians should carry on them a Cross made from wood, or gold, or silver, or another metal, as a means of sanctification and as protection from all harm. For, Christians of the first centuries (such as Saint Mardarios (†296 AD) and Saint Pangratios) had this sacred custom of wearing a cross around their neck.