

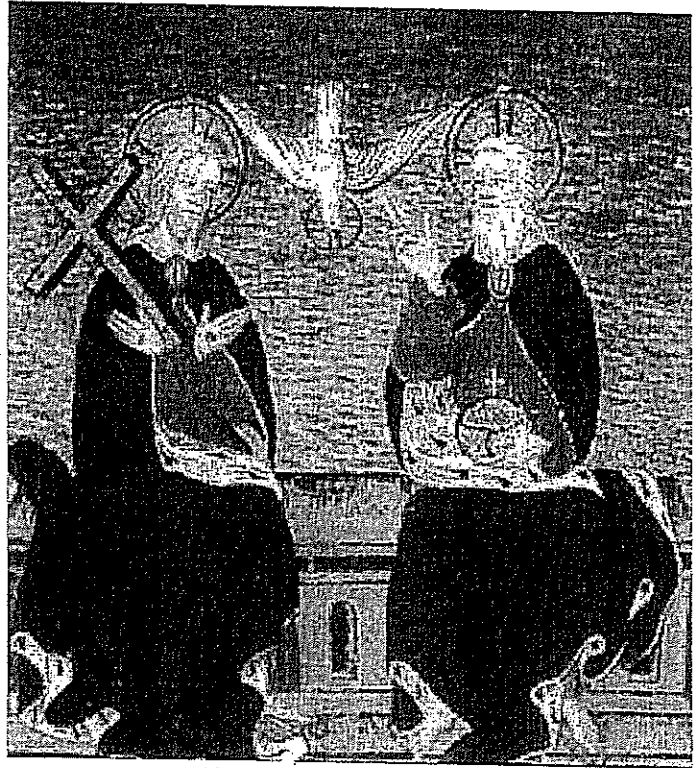
Lord,
teach us
how to pray

Praying in words and signs: The Sign of the Cross

by Victor Hoagland, C.P.
based on the New Catholic Catechism 1077-1109;
see also: The Sign of the Cross - for children

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Christian prayer is modeled after the prayer of Jesus. Like his, it should come from the heart. When he prayed Jesus used words and signs and sometimes cries, as expressions of his heart. And so do we when we pray; our hearts too look for an outward voice.



The Holy Trinity

The words and signs that Jesus used when he prayed often came from his own Jewish tradition, from what he learned in his family and from others. As for ourselves, we turn to our Christian tradition for guidance in prayer. We believe it is a tradition inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it is also an outgrowth of the Jewish tradition of prayer that nourished Jesus himself.

The Christian tradition of prayer has a wisdom all its own, with many different forms and expressions. Some basic prayers of our Christian tradition, however, have a special place. The Sign of the Cross is one example.

In the Catholic church and other Christian churches the Sign of the Cross is an important part of personal and public prayer. It originated in the earliest days of Christianity and so it is centuries old. It is the first sign made on us at Baptism and the last sign made as we pass to our future life. It's a vital part of liturgical prayer and



the sacraments. With the Sign of the Cross we begin and end our prayers.

A Blessing of the Triune God

We call it a blessing. We say we "bless ourselves." Tracing with our hand the figure of the cross on our forehead, our breast, our shoulders, we bless ourselves:

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

The Sign of the Cross expresses blessing. It symbolizes God blessing us, God embracing us with blessings. And in this same sign we express our belief in God from whom all our blessings flow. In the Sign of the Cross we embrace our good God with mind and heart and all of our strength.

God blesses. The Jewish scriptures describe God as, above all, the One who blesses. God blessed Noah and saved the world from the flood. God blessed Abraham and Sara with blessings more than the stars in the sky. God blessed the Jewish people, redeeming them from the slavery of Egypt. Life itself and all creation are God's gifts.

And so the Jewish tradition of prayer always approaches God as One who blesses. "I will bless the Lord at all times," the psalmist prays. As we are blessed by God, so we bless the Lord in return.

The Christian tradition of prayer follows this same pattern, but in addition it praises the One who blesses for another incomparable blessing: the blessing of Jesus Christ. "Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing." (Eph 1,3) He is "the Word who made the universe, the Savior sent to redeem us." In Jesus Christ God appears as our Friend and Brother. With the Father he sends the Holy Spirit upon us "to complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace." In Jesus, God has revealed to us the source of all blessings.

When we bless ourselves with the Sign of the Cross we remember the One who blesses us: the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Blessed by the Cross

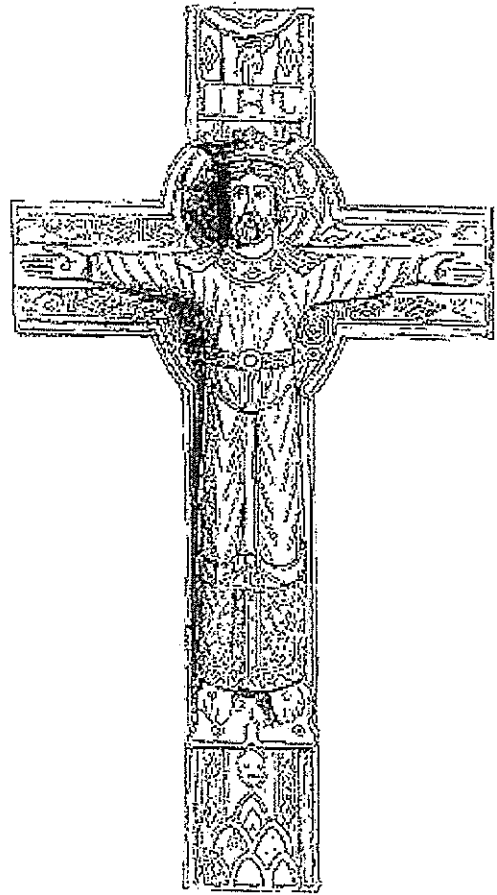
With the Sign of the Cross we recall in particular the blessing of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We trace a cross on ourselves, the cross of Jesus. His death on the Cross was an outpouring of love for us. The Sign of the Cross is a reminder of his

love, a love found not only in the past, but here and now, as we make this sign upon ourselves; for the love of Jesus Christ abides forever.

The Sign of the Cross is a wonderful daily expression of our relationship with God. God is the One who blesses. This prayer reminds us that each day, in good times and bad, in danger and sorrow, God's care and blessings are never far from us.

Tracing this holy sign on our forehead, our hearts and our shoulders, we remember we are blessed in mind and heart and all our being. We can approach God with confidence through Jesus Christ whose ever present love this holy sign recalls.

"Come to me," God says through this prayer, "do not be afraid. Before you take one step, I reach to embrace you with blessings in my hands."



See also:
The Sign of the Cross - for children

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