

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS IN THE MASS

HUBERT M. HORAN, O.P.



IN THE THIRD CENTURY, Tertullian recorded in his work, *De Corona Militis*, "At every step and movement, whenever we come in or go out, at the bath, at table, whatever we are doing, we make the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads." From this, it is very evident that the early Christians realized how efficacious was the use of the Sign of the Cross. Christ died on the Cross to redeem us. The night before He died, however, He instituted the Mass so that we might have on earth in an unbloody manner a commemoration and continuation of the Sacrifice of the Cross. In order to apply to us more abundantly the merits of Christ's death, the Church uses the Sign of the Cross extensively in all her liturgical functions, but especially in the Mass. In this service alone, it is made about forty times.

The occasions when the celebrant of the Mass makes the Sign of the Cross may be conveniently divided into six groups. He signs himself at the beginning of Mass and at the end of certain prayers. He makes the Sign of the Cross over the Missal, over the unconsecrated species, over the consecrated species, with the consecrated Host when distributing Holy Communion, and over the faithful at the end of Mass. We shall treat of these in this order.

First of all, the celebrant signs himself when he begins the prayers at the foot of the Altar. Well does he realize the sublimity of the Sacrifice and his own unworthiness to offer it. He needs divine aid at this all-important time. In the name of the Crucified Jesus he calls upon the Holy Trinity for assistance. He again signs himself when he is reciting the *Misereatur* to signify that the remission of his sins is obtained through the merits of Christ's Passion and death. The next sign is made at the beginning of the Introit, the first prayer of the Mass. Before the prayers at the foot of the Altar were added, the Introit was the first prayer of the Mass. This sign thus indicated the priest's hope that through it he might receive all the graces necessary to perform the Holy Sacrifice worthily and becomingly. After the Introit, the priest recites the *Kyrie Eleison* and the *Gloria in Excelsis*. At the conclusion of this angelic hymn he again signs himself. Liturgists differ in explaining this sign: some hold that it is a symbolical acknowledgement of the glory of the Holy

Trinity whose praises have been sung in the hymn ; others, a worthy ending for so sublime a prayer.

The Collects of the Mass are then said, followed by the Epistle, Gradual, Tract, Alleluia and Sequence according to the liturgical season or the Mass being celebrated. Then after a short prayer at the center of the Altar, the priest proceeds to the left side to begin the Holy Gospel. Since the Gospel is the word of God and a record of Christ's life, passion and death, it is sacred and worthy of our reverence and respect. To denote this, the priest signs himself on the forehead, lips and breast as he begins the Gospel. The sign on the forehead signifies that the holy Gospel should be first in our minds that we may know about Our Lord, together with understanding and believing all that the Gospel teaches. The sign on the lips signifies that we should be able and willing to profess openly the words of the Gospel. The sign on the breast signifies that we should live in conformity with the teachings and life of Christ our Saviour. When the priest concludes the Gospel, the celebrant in the Roman rite kisses the text ; Carthusians kiss the margin of the Book, and Dominicans sign themselves with the Sign of the Cross and kiss the text. On some occasions the Credo or Nicene Creed follows the Gospel. As he recites the final verse of the Creed, the priest signs himself. Some liturgical writers consider this only a fitting Sign with which to end and seal that brief profession of faith, others conclude that it is a shield and buckler against all adversaries and dangers to our faith.

With the conclusion of the Credo, the first part of the Mass, known as the Mass of the Catechumens, comes to an end. Here, in the early days of the Church, it was customary to dismiss the Catechumens, that is, those who were preparing for Baptism, and also public sinners. Both groups were considered unworthy to assist at the more sacred acts in the Mass. Then the priest recites the Offertory prayers, which are followed by the offering of the species of bread and wine. Several variations of this ceremony should be noted. In the Roman rite, the priest offers the host, and, going to the Epistle corner places water and wine in the chalice, blessing only the water. The Carthusians put water and wine in the Chalice before Mass and bless both with a single cross before offering the host and chalice together. The Carmelites bless the host and wine immediately after uncovering the chalice. The Dominicans place wine and water in the chalice before Mass, blessing only the water. When only the water is blessed, it represents the people who need sanctification through the Sign of the Cross. When both the wine and water are blessed, it is done so that in virtue of the Sacrifice of Calvary, they may be

changed into the Precious Blood of Christ. The offering of the oblations is followed by the Secret prayers, the Preface and the Sanctus. Concluding the Sanctus with the words "Benedictus qui venit etc.," the priest again signs himself not only to conclude this prayer worthily but also to indicate that Christ came as a victorious Conqueror and Prince of Peace to establish His kingdom by means of the Cross. And now He comes down on the Altar to renew mystically the Sacrifice of the Cross.

Immediately after the Sanctus, the Canon begins. This is the most sacred part of the Mass because within it the actual consecration of the species occurs. During the Canon the Sign of the Cross is made during seven different prayers. During the *Te igitur*, the first prayer of the Canon, the priest prays that the Eternal Father through His Son our Lord will vouchsafe to receive and bless the oblations which he calls "... these gifts, these offerings, these holy and unblemished sacrifices." The Angelic Doctor explains these crosses as follows: "The priest in celebrating the Mass makes use of the Sign of the Cross which was ended upon the Cross. Now Christ's Passion was accomplished in certain stages. First of all there was Christ's betrayal, which was the work of God, of Judas and the Jews; and this is signified by the triple sign of the Cross at the words: "... these gifts, these offerings, these holy and unblemished sacrifices."¹ Then the priest prays for the Holy Father, his Bishop and all the faithful, and especially for those who are present at the Mass. Next the priest asks the Blessed Mother, the Apostles, certain Saints and Martyrs and then all the Saints to obtain approbation for his sacrifice.

After asking the intercession of the Church Triumphant, the celebrant makes a fourfold request directly to our Lord, to accept this oblation of our servitude, to dispose our days in peace, to preserve us from eternal damnation and to rank us among the number of Thy elect. Then he immediately adds the final petition in behalf of his oblation, asking God to bless, approve and ratify the offerings that they may become for us the Body and Blood of Christ. During this prayer, the priest makes the Sign of the Cross five times: three times conjointly over the bread and wine, once separately over each. St. Thomas explains that these signs signify the selling of Christ. "He was sold to the Scribes and to the Pharisees: and to signify this, the threefold Sign of the Cross is repeated at the words: bless, approve and ratify. Or again, to signify the price for which He was sold, viz., thirty pence. And the double cross is added at the words ... Body

¹ *Summa*, III, q. 83, art. 5, ad 3.

and Blood . . . etc., to signify the persons of Judas the seller and of Christ who was sold."² Upon concluding the prayer, *Quam oblationem* the priest proceeds to the actual consecration of the bread and wine. This is the most important act in the Mass for it is the renewal of the words and acts of Christ Himself at the Last Supper. In obedience to the command of Christ the priest re-enacts the entire scene for the faithful. Just as Christ did, so also does the priest bless each species before consecrating it. These crosses according to St. Thomas represent the foreshadowing of the Passion at the Last Supper. The priest makes the sign as he says the words, "He blessed."

The prayer immediately following the Consecration, the *Unde et memores*, is a review of the Life of our Divine Lord for the Eternal Father, for we ask the Father to accept our Sacrifice in view of the Passion of Our Lord, His Resurrection from the dead and His glorious Ascension into heaven. To express the worthiness of the consecrated species, the priest calls them, "a pure Victim, a holy Victim, a spotless Victim, the holy bread of eternal life, and the cup of everlasting salvation." Again the priest makes the Sign of the Cross five times: three over the Consecrated Species together, then one over each. In this instance, however, the signs have a different significance than previously. Here we are offering Christ as the Victim of our Sacrifice; here then the Crosses represent the five wounds the Sacred Body incurred during Christ's Passion. The next prayer is a supplication to the Eternal Father to accept our Sacrifice as He did those of Abel, Abraham and Melchisedech in the Old Law. Then the priest asks that the sacrifice be carried to God by the hands of His holy Angel to His Altar on high ". . . that as many as shall partake of the most sacred Body and Blood of Thy Son may be filled with every blessing." At the mention of the Body and Blood the priest makes a double Sign of the Cross over the Consecrated Species and then signs himself. This threefold sign represents the outstretching of Christ's Body on the Cross, the shedding of His Precious Blood and the fruits of His Passion.

In a previous prayer, the priest interceded with the Church Triumphant; he has asked divine aid for the Church Militant. Now he prays for the Church Suffering, who are most worthy of our prayers since they are unable to aid themselves. Then he adds a petition that he and all other sinners may through the merits of the holy Apostles and Martyrs, some of whom he names, may be admitted into heaven, "not in consideration of our merits, but of Thy own gratuitous par-

² *Summa Theologica*, loc. cit.

don." This petition is concluded "through Christ Our Lord" and the next prayer continues the same thought by requesting that "by Whom, O Lord, Thou didst always create, sanctify, quicken, bless and give us all these good things. Through Him, and with Him, and in Him is unto Thee, God the Father Almighty, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, all honor and glory. Forever and ever. Amen." During this short prayer, the priest makes the Sign of the Cross at the words "sanctify, quicken and bless" to represent the threefold prayer of Christ for His persecutors, for deliverance from death and His entrance into glory. At the words "through Him, and with Him and in Him," he makes the threefold Sign of the Cross to signify the three hours that the Sacred Victim spent in His agony. Lastly at the mention of the Eternal Father and the Holy Ghost he makes a two-fold sign, one over the Host, the other over the chalice to signify or to recall the separation of the Soul of Christ from His Body.

This prayer, the last of the Canon, is followed by the greatest of all prayers, the Lord's Prayer. This petition for our needs given us by Christ Himself is followed by the prayers which are the priest's immediate preparation for Holy Communion. At the conclusion of the first prayer for peace, the priest makes a threefold Sign of the Cross to represent the glorious Resurrection of Christ on the third day after His death. After the priest concludes these prayers, he receives the Sacred Body and Blood. Then he distributes the life-giving Body of Christ to the Faithful. Before he places the Host on the tongue of the communicant, the priest makes the Sign of the Cross with It to indicate the intimate relation between the two Sacrifices.

After the Communion of the Faithful, the priest purifies the Chalice, recites the Communion antiphon and the Post-Communion prayers. Just before reciting the Last Gospel, the priest says the *Placeat tibi*, a prayer of praise and thanksgiving and formerly the final prayer of the Mass. Then in all Masses except Requiem Masses, he blesses the faithful in the Name of the Holy Trinity, a blessing given in the name of the Church by her lawful minister for the good of our souls. Then the priest recites the last Gospel which is usually taken from St. John. At the beginning, he signs the Altar and himself as he did before the first Gospel, at the end signs himself.

With this prayer, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is concluded. This sacrifice is, as Christ intended, the continuation and commemoration of the Sacrifice of the Cross. Christ died on the Cross to save us. Therefore it is fitting that the Cross should be so prominent in the renewal of His sacrifice on the altar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Summa Theologica, III^a, q. 83. Trans. by Fathers of English Province. R. T. Washbourne, Ltd., London, England, 1913.

Dunney, Rev. Joseph E., *The Mass*. Macmillan Company, New York, 1941.

O'Brien, Rev. John A., A.M., *The History of the Mass*. Benziger Brothers, New York, 1879.

Strapper and Bair, *Catholic Liturgics*. St. Anthony Guild Press, Paterson, New Jersey, 1935.

Gehr, Nicholas, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*. B. Herder Company, St. Louis, 1902.