

THE HOLY CROSS

The Holy Cross holds a unique place, both in the Christian faith and in the worship of the Orthodox Church. It is the symbol of love and sacrifice, as well as foreshadowing the Resurrection. It has influenced Christian art, architecture, painting, poetry, and music, more than anything else.

From an early age, majestic churches were built in the shape of a cross, with a cross erected at the top of each one. The iconostasis and everything used in common worship are decorated with the cross. Ornate crosses of blessing are placed on the Holy Table (the Altar), for the celebrant Bishop or Priest to bless the people. The cross is worn by newly baptized Christians to protect them (from visible and invisible threats) and strengthen them in the spiritual struggle. It is used to bless the waters. Behind the Holy Table, which represents the Empty Tomb of the Risen Lord, the Holy Cross stands as a symbol of His crucifixion, His sacrifice for the salvation of the world.

Almost from the beginning, the tradition emerged of the Priest or Bishop blessing the faithful with their hand in the sign of the cross. When the Celebrant begins the Divine Liturgy, he starts by making the sign of the cross with the Holy Gospel over the Holy Table (Altar), while praying "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father..." This same movement occurs before all other Holy Sacraments, but also in every blessing that is done, be it the Gospel, the Holy Gifts or the cross of blessing.

The laity can also make the sign of the cross. Joining the three fingers of their right hand (in the form of the Trinity), they trace the points of the cross on their bodies. Starting from the forehead, and then chest, followed by the shoulders (right shoulder to left shoulder). We make the sign of the cross in many different situations, such as entering a holy church, venerating Icons, and before and after each Holy Service. We also do so during the Services, particularly the Divine Liturgy, such as: When the Small Entrance of the Holy Gospel and Great Entrance of the Holy Gifts take place; before and after the reading of the Holy Gospel; whenever the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are invoked; and especially before and after receiving Holy Communion. There are also times where we are not to make our cross, such as when the Celebrant incenses us (we are to just bow), or when we receive Antidoron from the Celebrant's hand (we just bow and kiss it). This also applies when we ask the Bishop or Priest for a blessing (we just bow and kiss his hand).

There are many instances outside of the Holy Services or church where the sign of the cross can be made. We can cross ourselves when we wake up in the morning, and before we go to bed. The cross can start and end our meals, as well as our work. The faithful can cross themselves before travel (starting their car and praying to God for protection), and in any situation where we need to thank the Lord or ask Him for something. By sealing our prayers with the cross, our bodies as well as our souls are turned to God. This is something that should be done with reverence, not with dry formality or sloppiness. Our minds and whole being should turn to God in that short moment of making the cross. Whether it is to praise God, ask His forgiveness, seek His help, or to invoke His protection, this prayer can be done for anything that we need.

Experience has shown that many miracles have resulted (even by ordinary Christians) from making the sign of the cross with faith. One amazing example: There is a Christian who was arrested, and then given a deadly poison to drink. He made the sign of the cross over the cup, invoked the power of the Lord, and drank the poison. He remained unharmed, confirming the Lord's words: *"if they drink anything deadly (poisonous) it will by no means hurt them"* (Mark 16:18). Others have been protected from Satan's terror by the cross, and with its power "will cast out demons," as the Lord also said (verse 17). This is why our Church sings: ***"Lord, You gave us Your Cross as a weapon against the devil. He quakes and trembles, unable to bear the might of its power"*** (Orthros, 8th Tone).

My dear brothers and sisters, the Lord has given us this powerful weapon against every attack of the devil and his instruments, as well as any adversity in our lives. As the Holy Fathers teach (through experience), the Cross covers all Christians. It is a source of sanctification and strength; it supports the faithful; it gives hope; it heals the sick; and protects us always, saving us from evil.

The Holy Cross, which the Church offers us today for adoration, is the guardian of the entire universe, and a harbor of salvation. It is a ladder that takes us to Heaven, and so much more.

May we take refuge in the Holy Cross of the Lord, every day and in every situation, be it danger or need. We do this with the certainty that we too will see miracles in our lives. Amen.

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