

Why do we trace the sign of the cross over our bodies?

Mass begins and ends with what is commonly called the "Sign of the Cross". In our Roman rite, this sign is made with our open, right hand, touching first our forehead, then down to the bottom of our rib cage, then touching our left shoulder then the right shoulder creating a "cross" on our body. As we do the actions, we say the words: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This simple gesture has a deeper meaning than most of us know.

Primarily, when we make the sign, we are professing a mini version of the creed — our belief in the Father, and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. It is a statement of our faith, we are claiming the cross of Christ and all that it represents for our self.

In baptism, we die with Christ and rise to new life. The sign reminds us of our baptism and that it unites us to the body of Christ. It is the outward sign that we are joining to the body of believers becoming one, with Christ as our head.

This sign is a mark of discipleship. Jesus says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." The word that the Church Fathers used for the sign of the cross is a Greek word, the same as what a slave owner put on a slave, a shepherd put on a sheep and a general put on a soldier. The sign of the cross declares that I belong to Christ. To be a disciple we are under Christ's leadership and we don't belong to ourselves. By making this sign, we're saying to the Lord, "I want to obey you; I belong to you. You direct all my decisions. I will always be obedient to God's law, Christ's teachings and the Church."

When suffering comes, the sign of the cross is a sign of acceptance. We remember that Jesus became a man and suffered for us and that we participate in Christ's suffering. The sign says, "I am willing to embrace suffering to share in Christ's suffering."

One of the main teachings of the early Church Fathers is that the sign of the cross is a declaration of defense against the devil. When we sign our self, we are declaring to the devil, "Hands off. I belong to Christ; he is my protection." It's both an offensive and defensive tool. The Church Fathers say if we are angry, full of lust, fearful, emotional or grappling with other problems, make the sign when tempted and it will help dispel the problem.

Let us remember to use this powerful tool often in our lives, not just at Mass.