

TRINITY NEWS

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Notes on the Liturgy 9. The Sign of the Cross.

Humans communicate through body language almost as much as they do through speech and body language includes among other things, gestures, like waving, saluting, high-fiving, thumbs-upping, clapping and making the Sign of the Cross.

When you think of it this way, it's easy to see how making the Sign of the Cross is a bodily prayer, a prayer to God, the Holy Trinity, to be present, whether we make the Sign ourselves ('cross' ourselves) or whether it's made over us by a priest or bishop.

In the Liturgy it can be a way of responding, a sort of bodily Amen, for example as when we make the Sign of the Cross at the words "Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord," or "Sanctify us also, that we may faithfully receive...." (Rite I – "be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction") and in response to the priest's blessing at the end of the service. At the gospel proclamation we sign our forehead, lips and breast as a prayer to receive it in our minds, proclaim it with our lips, and guard it forever in our hearts.

But making the Sign of the Cross is not confined to liturgical settings any more than other forms of prayer. Many make it first thing in the morning and before turning off the lights at night, before and after they pray in language, or anywhere and any time that they reach out to God.

The Sign of the Cross is one of the most ancient of Christian practices; we know that it was in use by the 2nd Century throughout the Church and was pretty much universal. It is still universal in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and widely used among Anglicans and Lutherans.

On the practical side, the Sign of the Cross is made in the Western Church with the thumb and two fingers (symbolizing the Holy Trinity) touching first the forehead, then the chest, the left shoulder and finally the right shoulder. In the Eastern Church, the right shoulder comes first then the left.

Making the Sign of the Cross is, of course, not mandatory, and no one should be made to feel that it is. But it is another way of praying with your body, of participating actively with what's going on at the altar, and of signaling to the world your allegiance to Christ.