

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 8/19/2022

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Do you make the sign of the cross? In worship? Before praying? At any other time?

Many Lutherans avoid this practice because it is “too Catholic.” Unfortunately, because of the hostility that existed (and still does in varying degrees in many places), Lutherans avoid those things that appear Catholic and vice versa. Yet, prior to the Reformation (apart from the great schism which divided the Eastern Orthodox from the Western Orthodox or Roman Catholic), there was pretty much only Roman Catholic, so everything worship related was, well, Catholic. Nevertheless, when the break occurred between the Protestants (protesting) and the Roman Catholic Church, Lutherans suddenly shunned many things which were perceived as “Catholic” behaviors even though they were really Christian behaviors.

One of these practices is that of making the sign of the cross or crossing oneself which is often the Catholic description. Why make the sign of the cross? And when should we cross ourselves? And how?

At baptism, the sign of the cross is made on the baptized person’s forehead, usually with oil, followed by the spoken words, “*Name*, child of GOD, you have been sealed by the HOLY SPIRIT, and marked with the cross of CHRIST forever.” At baptismal conferences prior to baptism, I tell the candidate and/or their parents and sponsors that this cross is like an invisible tattoo that GOD can see and always know that this is one of GOD’S baptized children. Making the sign of the cross is a way of connecting ourselves back to our baptism as we remember this marking and that we were baptized “in the name of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT.” In baptism, the water is applied three times, with each occasion including the naming of a member of the TRINITY. Making the sign of the cross also helps us to remember this cross on our forehead which links us to CHRIST’S death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. So, crossing ourselves is a way of claiming the forgiveness that GOD has bestowed on us through JESUS CHRIST.

Making the sign of the cross can be done whenever one wishes to recall their baptism and forgiveness. We do it several times in worship, often at the beginning and/or the end of the worship service. But it can be done before prayer, at a time of crisis or emergency (and it’s a good substitute for saying, “Oh, my GOD), as a prayer to ward off evil, or anytime our triune GOD is invoked or called upon: “In the name of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT.” You can even make the cross over another person to call for GOD’S blessing to be upon them, either in the air or with your finger upon their forehead.

When we make the sign of the cross for ourselves, we start with our finger or hand on our forehead, the place where the cross was first placed upon us. It is also the high point, closest to GOD and symbolizes our desire to again invite GOD into our lives. Then one moves the hand from the forehead down to the heart as a reminder that GOD dwells in us and that we love GOD. Finally, one completes the cross by moving the hand from shoulder to shoulder to finalize the cross and to symbolize GOD’S grace and mercy moving out into the world, and that reminding us that it can do so through us. And it doesn’t matter if you go left-to-right or right-to-left.

The sign of the cross is a wonderful *Christian* action to demonstrate our faith and, again, to connect us back to our baptism. We need not fear if others perceive it as a Roman Catholic action. In fact, it might create an opportunity to explain the differences between Lutheran and Roman Catholics and the fact that we are both Christian. It is not a requirement, but if it helps you in your faith, as a way of recalling that you are a baptized child of GOD, or to outwardly claim JESUS as your LORD, feel free to do so and do so boldly.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey