

National Spiritual Assistant
Order of Franciscan Seculars - Oceania

St Francis Friary
96 Catherine St
Leichhardt NSW 2040 Australia



Friary Phone: (02) 9569 5747
Mobile Phone: 0412 162 946
E-mail: johnncap@ozemail.com.au

Monthly Spiritual Message September 2014

First Teachers of their Children. Part 2.

The Sign of the Cross

The Sign of the Cross is for Catholics, the simplest, but most profound profession of faith. It is our way of recalling the passion of Christ and applying it to ourselves. It is a profession of our belief in the Most Holy Trinity.

In touching our forehead we proclaim that we believe with all our mind; in touching our chest we believe with all our heart and in touching our shoulders we believe with our whole being, that Jesus Christ has died for us on the Cross. We believe he is the second person of the Most Holy Trinity, who was incarnated as a child because of love for us and who died for us on the Cross to restore our freedom and showed us the way to heaven. It is not extreme to say that this sign is an expression of our whole Catholic faith. Let us make it with clear intention and certain faith.

Making the Sign of the Cross on the forehead, with the thumb, can be traced back with certainty to 200AD, but quickly it became a larger gesture. St Francis, so attuned to the Church, most probably followed the instructions of Pope Innocent III (1198 – 1216) in making the Sign of the Cross, but they are a little confusing, showing that the action was not stabilised at that time:

The Sign of the Cross is made with three fingers, because the signing is done together with the invocation of the Trinity. ... This is how it is done: from above to below, and from the right to the left, because Christ descended from the heavens to the earth, and from the Jews (right) He passed to the Gentiles (left).

Others, however, make the sign of the cross from the left to the right, because from misery (left) we must cross over to glory (right), just as Christ crossed over from death to life and from Hades to Paradise. [Some priests] do it this way so that they and the people will be signing themselves in the same way. You can easily verify this — picture the priest facing the people for the blessing — when we make the sign of the cross over the people, it is from left to right...

Pope Innocent's style of the thumb, index and middle finger being brought to a point, symbolizing the Trinity, seems today to be very Byzantine and is certainly very Russian Orthodox. However, before the 17th Century Russians used only two fingers, index and middle finger, (symbolizing the Two natures of Christ) with the thumb holding down the ring finger and the little finger. (symbolizing the Trinity) This was also the position of the hand when a priest gave a blessing in the Bazantine Liturgy. St John Vianney said a sincere Sign of the Cross "*makes all hell tremble*". I think that most Catholics today do not think much about it, specifically in terms of fingers, they just make a sign of the cross, but still others say that using the whole hand, five fingers reminds them of the five wounds of Christ.

A Blessing with the Sign of the Cross has always been seen as a specifically powerful sign when given by a priest or bishop whose hands have been consecrated at ordination. Indeed, first blessings by a newly ordained priest or bishop are considered something very special as is the first blessing of

a newly proclaimed Pope: “*Urbi et Orbi – To the City and to the World*” which carries a Plenary Indulgence.

As we enter the church we make the Sign of the Cross using Holy Water, “*which through merits of our Lord Jesus Christ obtain from God the remission of our venial sins.*” (Ref: The Daily Missal, Imprimatur, Belgium 1930) It does this because Holy Water is a sacramental of the Precious Blood of Christ.

The Sign of the Cross coupled with the blessing of the high priest Aron, the brother of Moses, as we find it in the “Blessing of St Francis to Brother Leo” takes on a prophetic and very powerful meaning, because God showed his face to us in the person of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. In this the Aronic prophetic blessing is fulfilled and yet carried forward to our personal encounter with the merciful God.

*May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May He show His face to you and have mercy on you.
May He turn His countenance to you and give you peace.
The Lord bless you!*

It has always been a Catholic tradition for parents to bless their small children before they go to sleep.

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap
National Spiritual Assistant

PLEASE distribute this Monthly Spiritual Message
to all MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL OFS FRATERNITY and Spiritual Assistants