



The sign of the Cross

Its Power, Meaning and Miracles.

Introduction

Twenty centuries ago the Cross was an instrument of dishonourable punishment and of frightful death. The Romans condemned violent convicts to the punishment of crucifixion.

Today the Cross is paramount in the whole life of pious Christians, and of the whole life of our Church, as an instrument of sacrifice, salvation, joy, sanctity and grace. As Saint Chrysostom writes, "this cursed and abominable symbol of the worst punishment now has become a desirable and beloved. One sees it everywhere. "On the holy Altar, in the ordination of priests, in the divine liturgy, in the homes, at the markets, in the deserts and on the roads; at sea in the ships and the islands; on the beds and vestments, at the weddings, at banquets, on gold and silver utensils, on jewelry and on frescos..... So desirable, this gift has become to all an inexpressible joy.

Truly, wherever one looks, whether inside or outside the Church one sees the sign of the Cross. As a visible symbol but also as a sacred gesture. The sign of the Cross dominates in the life of the Church. But why?

Because from the time God, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself was nailed to the Cross and died for the salvation of the world, this instrument of punishment became an instrument of salvation. "... for no more it is an indictment to punishment but a proven trophy of our salvation" says a troparion. The object of shame became the glory of the Church. The symbol of a curse became "the release payment for the ancient curse". The wood, from mourning and death, became "sign of joy" and "treasury of life". And all these because upon the wood of the Cross with His immaculate body, the Lord nailed also our sins. As saint Paul writes; He gave us "the document erasing all our trespasses..... and nailed it on the Cross".

The Cross of Christ reconciled us with our heavenly Father, from Whom the devil separated us, by deceiving our forefathers. The Cross of Christ opened the kingdom of heavens to us, which, up until the Crucifixion, Hades swallowed insatiably even the righteous. That is why it has so much power and grace, the power and grace of Christ, which while He was crucified, He transferred it in a mystical and incomprehensible way to His holy Cross as the hymnology wisely tells us. "Your Cross, Christ, being visible wood in essence, yet it represents a divine reign and appearing perceptible to the world, noetically miraculously works our salvation...."

The Cross therefore has become the symbol of Christ Himself. Symbol that causes the demons to tremble.

The invaluable worth of the Holy Cross

If therefore it is so, why then there are people who deny, detest and dishonour the Cross? "For those who trespass" writes the Apostle Paul, "to whom I would tell, now even crying I say, the enemies of the Cross of Christ, their end is perdition".

Truly, certain heretics are "enemies of the Cross". They say, the Cross is a tool of crime and granting it honour constitutes idolatry. They even maintain that the early Church did not use the sign of the Cross.

This view is fallacious. Firstly, because our Church does not honour the Cross as though a random geometrical shape. Secondly, because the honour given to the sign of the Cross already has its beginning from apostolic times. Thirdly, because God Himself showed with supernatural events on different occasions and times that the Cross is His symbol. And fourthly, because with the sign of the Cross were performed and are performed amazing miracles.

Let us however take things in their order.

A. The honour given to the Cross is inseparably tied with our Crucified and Resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ.

Our Church does not honour the Cross by itself, as a simple sign, separate from the crucified Lord. This would have truly been idolatry. She honours it as a symbol of the great sacrifice of Christ from which flows grace, sanctity and the salvation of man. She kisses and venerates it as the sign of the Son of man (Matt 24:30) that has received mystically and incomprehensibly as we already said, the grace and His power.

The faithful seeing the sign of the Cross, making the sign of the Cross, venerating the "type" and symbol of the Cross, sees with the eyes of his soul and worships the crucified Christ. "We do not embrace the Cross as God but we demonstrate this way the sincere disposition of our soul towards the crucified" writes Saint Hieronymos. Saint John Damascene also clarifies that apart from the holy Wood, we venerate also the type of the holy and life giving Cross, even if it is made from different matter, of course not honouring the matter, God forbid, but the type, as symbol of Christ".

How justified are the Holy Fathers, can be determined below, testing the sanctifying and miraculous power of the sign of the Cross.

B. The honour to the sign of the Cross existed always and from the beginning in the Church.

The beginning of the honour accorded the sign of the Cross disappears in the depth of early Christianity, once it was delivered from the apostolic times.

Saint Paul the apostle was condemned to death by crucifixion, like the Lord. He so much honoured the sign of the Cross that he begged his executioners "I am not worthy to be crucified upright like my Christ. He was crucified like that to look at the earth, because He was going to hades to free the souls that were there. However, crucify me with my head down, so that I look to heaven, where I am about to go"

The holy apostle Andrew, the first called, when he saw the Cross of his martyrdom (X-shaped) cried out with awe and emotion: "Welcome, o Cross that was sanctified by the body of Christ and who, with His members, as though pearls, you were adorned! Before my Lord was nailed on you, you were formidable to people. Now though all the faithful know how much grace hides within you, I approach you with no fear and with joy. Eagerly receive me too, the disciple of the crucified Christ..... Oh blessed and most desirable Cross, take me from the people and deliver me to my Teacher"!

The antiquity of use of the sign of the Cross is confirmed by one of the great apologetics, Tertullian (ca 160-220AD) who wrote: "Wherever we are going to arrive and whenever we need to begin from, when we arrive and when we depart, when we put on our shoes, when we wash ourselves, when we eat, when we light the lamp, when we go to bed, when we sit on the stool, when we begin a conversation we make the sign of the Cross on our forehead" (De corona 3, 11)

C. God reveals the power of the Holy Cross with supernatural events.

The Lord Himself with supernatural events and amazing revelations revealed during different occasions in a vociferous manner that the sign of the Cross constitutes His symbol and the invincible trophy of the faithful. We shall present a few examples from the innumerable ones that are preserved in the ecclesiastic history, the holy Fathers and the book of Saints.

1. The well known ecclesiastic historian Eusebius of Caesaria (+340), a contemporary of Saint Constantine, describes lucidly and irrefutably the most renown event of the appearance of the bright Cross in the presence of Constantine the Great with the inscription "By this, Conquer" and in fact during broad daylight with all the men of his army as witnesses.

2. Apart from the above supernatural appearance of the sign of the Cross another one happened, again in front of innumerable witnesses when Constantios, the son of Saint Constantine was king and Saint Cyril was archbishop of Jerusalem. The miracle is described by Saint Cyril himself to the king in his letter, in which he says that during that day (7 May 346AD during the period of Pentecost) around the 3rd hour, there appeared in the sky the sign of the holy Cross, huge, brilliant, spanning from Holy Calvary to the Mount of Olives. Not one or two saw it but all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And it did not appear for only a moment but for many hours remained hanging in the firmament. And it was so brilliant that it was brighter than the sun's rays and that is why they could watch it clearly during noon. Seeing this miracle, the people of the city ran to the Temple of the Resurrection. Everybody glorified our Lord Jesus Christ with one mouth, having by now been taught from these events that the most sacred dogma of the Christians does not rest in human wisdom that convinces with words and logic but in the proofs given by the spiritual gifts and the miraculous powers. And the dogma is not preached only by people but is testified by God Himself from Heaven.

The commemoration "of the appearance of the Holy Cross in heaven" is celebrated on the 7th May, the day of its appearance.

3. The holy great martyr Efstathios (20th September) was found worthy to have a wondrous vision, thanks to which he converted from idolatry to the Christian faith. Sensible, sober, charitable and just, even though an idolater, saint Efstathios (who was then called Plakidas) attracted to himself the grace of Christ who was revealed to him in an unusual manner. Specifically, while hunting one day in the forest, he saw at a distance a most beautiful and large stag, which, while walking away, would turn its head every so often and would observe him eye to eye. The saint spurred his horse to catch up with it but he could not. His friends followed him but in vain. After a while they decided to abandon the effort because their horses were exhausted. Only the saint was determined to ride after the untiring stag. Finally, full of sweat, he and his horse reached a great crevice. The stag easily jumped over to the other side, where it stopped and was looking at the saint. The horse though could not jump over so he decided to stop. Then with indescribable surprise, the saint saw between the horns of the stag a brilliant Cross that bore the crucified Lord and heard a voice telling him: "Plakida, why do you hunt me? I am Christ whom you do not know but you please Me with your good works. For your sake therefore I appeared to you on this stag. Your charities and good works have pleased Me. For this I appeared to you, for it is not just that a person like you not to know the truth". These things and many

more the Lord told him, before sending him to the local bishop, who baptized him together with his whole family, giving him the name Efstathios.

Three of the innumerable examples of divine revelations regarding the sign of the Cross are the ones we described above, which teach us that the sign of the Cross is the seal of Christ.

D. The sign of the Cross is miraculous

To support with more evidence the honour that the Church accords to the Cross and to present vividly the power of the Cross as a sign of Christ, we will describe below a few sporadic miracles- most of them from the lives of the saints- that occurred at various times with this all-holy symbol.

Saint John the theologian (26 Sept) healed in Patmos the paralyzed idolater priest of Apollo by making the sign of the Cross on him.

Saint Anthony the Great (17 Jan) wishing to put to shame certain idolaters who went to offend him, brought before them some demon-possessed persons and told them: "Either you cleanse them with your musings and any other art or sorcery you want, invoking your idols, otherwise if you cannot, give up your polemics against us and you shall see the power of the Cross of Christ". And at that moment he invoked the Lord, making the sign of the Cross on the demonics three times. Immediately they were freed from the demons and were healed, glorifying God.

When Saint Epiphanius, archbishop of Cyprus (12 May) was still a young, 10-year old child, an unruly calf seriously wounded him in the thigh and threw him down, unable to get up. A pious Christian, Cleovios, made the sign of the Cross three times on his wounded member and immediately the little Epiphanius was healed and stood up. The same saint, much later, made the sign of the Cross on the daughter of the king of Persia and relieved her immediately from the demon that tormented her.

Saint Basil the Great (1st Jan) when the Arian king Valens ordered the surrender of the Cathedral Church of Nicea to the Arians, he requested that God be allowed to opine on the matter. He suggested that the Church be closed and then they, both Arians and Orthodox should pray. If the Church opened with the prayers of the Orthodox then it should remain with them. Otherwise, if it opened with the prayers of the Arians or even if it did not open at all for both of them, then the Arians could take it. So it was. However the prayers of the Arians were not fruitful. On the contrary, when Saint Basil made the sign of the Cross three times on the closed door of the Church, saying, "Blessed is the God of the Christians in the ages of ages" immediately the gears engaged and the door panels opened. Thus the Church remained with the Orthodox.

The holy Vasilissa (3rd Sept) when the ruler of Nicomedia, Alexander threw her into a furnace, she made the sign of the Cross three times and was not at all harmed by the fire.

With the sign of the Cross Saint Thalleus (20 May) healed all the sick that were running to him to regain their health.

With the sign of the Cross, Hossios Andrew, the fool for Christ (28 May) and Saint Zacharias the shoemaker (17 Nov) would open the locked gates of the Churches of Constantinople at night, where they would go to pray secretly from the people and in the same way would close them when leaving. But there is no end to the miracles of the Cross.

One continuously recurring miracle is that of the blessing of the waters. Only the Orthodox Church, the Ark of the Truth, has this divine gift and right. Only our Church has holy water. With the blessing of the crucifix by the priest and with the triple immersion of the Cross into the water, it becomes sanctified and becomes the "healing of both soul and body and wards off any opposing power" while furthermore it remains intact and unspoiled with the passing of time!

Saint John of Cronstand is correct when he writes: "The Cross is the icon of the crucified Christ, the Son of God. That is why also its sign and even its shadow alone causes terror to the demons because it is the sign of Christ, because it is the protection of the Crucified. For this it is enough for someone to dip the Cross into the water, to sanctify it. After this the water becomes therapeutic and expels demons.

The value of the sign of the Holy Cross and the need for its very frequent use by the faithful.

With everything we briefly expounded on this point it is fully self explanatory and understandable why our Church bestows to the sign of the Cross such a great honour as well as its very frequent use, both during the divine liturgy as well as in the daily life of the faithful.

In all the movements of the officiator during the performance of the Divine Liturgy from the "Blessed is the kingdom..." to the "Through the blessings" the sign of the Cross is predominant.

In all the acts of worship and functions wherever there is mention of a blessing, according to unwritten tradition of the Church it is necessary that the "sign of the Cross" be made by the priest.

Wherever one turns his gaze, inside or outside of the Orthodox Church, he will see the sign of the Cross impressed: on the building of the Church, in the iconography, in the ecclesiastic décor, in the liturgical books, on the sacred vestments and utensils ...

But also in our daily life all the faithful keep as a valuable spiritual and sanctifying heritage, the same holy habit of the use of the sign of the Cross.

The pious Christians make the sign of the Cross very frequently: in the morning when one wakes up from sleep; during the duration of all their prayers; when they leave their house; when they pass outside Churches; when they finish their work; before drinking water or other drinks; before food; after food; before retiring to bed; when they hear either good news or bad news..... At every occasion, the sign of the Cross! The day of the faithful begins - and must begin- with the Cross and ends with the Cross! But also vise-versa his night begins and ends again with the Cross!

Many times also Christians go to the Church, asking the priest, to "Cross" them, namely to bless them with the sign of the Cross (either with the Cross, or with another holy vessel or vestment) with the intention to be strengthened against the temptations or to be relieved of some sickness.

So great is the power of the sign of the Cross, the sign of the almighty Son of God. So great is the grace that it envelops mystically within it! As briefly and vividly Saint Makarios of Moscow (+1563) notes "Oftentimes, one single sign of the Cross that is made with faith and intense experiences is more powerful than many words of prayer in front of the throne of the Most High. In it exists the light that illuminates the soul, the healing power that heals the sicknesses of the souls and bodies, the mystical power that acts against all harm. Do unclean thoughts and desires disturb your soul? Become encompassed by the sign of the Cross, double and triple this wall and the unclean thoughts will be tamed. Is your heart tormented from depression and sadness? Are you overcome by fear or are you surrounded by temptations? Do you feel the wiles of invisible enemies? Run to this power of the Cross, and the peace of your soul shall return, the temptation will go away, the consolation of the grace of God and spiritual joy will flood your heart".

Why do we always repeat the blessing of the sign of the Cross?

After the above, however, the question justifiably is raised: If the sign of

the Cross has so much grace and so much power, why can't we all enjoy its blessings and gifts always?

The answer is simple: Because we do not use it properly, as we should, as God and the Church wants us to. We shall refer indicatively to only four reasons:

A) Perhaps because we are of little faith and lukewarm. We do not make the sign of the Cross with living faith to the crucified Lord and in the power of the grace of His Cross.

B) Perhaps because we have no humility. Thus because if the Lord activates the power of the sign of the Cross, there is a danger of falling in pride, believing the results of this divine power as our own accomplishment.

C) Perhaps because of our hardheartedness, sinfulness and our unrepentance. As Saint Cosmas the Aetolian characteristically says, "we should have our hand clean of sins and uncontaminated and then, as we make the sign of the Cross, the devil gets burnt and departs. Seeing that we are contaminated with sins, the sign of the Cross is not valid when we Cross ourselves (and so) the demons are not afraid".

D) Finally, perhaps we do not make the sign of the Cross correctly, according to the tradition that the Church has delivered to us, offending this way both the sanctity of the Cross and the Lord Himself.

This last one we must pay a lot of attention to it. A lot of attention. All of us - clerics, monks and lay people - are guilty, some a little and others a lot, for a careless or mechanical or even impious execution of the sign of the Cross on our body.

Some move their hand hurriedly over their chest or in the air, without touching their body at all, other times they make a triangular sign or an X and other times one could say they are playing the guitar. How could one characterize such a pointless and mindless movement, that reaches the limits of blasphemy? Heavy but true is the word of Saint Chrysostom who wrote that sometimes the devil himself moves the hand of these inattentive Christians to mock the most holy symbol of the holy Cross and to damn themselves.

Some Christians again fall into another error. They are those who come to the Church, who usually stand in prominent spots and there, in front of everybody, with hollow exhibitionism, bend their waist in deep prostrations, extend their hands uncontrollably here and there, crossing themselves with excessive, indiscreet and sometimes ridiculous movements.....

There is a third category of Christians who completely avoid making the sign of the Cross and especially in public. It is those who are ashamed to confess their faith in Christ and to His Cross. They are afraid of the irony, contempt, the mocking of the people of the world. As the holy evangelist John writes, "They love the glory of the people over that of God". If we belong to them, let us remember the instruction of the holy apostle Paul, "And be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2) as well as the serious warning of the Lord Himself "Whosoever does not confess Me in front of the people I too will deny him in front of My Father in heaven". And beyond these let us be conscious that we deprive ourselves from yet another almighty weapon against the temptations, the passions, the sicknesses and the demons. Let us be careful what Saint Cyril of Jerusalem advises us: "Let us not be ashamed of the Cross of Christ. And if someone else is ashamed and hides it, you make your Cross visibly so that the demons may see the sign of the King Christ and depart far, trembling. In fact make the sign of the Cross often, whether you eat or sit, or rest, or rise or speak or walk, in other words at every situation. Because whoever Crosses himself here on earth, he noetically is up in heaven..... The protection is great. Freely do the poor receive it and without toil by the sick because the grace derives from God. It is the sign of the faithful and the fear of the demons.

How we make the sign of the Cross correctly

How can the sign of the Cross become a protection for us too? How can it become in our hands the terror of the demons? If we do it correctly. If we do it as our Church shows us and teaches us, that is, with faith, piety, consciously, sacredly, humbly and with discretion. In other words, how?

Firstly we bring together the three first fingers of the right hand, thus confessing our faith to God, who is at the same time three hypostases, three persons- "The Father , the Son and the Holy Spirit- of the same essence, united between them "inseparably" and "indivisibly". The other two fingers that touch against the palm, symbolize the two natures, the two wills and the two energies of our Lord, Jesus Christ, namely the divine and the human. This way we make a symbolic confession of our Orthodox faith, whose bases and foundations constitute the Trinitarian and Christological dogma.

Then we bring our hand to the forehead, the physical spot of our thought function, revealing in this way that we love God with all our mind and we dedicate all our thoughts to Him.

The hand then goes to the abdomen. This way we symbolically declare that we dedicate to the Lord all our desires and all our emotions.

Finally, we bring our hand to our shoulders, first to the right one and then to the left one, this way confessing that every bodily activity belongs to Him.

One other complementary interpretation, most theological in its simplicity is given to us in the fifth teaching of Saint Cosmas Etolos: "Listen my Christians how the Cross is made and what it means. The Bible tells us that the Holy Trinity, God, is glorified in heaven more than the angels. What should you also do? You bring your three fingers of your right hand and not being able to ascend to heaven to worship, you place your hand to your head because your head is round and indicates the heaven and you say with your mouth; Just as Your angels glorify the Holy Trinity in heaven likewise I as an unworthy servant, glorify and worship the Holy Trinity. And as these fingers are three-they are separate and they are together- this way is also the Holy Trinity, God, three persons and a single God. You then lower your hand from your head and place it on your belly and say; I submit and worship You, my Lord, for You condescended and were incarnated in the belly of the Theotokos for our sins. You then place on your right shoulder and say; I supplicate You, my God, to forgive me and place me at Your right, along with the just. Then placing the hand on the left shoulder, you say; I implore You my Lord, do not place me at Your left, with the sinners. Then bending down to the ground you say; I glorify You my God, I submit and worship You, for as You were placed in the Tomb, so too will I be placed in the tomb. And when you stand erect, you indicate the Resurrection and say; I glorify You my Lord, I submit and worship You, for You arose from the dead, to grant us eternal life". That is what is the meaning of the most holy Cross.

Conclusion

As we note from the above, the sign of the Cross includes in it all the salvific events that are found in the infinite love of God for fallen man. Exactly because of this it is a salvific sign, a life giving sign, a sanctifying sign, a "victory-bringing weapon" (Saint Sophronios of Jerusalem), "protection against evil" (Saint Gregory of Nyssa), "the capital of everything good" (Saint John Chrysostom) for the Christians. Let us therefore use it, as often as we can, sanctifying with it every bit of our daily and spiritual life.

"Cross: the guardian of the world,
Cross: the beauty of the Church,
Cross: the strength of kings,
Cross: the support of the faithful,

Cross: the angels' glory
and the demons' injury".