A mother had introduced the ritual of blessing her children by signing their foreheads with a cross every night before they went to bed. One day there was an accident on the farm. The family dog had bitten the mother between the eyes and she needed urgent medical treatment. The eldest daughter, who was only ten at the time, had rung the ambulance and was trying to organise a pick up point. The only thing she could do was to drive her mother to the service road where the ambulance would pick up the mother to take her to the nearest hospital. As the children helped the mother into the truck, her little boy took his thumb and made a Sign of the Cross on the mother’s forehead saying, “It’s okay mum, Jesus is with you.”

Shared by a mother in Geraldton WA

The Sign of the Cross, for many, is the first Christian gesture we learned in our childhood. As Christian parents it is also the first religious gesture that we teach our children. The Sign of the Cross is an integral part of our Christian life. In our Christian tradition the Sign of the Cross is an important part of both our personal and public prayer. It’s a vital part of our liturgical and sacramental celebrations.

The practice of signing oneself stems from the earliest days of Christianity. Just as slaves had the name of their master tattooed or branded on a visible part of their body, usually the forehead, so that all would know to whom they belonged, Christians marked or sealed their forehead with the Sign of the Cross as an outward mark that they were a follower of Jesus Christ.

This issue of Living, Loving, Learning considers the significance of this simple gesture through exploring the Sign of the Cross as a prayer; as a blessing; as a profession of our faith; and as a sign common to all our Sacramental and Liturgical celebrations.
The Sign of the Cross as a Prayer

The Christian begins his [her] day, his [her] prayers and his [her] activities with the Sign of the Cross: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” The baptized person dedicates the day to the glory of God and calls on the Savior’s grace which lets him [her] act in the Spirit as a child of the Father. The Sign of the Cross strengthens us in temptations and difficulties.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church #2157

The Sign of the Cross is first and foremost a prayer through which we call God’s blessing upon us. It is perhaps the most frequently used prayer for Christians. When we make the Sign of the Cross we mark ourselves as Christians and it becomes a visible expression of our belief in the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God, the Holy Spirit. The Sign of the Cross is a prayer through which we remind ourselves of God’s love for us, of the sacrifice Jesus made to give us eternal life, and of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. In the Sign of the Cross we embrace our God with mind and heart and all of our strength (Hoagland 2002, p.2).

Within our Christian faith life we sign ourselves with the Sign of the Cross each day as we rise to welcome God into our day, at the end of the day as we place ourselves in God’s arms for the night. As a family we sign ourselves at meal times, and at other occasions when we come together for prayer.

When we make the Sign of the Cross at the beginning of our prayers we enter into a sacred space. We call on the Lord in a special and personal way (Ghezzi 2006, p.29). When we touch our forehead, heart, and shoulders in the name of God, we invite God to bless us. This prayer reminds us that each day, in good times and bad, in danger and sorrow, God’s care and blessings are never far from us (Hoagland 2002, p.3). Each time we sign ourselves with the Sign of the Cross we are drawn into a deeper relationship with God.

The Sign of the Cross in our Eucharistic celebration

At the Eucharistic celebration (the Mass) the Sign of the Cross is used several times. We are invited to join with the priest in making the Sign of the Cross at the beginning and at the end of Mass. This is a way of saying that we belong to Christ. We acknowledge that we are in the presence of God, in and through Christ. It is an affirmation of our faith. We also make a Sign of the Cross with our thumbs before the proclamation of the Gospel. The priest makes the Sign of the Cross on his forehead, lips and chest and invites us to do the same. The Sign of the Cross on the forehead indicates that we believe in the good news of the Gospel; the Sign of the Cross on the lips indicates our call to preach the Gospel by word of mouth; and the Sign of the Cross on the chest indicates that we must treasure the word of God in our hearts. In doing this, we acknowledge our belief in the Word of God, our commitment to spread God’s Word in our daily lives, and our awareness of God’s presence in our hearts. In other words, we pray that we should understand the Word of God with our minds, speak it with our lips and believe it in our hearts.

The Sign of the Cross as a Blessing

The Sign of the Cross is a prayer that expresses blessing. We call it a blessing. When we make the Sign of the Cross we say “we bless ourselves”. Blessing others is very much part of our Christian practice. As parents we can use the Sign of the Cross to bless our children, our spouses, friends, guests. We can also bless things such as our homes, our food, our cars. In doing so we acknowledge that our use for them may open us more fully to God (Ghezzi 2006, p.13).

Our days are filled with endless opportunities in which we can invoke a blessing. The simple gesture of tracing the Sign of the Cross on the forehead of our children as we tuck them into bed allows our children to be mindful that God is always with them. The signing of our children on a special occasion, such as a birthday, opens them up to the understanding that they are special in the eyes of God and in the eyes of those who love them.

Tracing the Sign of the Cross on our forehead, our hearts and our shoulders, we remember we are blessed in mind and heart and all our being. We are blessed with God’s love, a love found not only in the past, but here and now (Hoagland 2002, p.2). Every time we make the Sign of the Cross, we invite the Lord to bless us and he touches our spirit (Ghezzi 2006, p.11). Every time we make the Sign of the Cross as a family we invite God to bless us as we acknowledge God’s presence.

The Sign of the Cross as a profession of our faith

The Sign of the Cross serves as a summary of our faith. As we make the Sign of the Cross we affirm our faith. The early Christians often traced a small cross on their foreheads for it was for them, as it is for us today, a sign of faith. It is declaring publicly that [we] are followers of Christ (Ghezzi 2006, p.57). Through the simple gesture of the Sign of the Cross we express the belief and commitment to the truths of our faith which we recite in the Creed on Sundays. It can be said that the sign of the Cross is a minicreed (Ghezzi 2006, p.29).

Touching our forehead and descending to our breast declares that we believe that the Father sent his Son from heaven to earth to assume our human nature; touching the left shoulder confesses that the Son died on the cross to bring us salvation; and moving to the right shoulder professes our faith in his ascension to heaven and his sending of the Holy Spirit to sanctify us. (Ghezzi 2006, p.32)
Sign of the Cross in our Sacramental celebrations

The *Sign of the Cross* is also very much part of our liturgical and sacramental practice. The prayer we say while making the *Sign of the Cross* comes from Jesus’ command that the disciples should baptise new disciples “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). The *Sign of the Cross* is used in all the sacraments of the Church. It is the first sign made on us at Baptism and the last sign made as we pass to our eternal life.

In Baptism the priest marks us with the *Sign of the Cross* on our foreheads with the Oil of Chrism and pours water over us while praying the words I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In the Catholic Church we are reminded of our baptism every time we enter and leave the church. Traditionally, we dip our fingers in the bowl of Holy water at the entrance and make the *Sign of the Cross* on our body. The Holy water, together with the gesture of the *Sign of the Cross*, is a poignant and tangible reminder of our Baptism when were signed with the *Sign of the Cross* marking us as a member of God’s family.

When we are confirmed the Bishop makes the *Sign of the Cross* on our forehead with the oil of chrism. This is the sign by which we know that we have been sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In the sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation) the priest makes the *Sign of the Cross* over us while praying the words of Absolution. This is a sign that through the love of God we have been forgiven.

In the sacrament of marriage the rings are blessed by the priest and then the couple exchange them with the words “take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”.

The *Sign of the Cross* and the oil of chrism are also used at the ordination of priests and bishops. The hands of a priest are anointed with the oil of chrism and the *Sign of the Cross* to give them the power to confer blessings. In administering the sacrament of the sick the priest anoints the person with the *Sign of the Cross* made with blessed oil. The priest signs the sick person’s forehead and the palms with the *Sign of the Cross*.

The *Sign of the Cross* is an integral part of all sacramental celebrations because it brings us into God’s presence.

Teaching our Children how to make the *Sign of the Cross*

As parents, we find that even before our children can talk they try to imitate what they see other family members doing. When members of a family bless themselves children begin to imitate this prayer. The *Sign of the Cross* is a simple way of introducing prayer into family life. In teaching our children the *Sign of the Cross* we raise awareness within them that God loves them and is always with them.

Within family life some of the ideal times to teach our children the *Sign of the Cross* are at bedtime, at meal time, or in the morning. As parents we need to take the time to not only teach them the gesture, but to also take the opportunity to explain to our children the meaning of making the *Sign of the Cross*.

**How to make the *Sign of the Cross***

In the Roman Catholic Church there are two main ways in which the *Sign of the Cross* is made. The first way is to trace the *Sign of the Cross* across our bodies. Using our right hand, we touch our forehead at the mention of the Father; the lower middle of our chest at the mention of the Son; and the left shoulder on the word “Holy” and the right shoulder on the word “Spirit”.

Another way to sign ourselves is with a small cross. When we sign ourselves with a small cross, the *Sign of the Cross* is made on the forehead, hands or chest with the thumb or index finger. The small cross is used mainly to bless someone and during the celebration of the sacraments. A small *Sign of the Cross* is traced with the thumb on one’s own head, lips and heart: a gesture made by both priest and people before the reading of the Gospel.

There are many different prayers which are suitable to teach our children how to make the *Sign of the Cross*. These are a few which may be useful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Touching the forehead</th>
<th>Jesus be in my mind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Touching the heart</td>
<td>Jesus be in my heart,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left shoulder to right shoulder</td>
<td>Jesus be in all I do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching the forehead</td>
<td>In the name of the Father who made me,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching the heart</td>
<td>The Son who saves me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left shoulder to right shoulder</td>
<td>And the Holy Spirit who guides me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suggestions to help make the Sign of the Cross a part of family routine

Place a little holy water font at the main door of the house or at the door of each bedroom and encourage family members to make the Sign of the Cross when they leave their rooms or the house in the morning and again when they enter at night. This is a way of encouraging family members to put God first and last in all the coming in and going out for the day. Holy water fonts for the home are available at most Christian gift shops.

Give your children a cross or crucifix as a gift. Ask the priest to bless it for them while they are present.

While travelling to Mass, parents with younger children could remind them about the special Sign of the Cross and challenge them to count how many times the priest makes it during the celebration. On the way home chat about what the children noticed.

Establish a ritual of blessing yourselves with the Sign of the Cross at the beginning of a meal as a way of thanking God for the food the family is about to eat.

Trace the Sign of the Cross on your children’s forehead before they go to sleep as a blessing.

(Women for faith and family 2005).

Conclusion

The Sign of the Cross is a prayer that calls us to embrace God with our minds, hearts and with all our strength. It is a prayer that expresses our relationship with God and we affirm our faith in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Each time we make the Sign of the Cross we acknowledge that God’s care and blessings are never far from us. Within family life we can make this sign when we get up and when we go to bed, before our meal times and when entering a church. We make the Sign of the Cross both over ourselves and others as we extend our blessing upon one another. The Sign of the Cross is the first prayer we pray, the first blessing we receive and the first sacramental sign we are given. It is the visible sign that we are followers of Jesus.

Bibliography


