Why Do We Make the Sign of the Cross?

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Introduction: Trinity and Cross

Baseball players make the sign of the cross before stepping up to the plate. Basketball players cross themselves at the free throw line. What do they mean when they do it? They are publicly expressing faith in God as the ultimate source of their strength. But there is more to the sign of the cross than an expression of reliance upon God.

The sign of the cross is everywhere in popular culture. Even a rabbi, played on the big screen by actress Sarah Sherman in the comedy "You Are So *Not* Invited to My Bat Mitzvah," crosses herself. Why would a film depict a female rabbi – a representative of Judaism – making the sign of the cross that is specifically Christian?

In the film, Rabbi Rebecca teaches a class of teenagers. She is preparing them for the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony, the Bar-Mitzvah (for boys) and Bat-Mitzvah (for girls). Two of the girls are best friends but jealous of each other over a boy. In preparation for Lydia's Bat-Mitzvah, her best friend Stacy makes a video meant to humiliate Lydia. At the Bat-Mitzvah celebration itself, before all of the invited guests, Stacy shows the video. Watching it, Rabbi Rebecca begins to realize that the video is not a tribute to Lydia by Stacy but a form of revenge and character assassination. Cringing at the video, the rabbi makes the sign of the cross. It is a comic moment and meant to say, "Why is Stacy deliberately embarrassing her best friend?" Rabbi Rebecca is acknowledging that a crisis has arrived. Teenage Stacy is about to betray Lydia. The matter is out of the rabbi's hands and in the hands of God.

Of course, the sign of the cross is much more than a gesture that a crisis is in God's hands. It is more than an act of piety by a basketball- or baseball-player. Christians touch their forehead, their heart, and the shoulders (tracing a cross on themselves) and pray "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The sign of the cross is also an act of prayer. It is also part of the liturgy. The Mass begins with it.

The sign of the cross has two aspects. By the *words* we indicate that we believe in the Trinity, and by the *gesture* we connect the Trinity to the cross. This is well known to every Christian, but the meaning is not simple. Our faith in the one God – our faith in the Father-creator, the Son-redeemer, and the Spirit-sanctifier – is not the same as our belief that Jesus died on the cross. The one God is immortal. God cannot die. So the death of Jesus Christ is something other than the death of God. Christians say, "Christ died for us." We do not say, "God died on the cross." When we make the sign of the cross, we connect the Trinity to the crucifixion, but the connection is not self-evident.

Tonight we will examine the connection between cross and Trinity. We are going to see, *first of all*, why the church calls the Trinity the "central mystery" of Christian faith. The Trinity is not a mystery because it is hard to understand, but because it is identical with God's desire to save us. *Secondly*, we will look at the crucifixion of Jesus. Scripture says that Adam brought sin into the world, and that death is the consequence of human sin. But Jesus' "obedience unto

death" puts death in a different light. More than the consequences of sin, we will see, death is a surrender of our lives to God that culminates earthly existence and brings us to new life. So our themes are the Trinity and the end of life, and we begin with the Trinity.

Part One: Saved by Father, Son, and Spirit

Before retiring from St. John's Seminary, I used to stump my students with hard-to-answer questions. My favorite was to ask the seminarians, "What is the central mystery of Christian faith and life?" No one ever got it right. Seminarians would try to guess the "central" mystery in various ways. Some said it is the Eucharist. Others thought it the Church. Still others replied that it is Jesus Christ. None of these is correct.

About the Trinity, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*[1] has this to say: "The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself" (no. 234). This means that, when we say that God comprises Father, Son, and Spirit, we are not speaking about one mystery among others of equal value. The Trinity is the central mystery. All other mysteries flow from it. So let us look more deeply into the Trinity in salvation history, particularly in the experience of Israel and in the experience of Jesus Christ.

A. Trinity as the Central Mystery

The reason why so many of us cannot identify the central mystery of Christian faith and life is that we do not connect it with ourselves. We all know the formula, "one God in three persons," but it is hard to understand. People try to explain it by saying that one shamrock has three petals; or that water can be liquid, gas, and solid. St. Augustine famously said that, within the one God, we find being, knowledge, and will (*Confessions* XIII.11). These are all attempts to know the Trinity as it exists "in itself." Theology calls this the "immanent" Trinity. But trying to know the inner workings of God can be an exercise in divine psychology.

For the moment, let us avoid speculating about how God can be both one and three. Let us concentrate instead on showing that the Trinity is the central mystery because God wants to save us. The *Catechism* explains the centrality of the Trinity by saying this:

> The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men 'and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin'" (CCC 234).[2]

Theology calls this the "economic" Trinity, that is, God within the "economy of salvation." This is economics in the theological sense and not as we ordinarily understand it. Salvation history is made up of events, such as the revelation of God to Abraham, the exodus led by Moses, and the birth of Jesus. Salvation history is "identical," the *Catechism* says, with the revelation of God to human beings. Revelation is not simply an explanation of God. It is an action that "reconciles" and "unites" us to God, provided that we turn away from sin. We make this turn by hearing God's word and by obeying it. In short, the Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life because God has taken the initiative. In the "economy" of salvation history, God wants to

[1] John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), no. 234.

[2] The phrase in quotes refers to the Congregation of the Clergy's 1971 *General Catechetical Directory* (no. 47).

save us. *In a few moments, I will invite you to reflect on this more deeply – on the difference between God's inner life as three divine persons and God's desire to save us in salvation history.*

We pray to the Father. We are filled with Holy Spirit. We share the Son's human nature. We are redeemed because "God became man." That can mean many things. The most important is that God created human beings capable of hearing God, obeying God, and becoming one with God. We have that capacity because God took the initiative. How do we know about it? That brings us back to the history of Israel.

B. Revelation of God in Israel

The first thing that must be said is that we are different from God. There seems to be an impassable gulf between us. God created us and all things. We are at best co-creators with God, cooperators with what God has made. We are able to understand the mysteries of nature because they follow laws. They imply the existence of a law-giver.

Our knowledge of God is limited. We say that God is all-good and that we are sinners. Our imperfect goodness is measured in relation to God's perfect goodness. And although every human being must die, we believe that God created us with a purpose, and has a destiny for us. Christians call it the resurrection of the dead. It means that the eternal God wants to share the divine life with mortal human beings. God cannot die, however, so there is a big difference between God and us. Our imperfect knowledge, our limited goodness, and our mortality – they all separate us from God.

Although we are different from God, God has been revealed to us. We know about God from history, especially from the history of Israel. With Israel we share faith in the oneness of God. God gave Moses the first commandment, "I am the LORD your God; you shall have no other gods besides me" (Ex.20:2-3). "Other gods" do not compare.

At the outset, I noted a recent comedy in which a rabbi, at a moment of crisis, makes the sign of the cross. But Jewish people do not regard the one God as a Trinity of persons. They do not distinguish, as we do, between Father, Son, and Spirit. For Israel, the LORD comes first and takes priority. Moses expressed this truth in the following words:

> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Dt. 6:4)

With the Jews, our "elder brothers in the faith," we also believe that God is one. Nothing else can compare to God. The first commandment is that we are to acknowledge and obey God.

Ancient Israel also saw that the one God is not indifferent to human beings. God expects something from us. Israel expressed it this way: "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). The creator of all expects something of us who know and love God. We were made for the purpose of being holy.

To be sure, ancient Israel associated God with fatherhood, with the begetting of son, and with the spirit. The prophets spoke of Israel's LORD as "our Father" (Is. 63:16). He created human beings (Mal. 2:10) and called them his people (Jer. 3:19). Moreover, ancient Israel also spoke about the spirit who inspired judges, kings, and prophets. The prophet Isaiah, for example, said that the "Spirit of the LORD is upon me" (Is. 611). And finally the Father-God was known to be fruitful. The king of Israel was the LORD's son (Ps. 27) and the Israelite people were

firstborn sons called out of Egypt (Hos. 11.1). The Old Testament refers to the fatherhood of God, to the spirit, and to God's sons. But there is no clear notion in the Hebrew scriptures of three divine persons. God was one for ancient Israel, and remains one for us.

C. Jesus' Experience of the Trinity

Every Christian knows God as a divine "word" spoken directly to our hearts and minds. God "speaks" this word in every time and place. When we experience the beauty of creation, when we have a moment of insight, when we act in accord with our conscience, God is present. We know God in the question, "Where did I come from?" We know God in the question, "What will happen to me after I die?" In these philosophical questions, the one God is already present. That is what I meant when I mentioned a divine word spoken directly to our hearts and minds.

If God is revealed as a word spoken to our hearts and minds, then why do we need a history of God? Why do we need the Bible, the Church, and the liturgy? The answer comes down to our very humanity. We are not just souls but also bodies. We are made in such a way that we experience reality in time. We experience God in tangible things. History shapes us. When someone asks, "How did you come to be what you are?" we tell the story of our life. The same is true for God. When someone asks, "How do you know that there is a God?" we reply with what we know. Normally we do not talk about God's inner life, but about how we are saved by Father, Son, and Spirit.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John tells us that the "word became flesh and dwelt among us." God's Word – the word human beings have always "heard" in their hearts and minds – was "spoken" in Jesus of Nazareth. The Apostles who witnessed his teaching and faithfulness unto death gave testimony. They left us a gospel, a tradition of prayer, and a Eucharistic liturgy. When the Father raised the Son after his crucifixion, the disciples knew him in the breaking of the bread. In short, we not only hear God's word in our hearts and minds, but also in history. Scripture testifies to it. In it we meet the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Jesus himself shows what it means to experience the Father and the Spirit. He prayed to his heavenly Father at his baptism (Lk. 3:21). Later he thanked the Father for revealing to him what is so often hidden from the wise and learned (Mt. 11:25, Lk. 10:21). In the Garden of Gethsemane he asked the Father to take away the cup of suffering that he had to drink – *if* it were the Father's will (Mt. 26:42). Jesus acknowledged his oneness with his heavenly Father (Jn. 10:30). Even at the moment of his death he commended himself to the Father (Lk. 23:46).

Jesus also experienced the Holy Spirit. The Spirit had been with him during his childhood (Lk. 1:80). At the beginning of his public ministry, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness to pray (Mk. 1:12). Teaching in the synagogue, Jesus prayed in the words of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me." He rejoiced in the Spirit (Lk. 10:21). Later he promised to send the Holy Spirit to his followers (Jn. 14, 15, and 16). Jesus, in short, was one with his Father and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Jesus knew himself to be God's Son. The angel promised Mary that her child would be the Son of God (Lk. 1:35). At his baptism in the Jordan, Mark records God's voice: "This is my beloved Son" (Mk. 1:11). And in the presence of the Apostles, when Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter replies that he is "The son of the living God" (Mt. 15:16). To understand the Trinity, we focus on the experience of Jesus. He prayed to the Father. He

received the Spirit. He knew himself to be a beloved Son. We know the persons of the Trinity as reflected in the experience of Jesus.

We began with the Trinity as the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the central mystery because it is about the reconciliation between God and human beings. Here we are not trying to understand God as a divine community of persons. Rather we understand God as the one who seeks a reconciliation with human beings. This happens both in grace, as God speaks to our minds and hearts, and in history. We recall this history in the election of the children of Abraham to be God's own. We recall it when God led the Hebrews out of Egypt at the hands of Moses. Above all we know God in the incarnation of the Son. The incarnate Word reveals that our human nature is meant for unity with God's own nature. When we make the sign of the cross, we bring together our faith in the Trinity with the memory of Christ's crucifixion.

Part Two: Signing Ourselves with the Cross

At the outset, I said that the sign of the cross has two aspects. First, there are the words. They express our Trinitarian faith. We believe in one God, the Father, who sent his Son and his Spirit. The one God comprises three divine persons. That is how we began. Now we come to the second aspect, the gesture. With our hands we trace the cross on our bodies. We call it the sign of the cross because we are recalling the crucifixion of Jesus.

In the sign of the cross, it is the Son who takes a central position, not the Father or the Spirit. Jesus Christ was crucified. To be sure, he is fully divine and fully human, but only in his human nature did he experience death. God did not die, but Jesus, the incarnate Word and beloved Son, was nailed to the cross. So when we make the sign of the cross, we recall what we have in common with him. It is nothing other than our own human nature. As human beings, we face the reality of death. We face it, just as did the man Jesus.

Sin and Reconciliation

Earlier we said that the Trinity is the central mystery of Christian life and faith because it has to do with reconciling and uniting with God those who turn from sin. We usually think of reconciliation when we are estranged from someone. We may have had a fight or disagreement. Because of that we no longer speak or listen to the other. This is the condition of sin. Pope Francis applied that word to describe himself. After his election to the papacy he asked:

> Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio? I am a sinner. This the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.

Francis was not saying that he was worse than any of us. He was simply acknowledging a reality. No one is perfect. All are sinners. We know this because God has planted in us a conscience. We do not always do what we should. God asks us to make the best use of the gifts we have been given. Sometimes we disappoint God and ourselves. But God has taken the initiative to save us. God provides the opportunity to own up to sin and turn again to God.

The church teaches that we are saved by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (CCC 617). This has been expressed in many ways through the centuries. Moses, for example, taught ancient Israel to sacrifice to God. With a "sin offering," the killing of a bull or a goat, the people could

atone for wrong-doing (Lev. 16). In a culture whose ancestors were nomads, there was no gift more pleasing to God than the sacrifice of an animal. The prophet Isaiah depicted the nation of Israel as a suffering servant, "a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (Is. 53:7). John the Baptist, in the Fourth Gospel, speaks of Jesus as "the lamb of God" (1:29). The evangelist wanted us to see Jesus as a sacrificial animal. By his suffering we are saved.

Jesus referred to himself, not as a lamb, but as the Son of man. The Son "did not come to be served but to serve," we read in Mark's Gospel, "and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). The word "ransom" gives us another way of understanding how we are reconciled to God. Ransom implies that humanity has been captured by evil. The giving of Jesus' life was a ransom or payment to grant release. Today's *Catechism* refers to the 1546 Council of Trent. Almost 500 years ago it taught that "Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father" (CCC 615). The understanding of the cross of Christ as a sin-offering, a ransom, and an expiatory sacrifice goes back centuries. It remains a part of tradition.

That does not make it easy to understand. It takes work to appreciate the traditional ways of understanding how the cross saves us:

- Lamb. Not many of us today would describe the crucifixion as a sin-offering. It is hard to believe that God is pleased by the blood of bulls and goats. Few would compare the death of Jesus to the death of a herd animal, even an unblemished lamb.
- Ransom. It takes an imaginative leap to regard Jesus' death as a ransom paid to the devil who holds us hostage.
- Expiation. We strain to understand the medieval thought that human sinfulness so offended the Father that only the crucifixion of his Son could appease his wrath.

To be sure, we affirm the teaching of the Council of Trent. It said that Jesus atoned for us and made satisfaction for our sins.[3] To affirm that teaching, however, we have to see atonement as reconciliation with God. We have to regard satisfaction in terms of God's love for his beloved Son and for us who are united with him as his body. The words "atonement" and "satisfaction" must be rightly understood.

When we make the sign of the cross, we affirm God's desire to save us. We are saved because one like us, Jesus Christ, surrendered his life to God. He did so as a spiritual sacrifice. He made a gift of himself. We do not usually regard this as a sin-offering in the style of ancient Israel, but as obedience to his heavenly Father. He did not try to escape death but accepted it as the inevitable price of faithfulness. The Father sent the Son, not to make him suffer, but to reconcile us. Reconciliation means that we pray to our Father, as Jesus did, "Thy will be done." God asks us to obey. We hear the divine Word and accept it.

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[3] The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar made a valiant effort to understand how the death of Jesus satisfies the insult to God that sin is. Balthasar quoted St. Paul: God made Jesus "to be sin" even though he "knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). God the Father levied a penalty against the Son, death itself. In the crucifixion, Balthasar argued, it was not Jesus, but sin itself, that was crucified. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. VII: *Theology of the New Covenant*, translated by Brian McNeil C.R.V., edited by John Riches (New York: Crossroad; and San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 209. It might be better to emphasize, with the theologian Karl Rahner, God's mercy and forgiveness. "What happened on the Cross," said Rahner, "proceeded from God's forgiving will as its effect." The effect (Christ's obedience unto death) stems from God's will (to forgive sinners). Karl Rahner, "Salvation" (article in four parts; Part IV, "Theology") in Rahner, editor, *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 1525.

Like Jesus, we must die. It is unlikely that we will die falsely convicted and condemned. Doubtless our deaths will not be as brutal as his death. Most of us hope that we will die in our beds. We are, however, "sentenced" to death. It is inevitable. It is part of our human destiny. When we trace the sign of the cross on our forehead, heart, and shoulders, we acknowledge death's inevitability. We cannot escape it. But everything hinges on the way we face it.

Reinterpreting Death

The church has taught that, through Adam's sin, death entered the world. That is what St. Paul said in the letter to the Romans. "The wage of sin is death," he wrote, "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Christ brought life, but death came through Adam. For that reason, death is ambiguous. It is both the punishment of sin and the culmination of a life open to God. The link between sin and death has been underlined by the doctrine of original sin. Its consequences are inscribed in our very being. For that reason, death can be an event of damnation. The church is not blind to the reality of evil. Human beings can refuse God's invitation to hear the divine word. They can close themselves off.

Because death entered the world, our lives are short, painful and burdensome. We recall the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Our knowledge is imperfect and our motives are flawed. We cannot possibly measure up to God, the immortal, the all-knowing, and the all-good. But at times we wish we could. We would like to enjoy a divine immortality. We even point to exemplary religious figures who have escaped death. Elijah did not die, we remember, but rose to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kg. 2:11). Some even speculate that the Virgin Mary was assumed into heaven before dying. All of us want to prolong our lives. Death can seem like a hateful interruption or a misstep on the way to eternal life. If death is the wage of our sin, we would prefer not to be paid.

Today we think of death more as the result of natural causes. We do not die because we have dishonored our parents, borne false witness, or committed adultery. Most lives end in car accidents, heart disease, and stroke. But the church reminds us that death is linked to human sinfulness. We are creatures, not gods. Our bodily weakness reflects our moral weakness.

The link between sin and death is real, but it is not the whole truth. The greatest argument against death as the wage of sin is the death of Jesus Christ. No Christian believes that Jesus died because he sinned. He was distinguished by his sinlessness. Rather than a punishment, his death was life-giving. When God raised him from the dead, St. Paul said that Jesus became "a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). He was "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). He is the first fruits, and we are the harvest.

At death we face a choice. We can die without thinking of God or the future that God offers. We can choose to be a law unto ourselves. That is one choice. But there is an alternative. We can regard our death as the culmination of our lives. By our choices we have defined ourselves. At the end of life, we can try to escape death and prolong our lives. Or we can surrender them to God, confident that God will receive us. That is the ambiguity of death. We cannot separate it from sin, but it is also the means to new life in God.

The sinless Jesus surrendered his life to his heavenly Father. The Father had given him life and, when the time came, he freely laid it down. We can look at our own end in the same way. In death we surrender our lives to God, just as Christ surrendered his life. The incarnation

revealed the capacity of our human nature for union with the divine. Now, as followers of Jesus, we walk in his footsteps. The Letter to the Romans said this about Jesus:

> We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. (Romans 6:4-5)

We Christians have joined our lives to that of Christ. We share his human nature. Like Jesus, we too will die. But that is not the end. With him, we too shall rise.

We started by concentrating on the Trinitarian words. We pray in the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is reconciling us through them. Then we turned to the gesture. We trace on ourselves the cross. That led us to reflect on the meaning of death. We are saved by the cross, we saw, but there are many ways to understand it, some of which are quite difficult. We are saved because one like us, Jesus Christ, surrendered his life to God as a spiritual sacrifice.

Conclusion

Tonight we asked, "What do we mean when we make the sign of the cross?" Professional athletes point to God as the ultimate source of their strength. A comic actress can signal, by crossing herself, that a crisis is in God's hands. But for us Christians, the sign of the cross professes our faith. With the *words* we indicate our belief in the Trinitarian God, and with the *gesture* we acknowledge the death that belongs to every human nature.

We started by looking at the Trinity, not primarily as God's immanent self, but as God is revealed in the economy of salvation. The *Catechism* says that the Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life because it is about our reconciliation with God. In particular, we looked at the Trinity as reflected in the humanity of Jesus Christ.

- Jesus acknowledged his heavenly Father, we said, as the one to whom he prayed and taught us to pray.
- Jesus recognized God in the Spirit who descended upon him at his baptism, who drove him into the wilderness to pray, and about whom he could say, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me."
- Jesus knew himself to be one in being with the Father. He could say, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30) and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:8-9).

So when we make the sign of the cross we testify to this Trinitarian God. We know God in the words and deeds of salvation history. God is reconciling us as a Father-creator, as a Spirit-animator, and as redeeming Son. That was the first part of our presentation.

In the second part, we focused, not on the words of the sign of the cross, but on the gesture. By signing the cross on our foreheads, heart, and shoulders, we refer to the divine Son, yes, but specifically in terms of his human nature. God did not die on the cross. The man Jesus did. The cross we trace on our bodies refers to the death that every one of us anticipates. Jesus went before us in death. As Christians, we go toward our deaths with him.

The cross saves us in the context of God's love for human beings. The crucifixion was not an improvised solution to a problem that God had not foreseen. The Father did not send the Son because he was surprised by human sinfulness and had to somehow make it right. No, God willed our salvation from the moment of creation. The incarnation of Jesus was the culmination of God's revelation first to our remote human ancestors, then to the Hebrew people, and finally to us. God revealed in Jesus Christ the capacity of human nature – our capacity – for union with God. Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom and, when he was rejected by the authorities of his day, he was sentenced to death. He did not try to avoid it. He did not deny his teaching or his mission. He accepted death as the culmination of a life united with his heavenly Father.

When we make the sign of the cross, we commit ourselves to the God we know from salvation history. We pray in the name of "Our Father," the source of all things. We pray to the Holy Spirit, who animates us and moves us to believe. And we pray to Jesus Christ, God's Son and our brother, who shows us the meaning of faithfulness. As we name the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, we trace a cross upon our bodies, praying to be faithful unto death. Death is more than the consequences of sin. It is the culminating moment of our lives. With the sign of the cross we profess a gospel, the very serious good news of Jesus Christ. We say, "My human nature, to which death belongs, is capable of union with God" – in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.