

THE SIGN AND SYMBOL OF THE CROSS



I wear a silver cross, three inches tall, with the vestments wear to lead services of worship each Sunday morning. I frequently wear a smaller cross on a necklace, sometimes as part of clerical attire, sometimes simply as a favorite piece of jewelry. But it is always more than jewelry: it is a symbol of my faith; a symbol of my ministry; a symbol of my (and our) debt to Jesus Christ; a symbol of God's great love and mercy. In response to the cross, Issac Watts, in 1707, wrote (fourth stanza of **"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"**):

***Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.***

We frequently use many other symbols in our church and daily life. Many pastors wear vestments, which emphasize our priestly function. Pastors wear stoles, symbolic of the yoke of Christ, in whose name and spirit we minister (Matt. 11: 29f). Candles on our altars symbolize Jesus, the Light of the World (John 8: 12), and when there is one candle on each side of the altar, the two natures of Christ, the human and the divine. Candles are also a symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit, who descended in tongues of flame upon the early Christians gathered in an Upper Room on Pentecost (Acts 2: 3f).

Some symbols are objects which represent much more than merely the objects themselves: the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion, the water used in Baptism, the altar, an anchor, a cup or chalice, the fish, a bowl and towel.

Symbols can also be actions: the Laying on of Hands, kneeling, the procession of pastor and choirs, the kiss of peace and the passing of the peace.

An action symbol which has commonly been used in the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian Churches has recently been reclaimed by the Lutheran and other denominations and which has raised questions among Protestants is the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross is a confession of faith in Christ Crucified and an invocation of his blessing made by a gesture in the shape of the cross on one's body. It is made by touching the forehead, the chest and both left and right shoulders with the tips of the fingers

and thumb of the right hand, usually accompanied by the words, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost." (Based on explanation in **"A Select Liturgical Lexicon,"** by J. G. Davis, Volume 14 of **"Ecumenical Studies,"** published by the John Knox Press, 1965.)

Many pastors of our own Church have traced the shape of the cross on the head of infants or older persons at Baptism, as they placed their hands, with water, on the head the third time, or while holding their hands on the head during the baptismal blessing. Pastors often trace a cross in the same way or form a cross with their thumbs during the Laying on of Hands in the Rite of Confirmation.

The symbol of the cross, whether used on the altar, carved onto the ends of pews, worn for personal adornment or professional identity, is undoubtedly the most widely recognized and used Christian symbol among all branches of the Christian Church. Whichever form we personally use and/or practice, it is always a reminder of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. The "empty cross" further emphasizes Christ's triumph over suffering and death and also the shame of death by crucifixion, a form of punishment used for criminals. The cross proclaims, "He is Risen" and lives in glory forever!

Whenever we display or wear a cross, or if we make the sign of the cross with others who cherish this action symbol, we declare our faith in Christ, Our Crucified and Risen Lord; seek his strength to resist temptations and invoke his blessings upon our life and work. Whenever we make the cross evident, we witness to Jesus Christ, Our Crucified and Risen Savior.

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Scripture References:

1 Corinthians 1: 18
Galatians 6: 14
Hebrews 12: 2

Affirming our Faith Series No. 10
Reformed-Evangelical-Catholic
Published by the Committee on Theology
Pennsylvania Southeast Conference
United Church of Christ

