

ANGLICAN ARCANA: The Sign of the Cross

On her deathbed in the A.D. 379, a woman named Macrina reportedly commended herself to God and then made the sign of the cross upon her eyes and mouth and heart. She then breathed a deep breath, and her life came to an end—according to the *Life of Macrina* written by her brother Gregory of Nyssa.

We learn from the *Life* not only a few glimpses of one of the many great women of the church's past but also that the practice of making the sign of the cross is of ancient provenance—well established by the fourth century.

Christian writers testify to the use of the “sign of the Lord” as far back as Tertullian (c.160–c.225). The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* reports that this was partly as sanctifying every action in daily life (such as rising in the morning) and partly as a means of mutual recognition in times of persecution. The sign has been used at baptism from very early times, and was in time extended to the more general liturgical blessing of people.

Nowadays, the three-fold crossing is most common at the proclamation of the gospel, when many people will trace a cross with a thumb at the same three places as Blessed Macrina.

The world “O Lord, open thou our lips” that begin Morning Prayer are frequently associated with a single cross, signed on the lips with the thumb.

Many Anglicans will make a larger single sign of the cross at the beginning and end of the liturgy—so both “Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” and the “blessing of God Almighty: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” have been associated with making the sign.

A sign of the cross is commonplace at the Benedictus (“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”) as well as at the epiclesis over the people in the eucharistic prayer (“Sanctify us also”). Most people make a sign of the cross at the absolution. Other places where a sign of the cross may sometimes be seen: at the end of *Gloria in excelsis*, at the mention of the resurrection at end of the creed, and even at the voicing of a petition for the dearly departed.

Some say the sign of the cross means one thing; others say it is superstitious, or has no meaning at all.

Whatever your own personal view of the significance, the sign of the cross is a venerable part of our liturgical action. We participate in liturgy with our body—not just our soul and our mind. The sign of the cross is one way in which we manifest this physical reality.

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