

# "BY THIS SIGN SHALT THOU CONQUER"

by

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The tradition of making the sign of the Cross was already well known to Christians in the second century throughout the East and the West. Tertullian, who was born around 155 A. D. and died in 240, writes: "In all our travels and movements, in all our coming and going, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at meals, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the Cross" (*The Chaplet*, 3).

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (+386) says much the same: "Let us not be ashamed to confess the Crucified One. Let the Cross be our seal, made with boldness by our fingers on our brow and in everything; over the bread we eat and the cups we drink, in our coming and going; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we awake; when we are travelling, and when we are at rest" (*Catechetical Lectures*, XIII, 36).

Originally, the sign of the Cross was made by the Christians by their thumbs or a finger on their foreheads.

However, from the Life of Saint Nina (c.+339), the Enlightener of Georgia, we read of a miracle worked by her, where the sign of the Cross was made over the whole body in order to bless the person in question: "Saint Nina began to pray and entreat God for a long time. Then she took her cross [made of grapevine branches] and with it touched the Queen's head, her feet and her shoulders, making the sign of the Cross, and straightway the Queen was cured" (*Studio Biblica*, v. 32).

It is evident that the custom of making the sign of the Cross, from brow to breast, from the right shoulder to the left shoulder began during the Monophysite controversy (5<sup>th</sup> century), as a confession of the Orthodox Faith. At first, the thumb and forefinger were extended, typifying the two natures and two wills of Christ. A little later, it became common to use the thumb and *two* fingers, while two fingers were folded back upon the palm. These latter two symbolized the two natures and two wills of Christ, while the extended three denoted the Holy Trinity.

At this time, Christians in the East and West made the sign of the Cross the same way: brow to breast, right shoulder to left shoulder. This remained true until the thirteenth century. But, as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912 edition) itself admits, the Roman Catholics changed this at that time by extending their whole hand (and not just the thumb and two fingers), and making the bar of the Cross from left to right, as they still do today.

In his work, *On the Holy Spirit* (chap. 27), Saint Basil the Great (+379) says, "Of the doctrines and practices, whether generally accepted or publically enjoined, which are preserved in the Church, some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us 'in a mystery' by the Tradition of the Apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force.... For instance, to take the first and most universal example, who is there who has taught us in any written text to sign with the sign of the Cross those who trust in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ?"

In other words, the Saint is telling us, all Christians have received this as an unwritten Tradition from the time of the Holy Apostles.\*

The Cross is *not* a "tradition of men." It is God's gift to mankind.

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\* See my earlier article, "Only the Bible, and Other False Teachings."