

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS.

Christianus es, in fronte portas signum Christi.

EVERY society or body of men, if at all numerous or important, possesses some distinctive sign. This sign may be known only to the members of the body, as is the case with Freemasons, or it may be manifest to all, as is the tonsure of the priest; it may consist in some peculiarity of dress, some badge to be worn, some act to be performed; but whether hidden or apparent, material or immaterial, there is always something to distinguish the member of a society from his fellow-men. The sign of the cross always has been, and ever will be, the special mark of the followers of Christ. As circumcision was amongst the Jews the exterior mark of the chosen people of God, so under the Gospel the sign of the cross is the exterior mark of the Christian people. We find it prefigured in the Old Testament by the sprinkling of blood on the transom and posts of the doors of the dwellings whereinto, on the Paschal night, the destroyer was not to enter; and, still more clearly, in the letter *Thau*, T, one form of the cross, which Ezekiel was to mark on the foreheads of the men who mourned over the abominations committed in their city. Some of the fathers are of opinion that our Lord gave this sign on His ascension to the apostles, and that they taught the people everywhere to use it; at any rate, there is abundant proof that from the very earliest ages of the Church, while the symbol of our salvation was an emblem of obloquy, an object of contempt and aversion to mankind in general, and long before the cross, either carved or painted, *crux exemplata*, found a place on the walls of every Christian house, the sign of the cross, made with the hand, *crux usualis*, was employed by the members of the Church to denote that they were Christians, and distinguished them from the Jews and heathen amongst whom they lived and with whom they mingled. St. Epiphanius, speaking of a woman who was subjected to some vain enchantments, says: "She, being a Christian, crossed herself in the name of Christ" (Haer. 30). "If man does ask a catechumen," says St. Augustine (Tract ii. in Joan.), "Does man believe in Christ? he replies, 'I believe in Him,' and makes the sign of the cross." And in another place (Serm. 53, De Verbo Dei): "We recognize the members of Christ because they bear the sign of Christ." The phrase, *portare crucem in fronte*, recurs frequently in the writings of

the early Christian apologists and fathers, and in some cases received a literal interpretation, for in the days of persecution those Christians who were condemned to work in the mines had a cross stamped on their foreheads.¹ A custom seems, too, to have existed at one time in the East of branding Christian children on the forehead, in order that they might be recognized if carried away into captivity.

The sign of the cross was originally made with the thumb of the right hand on the forehead only, or on the forehead, lips and breast. On the forehead, because it is not only the noblest part of the human frame, the seat of the intellect, but also because it is the most conspicuous. There a man's character is said to be inscribed, and there the flush of shame, the fear of disgrace first writes itself. What place, then, more fitting for that sign which proclaims that he is not ashamed to confess Christ crucified, which seals His dedication to God in the Christian church? "He placed his sign on my forehead," says St. Agnes, speaking of her celestial Spouse, "that I should admit no other lover." "Have Christ in your hearts and His mark upon your foreheads," was a Christian proverb. The act of crossing oneself was accompanied by an invocation of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, either severally or together, or of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; by the words, *adjutorium nostrum*, etc., or some formula of renunciation of evil: "I renounce thee, O Satan, and thy pomp and service, and I enrol myself as thine, O Christ. As thou sayest this make the sign of the cross on thy forehead" (Chrysostom, or. 21 ad pop. Antioch.). It was made with the right hand, as being the worthier and more honorable, at first with one finger only, and later, when this method became unorthodox, owing to the monophysites and other heretics quoting it in support of their doctrine of the single nature of Christ, with the whole hand, to signify, as Durandus suggests, the five wounds of our Lord; or with three fingers, in reference to the Holy Trinity; or with two, to denote the twofold nature of the God made man. About the eighth century the primitive manner of making the cross was supplanted by the more elaborate one of raising the hand to the forehead, lowering it to the breast, and passing it first to the left shoulder and then to the right. The movement from the head to the breast signifies the descent of Christ from the height of heaven to the Virgin's womb; from

¹ In the Dict. des Antiquités Chrétiennes, Martigny mentions a painting on glass, the bottom of a drinking vessel, found in the catacombs, bearing the inscription, *libernica*, and the bust of a young man on whose brow a Greek cross is imprinted. This is explained as perhaps intended to indicate his sanctity, the mark of the Lamb on his forehead; but most probably it is to betoken him as one of those who were sentenced *ad metalla*.

right to left shows how the Son of God removes us from the goats on the left to the sheep on the right, from the kingdom of death to life eternal ; we finish on the breast to signify that the cross and the Crucified are to be always in our heart.¹ " It is on our brow that we may confess Christ, on our heart that we may love Him, on our arm that we may work for Him," says St. Ambrose (*Lib. de Isaac et Anima*, 8). The Greeks taught that the hand should be passed from right to left, because the Son is seated at the right hand of the Father, and the Holy Ghost on the left ; but this manner of making the cross was condemned by Innocent III., who expressly prescribed that the cross in the Mass should be made from left to right, and this practice has since been followed in the Latin Church.

But the sign of the cross in the early days of Christianity was by no means regarded as a profession of faith alone, otherwise it would have fallen into disuse when the Pagan empire was overthrown and all nations became Christian ; and the Puritans might have been justified when, on separating themselves from the Church, they abolished the use of this sign, urging the altered circumstances of the times, and comparing it to the brazen serpent destroyed by Hezekiah's command. On the contrary, we find that the faithful were exhorted to employ it as a defence in danger, an encouragement in suffering, a remedy in sickness ; above all, as a means of stilling unholy passions and resisting sinful desires. " The flesh is signed that the soul may be fenced," writes Tertullian. And St. Cyril : " We make the sign of the cross to recall all that is good and virtuous." The sign of the cross was the habitual accompaniment of the Christian's daily life, no action being considered too ordinary or too oft-recurring to be preceded and followed by it. Not only did they cross themselves on forehead, eyes, lips and breast, on rising up and lying down, on going out and coming in, but they made the same holy sign on the garments they wore, the food they ate, the cup from which they drank, the couch on which they rested, the instruments and implements of their toil or handicraft. The works of the Christian writers of the first five centuries abound with passages showing how constant and widespread was its use. " We ought, on rising, to give thanks to God, and perform all our daily work with the sign of the cross," says St. Ambrose (*Serm.* 43). " And St. Jerome : " Whatever thou doest, wherever thou goest, let thy hand make the sign of the cross " (*ad Eustoch.* Ep. 22). " Before undertaking any work, at every step or movement, when we go in or out, when we dress or put on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, when lights are brought, when we go to bed,

¹ Gretser, *De Cruce*, l. 4, c. 5.

when we sit down, whatever it is that occupies us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross" (Tertullian, *de. Cor. Mil.*). Some superstitious custom seems to have been connected with putting on the shoes, which the sign of the cross was to replace, as at the commencement of meals it was substituted for the idolatrous usages of the heathens, who placed their gods before them at table. St. Augustine asserts that the sign of the cross is referred to by St. Paul, when, writing to Timothy, he says that every creature is to be sanctified by the Word of God and prayer; at any rate, it was the ordinary method whereby objects that had been employed for idolatrous purposes were purified, and meats offered to idols rendered fit for the food of the faithful.

And if every action, even the least and most trivial, was thus to be sanctified, how much more must the Christian have recourse to this sacred sign under exceptional circumstances of trial and temptation, on special occasions of danger and difficulty. If anything important was to be said, the speaker crossed himself before commencing his discourse. If the Christian heard words of blasphemy uttered, he smote his breast and made the sign of the cross, as when alarmed by tempests or any sudden peril. It was made over the sick to alleviate their sufferings, and again when the hour of death drew near. St. Jerome says of St. Paula, that when the sign of the cross was made on her breast, her pains seemed to abate. It formed the affectionate farewell of friends when parting for a lengthened period, or on any solemn occasion, a custom the memory of which still lingers in the German farewell salutations: "Behüt' dich das heilige Kreuz"; "Gesegne dich Gott." Soldiers, going to battle, crossed themselves when the trumpet sounded for the fight, to show that they trusted less in the strength of the sword than in the name of Christ. The martyrs crossed themselves in the presence of their judges, when asked if they were Christians; again, in the hands of their executioners they crossed themselves, this proving in many instances the means of delivering them from injury. We read in the "Martyrology" that St. Tiburtius (20 Jan.), after making the sign of the cross, walked unhurt over burning coals. St. Vitus (15 June), being thrown into a fiery furnace, came out uninjured, having made the sign of the cross; and when exposed to a raging lion, he tamed him with the same holy sign, so that the fierce animal licked his feet. Of St. Tecla (23 Sept.) it is said that, when thrown upon the fire, she made the sign of the cross, and a violent downpour of rain extinguished the flames. The acts of the saints furnish innumerable examples illustrating the piety wherewith the early Christians made the sign of the cross, the confidence they reposed in it, the wonders that were worked by it. By means of it St. Julian (9 Jan.) deprived poison

of its deadly power, and St. Remigius (13 Jan.) arrested a vast conflagration in the city of Rheims. St. Mary of Egypt (8 April), on making the sign of the cross, was able to traverse the Jordan, walking over its stormy waters in order to receive the Holy Eucharist from the hands of Zozimus. St. Procopius (8 July) made the sign of the cross before the statues of certain heathen deities, and they were cast out and broken in pieces without human hands. St. Benignus (1 Nov.), in the same way, caused the wood and stones and vessels prepared for offering sacrifice to idols to vanish into smoke. In like manner St. Amandus (6 Feb.) put to flight a monstrous serpent, and banished it from the isle it infested. He also, by the sign of the cross, restored sight to a woman struck blind for adoring idols. Pope Cœlestine (10 May) thus healed a woman paralyzed in both hands, and John, Archbishop of York, made a dumb man to speak by making the sign of the cross on his tongue. And as the powers of nature were dominated by the virtue of this holy sign, in like manner evil spirits were unable to resist it. "The devils cannot approach to them on whom they see this heavenly mark," writes Lactantius (Inst. l. 4, c. 27), "nor can they hurt those whom this heavenly sign, as an impregnable fortress, defends." It was thus the monks of the desert used to put the devil to flight when he appeared to tempt them under various forms, as man or brute, fawn or satyr. "Let him who wishes for proof," says St. Athanasius (De Incarn. Verbi Dei, c. 48), "use the sign of the cross, and he will see how the demons are put to flight by it, how the oracles cease, and all magic and witchcraft are brought to naught." It was also the usual form of exorcism; St. Theodoret, the Archimandrite, is said thus to have expelled an unclean spirit from a boy who was possessed (22 April). Even when employed by unbelievers and those who are opposed to the Christian religion, the cross was not without effect on the powers of evil, as was seen in the case of Julian the Apostate, Josephus, and other Jews of whom Theodoret and St. Gregory Nazianzen speak. This fact, as well as that of its use being recommended on all occasions, is brought forward by Gretser (De Cruce, l. 4) as proof that the cross has power *ex opere operato*; he admits, however, that the effect of the sign is enhanced by the piety and virtue of the user, and the name of Christ more powerful when invoked with the heart as well as the lips.

Many passages might be quoted from the pages of early writers to show that from the first the sign of the cross was, as it still is, a marked feature of Christian worship, both in the general devotions and, preëminently, in the administration of the sacraments. By this sign of the Lord's person, the body of Christ is consecrated, the fount of baptism sanctified, priests are initiated, the

other orders conferred, churches dedicated, and altars consecrated. It was considered as an essential part of the sacraments: "Unless the sign of the cross is made either on the foreheads of the faithful, or on the water wherewith they are regenerated, or on the oil with which they are anointed, or on the sacrifice with which they are nourished, none of these things are duly performed," is the dictum of St. Augustine (Hom. 118, in Joan.). St. Cyprian, speaking of baptism, says: "Whoever may be the minister of the sacrament, of whatever sort may be the hands that immerse the candidates, by whatever lips the words are uttered, it is the authoritative sign of the cross which works the effect." (De Pass. Christi.) It was the token of admission into the Church, the giving up of the catechumen to Christ, the sign and seal of passing from the state of sin to the state of grace. In baptizing, the priest first made a cross upon the catechumen's forehead, and, after the renunciation was pronounced, on his breast and head also, with olive oil, using the words: "Take the sign of the cross, both on forehead and breast;" for the heart of man, being the seat of error and vices when possessed by the devil, is made the abode of faith, hope, and charity when illumined and defended by Christ.¹ The original form of words varies according to the different rites, likewise the number of times the cross was to be made. In the Cologne rite it was repeated as many as seven times, on different parts of the person, each sign having its special signification: on the head of the catechumen, to show that he adopts the faith of Christ; on his ears, that he may hear the divine command; his eyes, that he may see the light of God; his nostrils, that he may perceive the sweet odor of Christ; his mouth, that he may speak the words of life; his heart, that he may believe in God; and his shoulders, that he may take Christ's yoke upon him.² Immediately after the immersion, the neophyte was again anointed with consecrated oil on the forehead by the bishop, if it was possible for him to be present. This was the sacrament of confirmation. Gregory of Tours tells how Clodovic was baptized and then anointed with sacred chrism with the sign of the cross of Christ. The ancient formula of confirmation was: Take the sign of Christ to eternal life; or: In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. But this varied, until Pope Eugene IV. (1439) fixed the formula since in use throughout the whole Church.

In the ordination of priests, the laying on of hands was in the form of the cross, not merely *consignatio*, but *consignatio cruciformis*

¹ See Augusti, Denkwürdigkeiten, v. 7, p. 295-7. Also, Martene, De Ant. Eccl. Rit. 4, l. art. 13.

² Binterim, Denkwürdigkeiten, v. l. p. 22.

(Dion. Areop. de Hier. Eccl., c. 5), to express that the priest is to imitate the life of Christ. The sacred vestments are also blessed with the sign of the cross. When, towards the end of the first century, the Church's blessing first became an adjunct to the nuptials of her children, the union of man and wife was sealed and sanctified by the same sign, in consequence of which St. Andrew Cretensis calls the cross *conjugii vinculum*, the bond of wedlock. It is also sometimes termed the sign of blessing, because the benediction, given to the people in the time of the Patriarchs with outstretched hands, under the new dispensation is given with the sign of the cross. Penance and extreme unction, also, like the other sacraments, are nothing unless accompanied by the sign of the cross, because the reconciliation of the sinner cannot be effected without it.

There still remains to speak of the use of the sign of the cross in the sacrifice of the Mass, which is both ancient and universal. The officiating priest crosses himself repeatedly, as well as the book, the altar, the offerings and oblations, and the people when he gives the benediction at the close. The different revisals of the "Ordo Romanus" decree differently as to the number of times of making the sign. The first mentions the cross to be made on the forehead at commencing, as well as three times over the elements at the consecration, as ordered by the Apostolical Constitutions. According to the Roman Missal now in use, the cross is to be made fifty-five times in the celebration of High Mass. In the liturgy of St. Mark it appears that the cross was made in the Creed at *Et incarnatus est*, at *crucifixus etiam pro nobis*, and again at *in spiritum sanctum*; and in that of St. James it was made by the priest over the elements at the *Sanctus*. From old records we learn that it was formerly, in some places, the custom for the deacon or priest, when about to commence the Gospel, to cross himself on forehead, lips, and breast, and for the people, standing up to show respect to the word of God, to do the same as a profession of faith. Gretser¹ says that it is related of St. Martin that when he made the sign of the cross in the prayer of consecration, his whole arm and hand shone with light to show the divinity of the act, which has also been attested by many other miracles.

That the sign of the cross should be employed in the celebration of Mass, to bless the unconsecrated bread and wine, occasions no surprise, accustomed as we are to its use in Christian ceremonial as a means of sanctification; but the reason why it should be employed subsequent to the consecration, when the elements have become the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, is less obvious,

¹ De Cruce, l. 4, c. 16.

since it would be absurd to suppose that any added sanctity could be conferred upon the Sacred Host by the blessing of the Priest. What, then, is the meaning of the sign of the cross when employed after the consecration? Bishop Hefele enumerates several explanations which have been suggested,¹ neither of which taken singly, however, does he consider as satisfactory when applied to all the occasions when the sign of the cross is made over the consecrated elements. The first is that of St. Thomas, who says that it is to commemorate the power of the cross and the form of Christ's passion, to signify, that is, the blessing that flows to us from them. This explanation holds good in regard to the first seven times that the cross is made by the Priest subsequent to the consecration, namely, the five in accompaniment of the words: *hostiam puram, hostiam sanctam, hostiam immaculatam, panem sanctum vite æternæ, et calicem salutis perpetuæ*; and the two later on at the words: *Ut quotquot ex hac altaris participatione sacrosanctum Filii tui corpus et sanguinem sumpserimus*. A second explanation is that the sign of the cross was originally made to bless the eulogia, or blessed bread placed upon the altar, and then given to the faithful who did not receive communion, the sign still remaining though the eulogia are abolished. This applies to the crosses at the words: *Per quem hæc omnia, Domine, semper bona creas, sanctificas, vivificas, benedicis et præstas nobis*. A third explanation is founded on the general custom of making the sign of the cross on naming the Persons of the Holy Trinity; and here we have the reason why it is made at the words: *Per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso*, etc. The three first times it is made with the host over the chalice, because Christ is present in both. The cross thrice repeated at the words: *Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum*, may be explained in much the same manner as those immediately after the consecration, as signifying the blessing accruing to the faithful from the passion of Christ. A fourth suggestion, taken from Kössing's work on the Mass, quoted by Bishop Hefele, but acknowledged by him to be insufficient to account for the use of the sign of the cross in the celebration of the holy sacrifice on all occasions, is that it is intended to express the identity of the victim offered upon the altar with the one who suffered upon the cross. Other and more mystic significations have also been given, but these may be regarded rather as a pious afterthought than the real reasons why the use of the sign of the cross was decreed in the liturgy of the Mass.

When the "mummeries of the Mass" and the other ceremonies of the Church, authorized by tradition, confirmed by custom, observed by faith, were swept away at the "Reformation," the sign of the

¹ Beitrage, vol. ii. p. 286.

cross, too, was abolished as being of human, not divine, ordinance. Not wholly abolished, however, for, strangely enough, the Lutherans retained it in the consecration of the bread and wine as well as the giving of peace at the close of the Communion service; the Episcopalians also, in England, thought fit to retain its use in the baptismal, though not in the Communion service, thereby giving great offense to Puritan zealots, as Hooker testifies.¹ "To some," he says, "it hath seemed almost an unpardonable oversight to retain the dangerous sign of the cross. To sign children's heads with the cross in token that they shall not hereafter be ashamed to make profession of the faith of Christ, is to bring into the Church a new word, whereas there ought to be no doctor heard in the Church but our Saviour Christ. . . . For although it be the word of God that we should not be ashamed of the Cross of Christ, yet it is not the word of God that we should be kept in remembrance of it by two lines drawn across each other on the child's forehead." Hooker himself is ready to acknowledge the good and profitable use of this ceremony, and maintains that "we are by no means bound to relinquish the sign and ceremony of the cross as superstitious."

Those who rashly refuse to sign themselves with the sign of Christ, in their folly fail to see that the Scriptures, on which they profess to rest their beliefs, repeatedly describe those as marked of God on the forehead whom His mercy will preserve from final confusion and shame; with what are they marked, but with the sign of the cross? Furthermore, in the last great persecution of the Church foretold in the Apocalypse, this sacred sign will be the mark which will be opposed to the mark of the heart, and will distinguish the followers of Christ from the followers of Antichrist. For, as we are distinctly told, that last and greatest enemy of the Christian Faith will also have his sign whereby his adorers may be known, a character which he will imprint in their right hand, or on their forehead, wherewith he will seek to obliterate the memory of the cross, to abolish the sign of the cross, and finally prevent its use.

¹ Eccl. Polity, 5, 65.