

WHY WE DO, WHAT WE DO: WHY DO CATHOLICS SIGN THEMSELVES WITH THE CROSS BEFORE THE GOSPEL IS PROCLAIMED?

More than just a routine gesture, this is steeped in biblical symbolism. For Roman Catholics, there is a gesture that can often go unnoticed before the recitation of the Gospel reading at Mass. It is a brief tracing of the Cross that is not the typical gesture usually performed and contains much symbolism. It is not one sign of the Cross, but three (over the forehead, mouth, and heart).



Prior to processing to the ambo to proclaim the Gospel, if a Deacon of the Mass is present, he goes to the presiding priest to receive a blessing, via the following prayer:

May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips, that you may proclaim his Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father † and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In a similar way, when the priest is the one to proclaim the Gospel, he prays the words (generally behind the altar) of the prayer *Munda cor meum* silently:

*Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, †
that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel.*

The gesture is a direct imitation of what is prescribed by the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) (priests: #134 / deacons: #176), which states:

“At the ambo, the Priest [or deacon] opens the book and, with hands joined, says: *The Lord be with you*, to which the people reply, *And with your spirit*. Then he states: *A reading from the holy Gospel according to ____*, making the Sign of the Cross with his thumb on the book [of the Gospels] and [then] on his forehead, mouth, and breast, which everyone else does as well. The people meanwhile acclaim: *Glory to you, O Lord. ...* Then he proclaims the Gospel and at the end pronounces the acclamation: *The Gospel of the Lord*, to which all reply: *Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ*. The Priest [or deacon] then kisses the book, saying quietly the prayer *Per evangelica dicta* (*May the words of the Gospel cleanse us of our faults.*)”

Along with the Deacon or Priest (before the Gospel is proclaimed), the laity and others attending the liturgy, are invited to likewise make a similar silent prayer and gesture. They are encouraged to say interiorly, a brief prayer that prepares them to receive the Word of God:

May the Word of the Lord be on my mind, † on my lips, and in my heart.

This simple sign and gesture is one with deep biblical roots. For example, God explains to the people of Israel to recite a particular prayer (the Shema: “Hear, O Israel ...”) on a daily basis, but also to put that phrase “as a pendant on your forehead” (Deuteronomy 6:8). Many Jewish males take that literally and wrap a small box (containing a small rolled scroll) around their forehead (a Tefillin) (examples below). It is a daily, visible reminder for them (especially during morning and evening prayer) to keep the Word of God always before them and on their mind.



Additionally, the prayer recalls the words from the Letter to the Hebrews (4:12), where it states:

“The word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.”

Thus, when we make such a meaningful gesture at Mass, it is truly a profound prayer to God, to sincerely and completely open us to hearing the words of Jesus Christ. Every time we listen to the Gospel, Jesus is knocking at the door of our heart, waiting ... wanting to get in. We just have to open the door and invite him in!



So, WHY is it not one sign of the Cross (like we demonstrate at the beginning and end of the liturgies), but THREE (the sign of the Blessed Trinity) (over the forehead, mouth, and heart)?

It's simple: ***The hearing of the Gospel must change our minds; it must then be proclaimed by our mouth, and it must affect our heart.*** By heart, we mean our will, affections, emotions and passions. For in the end: It is a profound and life-changing plea and prayer to God indeed!