

WHY IS THE SIGN OF THE CROSS A SACRAMENTAL?

Why the Church Calls Sacramental Signs

“Many Catholics use the Sign of the Cross every day, yet few realize that it is one of the Church’s sacramentals.”

For many Catholics, the Sign of the Cross is so familiar that it can easily become routine. We make it before prayer, at Mass, before meals, during blessings, and often in moments of danger, gratitude, or need. Yet the Sign of the Cross is much more than a habit or religious gesture. The Church considers it one of her sacramentals, placing it among the sacred signs that help prepare believers to receive God’s grace and dispose them to cooperate with it. This often surprises people because when they hear the word “sacramental,” they usually think of physical objects such as rosaries, medals, scapulars, or holy water.

So why is the Sign of the Cross a sacramental if it is not an object?

The answer helps us understand what sacramentals truly are.

1. WHAT IS THE SIGN OF THE CROSS?

The Sign of the Cross is one of the oldest and most universal practices in Christianity.

When Catholics make the Sign of the Cross, they trace the cross upon themselves while invoking the Holy Trinity:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

This simple action contains two central mysteries of the Christian faith:

* the Holy Trinity * and the saving Cross of Jesus Christ

In one brief gesture, Catholics profess belief in the Triune God and remember the sacrifice through which Christ redeemed the world. For this reason, the Sign of the Cross is both a prayer and a profession of faith.

2. WHAT IS A SACRAMENTAL?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that sacramentals are sacred signs instituted by the Church.

They do not confer grace in the same manner as the seven Sacraments, but they help prepare people to receive grace and cooperate with it.

Examples of sacramentals include:

* blessings * holy water * ashes * medals * rosaries * scapulars* and various sacred gestures and prayers

Notice something important. Not every sacramental is an object. Some sacramentals are actions, prayers, blessings, or signs. This is where the Sign of the Cross fits in.

3. WHY IS THE SIGN OF THE CROSS A SACRAMENTAL?

The Sign of the Cross is a sacramental because it is a sacred sign used by the Church to express faith and invoke God’s blessing. When made with devotion, it reminds Catholics of their baptism, their redemption through Christ, and their belonging to the Holy Trinity. The Church has long encouraged its use because it helps orient the mind and heart toward God. Whether beginning prayer, entering a church, receiving a blessing, or facing temptation, the Sign of the Cross becomes a visible expression of invisible faith.

Like other sacramentals, it helps dispose believers to receive God’s grace more fruitfully.

4. WHY DOES THE CHURCH CALL SACRAMENTALS “SIGNS”?

This question is the key to understanding the entire subject.

The Church calls sacramentals “signs” because their purpose is to point beyond themselves to a spiritual reality. A sign directs attention toward something greater.

For example:

- holy water points to Baptism* ashes point to repentance* a crucifix points to Christ’s sacrifice
* a blessing points to God’s protection

Likewise, the Sign of the Cross points to:

* the Holy Trinity* Christ’s Passion* redemption* and our Christian identity

The power is not in the movement itself. The sign is meaningful because of what it represents and the faith with which it is made.

5. WHY ARE SACRAMENTALS NOT LIMITED TO OBJECTS?

Many Catholics naturally associate sacramentals with religious items because those are often the most visible examples. However, the Church’s definition is broader. Sacramentals include sacred signs. Some of those signs are objects.

Others are actions. Others are prayers. Others are blessings. This is why the Sign of the Cross, though not an object, fully qualifies as a sacramental. The Church’s focus is not on whether something can be held in the hand but on whether it serves as a sacred sign that directs believers toward God.

6. DOES THE SIGN OF THE CROSS HAVE SPIRITUAL BENEFITS?

Yes. Throughout Christian history, the Sign of the Cross has been used as a reminder of God's presence and a source of spiritual strength. When made with faith and reverence, it can help believers:

- * begin prayer properly*
- * remember their baptism
- * profess belief in the Trinity*
- * focus their minds on God
- * and seek divine protection

The Church encourages Catholics not to make the Sign of the Cross mechanically but thoughtfully and prayerfully. A simple gesture made with faith can become a powerful act of devotion.

IN SUMMARY:

A SMALL GESTURE WITH GREAT MEANING

The Sign of the Cross is not merely a religious custom. It is one of the Church's sacramentals because it is a sacred sign that expresses faith, recalls Christ's saving sacrifice, and directs believers toward God.

It also helps explain why the Church calls sacramentals "signs."

Not all sacramentals are objects. Some are actions, prayers, blessings, and gestures that point beyond themselves to spiritual realities.

Every time Catholics make the Sign of the Cross, they proclaim the Trinity, remember the Cross, and renew their identity as followers of Christ.

Today, reflect:

When I make the Sign of the Cross, do I do so thoughtfully and with faith, or merely out of habit?

"The Sign of the Cross may be simple, but it contains some of the deepest truths of the Christian faith."

If this helped you understand Catholic teaching better, spread it and tell us:

When do you most often make the Sign of the Cross during your day?

SOURCE:

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1667–1679)

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2157)

Code of Canon Law

Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy

Church Teaching on Sacramentals

Fr. Anthony Onoko