



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Why do Lutherans make the sign of the cross?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

"In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit" or "Blessed be the Holy Trinity, + one God, who forgives all our sin, whose mercy endures forever." These words begin the orders for Confession and Forgiveness in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The rubric (directions in *red italics*) that accompanies these words says: "*The assembly stands. All may make the sign of the cross, the sign marked at baptism, as the presiding minister begins.*"

As this invocation is made, an increasing number of Lutherans trace the sign of the cross over their bodies from forehead to lower chest, then from shoulder to shoulder and back to the heart; and others trace a small cross on their foreheads.

The sign of the cross, whether traced over the body or on the forehead, is a sign and remembrance of Baptism. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament, says of this gesture:

These interpretive signs proclaim the gifts that are given in the promise of God in Baptism...The sign of the cross marks the Christian as united with the Crucified (28A).

The sign of the cross is ecumenical, in that it is used by the Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians, and is slowly increasing in use among mainline Protestants. It is also a remembrance of the death and resurrection of our Lord: the center of our faith. The sign of the cross is a treasured part of our heritage as Lutherans, because the practice was encouraged and used by Martin Luther himself. Luther made provisions for using the sign of the cross on at least three occasions.

- **In Holy Baptism** The text of Luther's 1526 Order of Baptism called for the sign of the cross to be made over the candidate as a part of Baptism. "Receive the sign of the holy cross on both your forehead and your breast" (*Luther's Works* 53:107).

- **At Ordination.** In his order for the Ordination of Ministers of the Word, Luther says of the benediction: "The ordinator blesses them with the sign of the cross" (*Luther's Works*, 53:126).
- **In Daily Prayer.** Luther instructed his followers to make the sign of the cross at both the beginning and the end of the day as a beginning to daily prayers. In the Small Catechism, in the section on morning and evening prayers Luther says: "When you get out of bed, bless yourself with the holy cross and say 'In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.' " This same instruction is given for bedtime.

In current ecumenical usage, the sign of the cross may be made at the following times or occasions, listed in order of prevalence by Lutheran assemblies. The use of the word "may" is very intentional, as such a gesture is made freely and never by compulsion.

- **At Baptism:** "*The presiding minister marks the sign of the cross on the forehead of each of the baptized. Oil prepared for this purpose may be used* (see also, ["How is oil used in worship?"](#)). *As the sign of the cross is made, the minister says: "_____, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever"* (ELW, p. 231).
- **At the invocation in orders for confession and forgiveness** in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, *Libro de Liturgia y Cantico*, and *This Far by Faith*.
- **At the absolution in orders for confession and forgiveness.** For example, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Confession and Forgiveness, the sign of the cross is made as the minister says, "I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit." or "In the name of + Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven (ELW p. 96).
- **At the Blessing during the Sending rite**, when a trinitarian form of benediction (one that includes the words "Father, + Son, and Holy Spirit") is used, and during the final phrase of the Aaronic benediction (The Lord bless you and keep you....)
- **In Holy Communion**, as the "Blessed is He" is sung in the Sanctus, and immediately before or after receiving the elements of bread and wine.
- **At the reading of the Gospel**, as the words "The holy Gospel according to ___" are said, a small cross may be traced with the thumb, first on the forehead, then lips, and finally on the breast. Signing the cross at the gospel is used most often by Roman Catholics and in varying degrees by some Lutherans and Episcopalians.
- **At conclusion of the Nicene Creed**, when the phrase "and the life of the world to come" is said. Making the sign of the cross here is a remembrance that resurrected life is promised to those baptized into Christ.
- **As part of the Welcome to Baptism**, a rite used with those who are beginning a public relationship with a Christian congregation as they inquire into Christian faith and life (See ELW pp. 232-233). During this rite, sponsors may simply make sign of the cross on over their inquirers' forehead or they may also trace the cross on other parts of the body such as the ears, eyes, lips, hands, and feet. (See *The*

Christian Life, pp. 92-95). The Rite of Welcome, along with other provisional catechumenate rites, can be found in the volume *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate* (Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- 🔄 How is oil used in worship?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. (p.117)

Other Resources

- 📄 The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Lancaster, PA has produced a brochure that has a good example of this:
http://www.elcgs.org/brochures/PDF/Sign_of_Cross.pdf

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