



## CHAPTER ONE

### Recovering the Power of the Ancient Sign

*But as for me, it is out of the question that I should boast of anything at all, except of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. . . . After this, let no one trouble me; I carry branded on my body the marks of Jesus.*

—GALATIANS 6:14, 17

*This sign is a powerful protection. It is gratuitous, because of the poor. Easy because of the weak. A benefit from God, the standard of the faithful, the terror of demons.<sup>1</sup>*

—ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (c. 315–386)

*Adorn and protect each of your members with this victorious sign, and nothing can injure you.<sup>2</sup>*

—ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN (306–373)



Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn leaned on his shovel and watched the gray clouds that dragged sullenly across the sky. A merciless wind tore at him through his prison garb. He felt as though it penetrated to his soul. Every bone and muscle ached. Hunger gnawed his stomach. Years of hard labor in the Siberian work camp had ruined his health and stripped him of hope.

Solzhenitsyn could endure no longer. He dropped his shovel, left the work gang, and sat on a bench nearby. Soon a guard would command him to return to work. When he would ignore the order, the guard would beat him to death, probably with his own shovel. He had seen it happen to others many times. *A quick, bloody death today, thought Solzhenitsyn, would be better than a slow death in a bleak and empty future.*

He stared at the ground, waiting for the inevitable. Soon he heard footsteps and braced himself in anticipation of the guard's harsh words. But when he raised his eyes, instead of a guard, he saw a gaunt, elderly prisoner standing before him. The old man said nothing, but knelt in front of Solzhenitsyn. With a stick he scratched the sign of the cross in the dirt and hurried back to work.

Solzhenitsyn looked at the cross and, as he reflected on it, a ray of light penetrated his dark thoughts. In that moment, his perspective changed radically. He realized that he did not have to face the evil of the gulag and the Soviets on his own diminished strength. With the power of the cross, he could withstand the evil of not just one but a thousand Soviet empires.

He got up from the bench and returned to work. Externally, none of Solzhenitsyn's oppressive circumstances changed that day, but internally he had experienced a gentle revolution. The sign of the cross had blessed him with the grace of hope.<sup>3</sup>

I found this story in an internet search, and it moved me deeply because it affirmed something I had been discovering in my own prayer. For some reason, in the past few years, I have taken the sign of the cross more seriously. I signed myself more frequently and with more reverence and faith. Over time I sensed that crossing myself tapped into a powerful divine energy that had many practical consequences for my life. It opened me to a flow of graces that strengthened me to face the challenges that arose every day.

When I reflected on how things were going for me, I realized that I was doing better with controlling my anger and overcoming other problems. I also felt that I was relating to God more freely and directly. I asked myself what I was doing differently that might account for this noticeable progress. The only answer I came up with was my praying more earnestly with the sign of the cross.

As I sought to understand what was happening to me, I read some articles and books about the sign of the cross.

A little research showed me that what was a novel experience for me had been the normal, everyday experience of Christians in the Church's first centuries. I learned that many early Christian writers described how believers signed themselves frequently. For example, Tertullian (c. 160–c. 240), a theologian writing at the turn of the third century, said, "In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross."<sup>4</sup> And my reading showed further that the Fathers of the Church testified to the great blessings and power attached to the sign of the cross. I will quote them extensively throughout this book, but here I will cite only St. John Chrysostom (347–407), the eloquent fourth-century preacher and patriarch of Constantinople:

Never leave your house without making the sign of the cross. It will be to you a staff, a weapon, an impregnable fortress. Neither man nor demon will dare to attack you, seeing you covered with such powerful armor. Let this sign teach you that you are a soldier, ready to combat against the demons, and ready to fight for the crown of justice. Are you ignorant of what the cross has done? It has vanquished death, destroyed sin, emptied hell, dethroned Satan, and restored the universe. Would you then doubt its power?<sup>5</sup>

When I was a little boy, my mother taught me to make the sign of the cross as I knelt for prayers at bedtime. For all the

years since, I have signed myself at the start and close of my prayer. But in retrospect I realize that, while I have always used the gesture respectfully, I made it routinely, superficially, and unaware of its significance. My recent experience and my research have changed my view and my practice. To my great benefit, I have discovered and recovered the tremendous power of this most ancient Christian prayer.

Sometimes as I sign myself, I imagine that I have traveled back through time to Calvary. With Mary, Mary Magdalene, and John, I stand at the foot of the cross as a witness to the Lord's supreme sacrifice. I watch him die a horrific death out of love for me. Then a soldier pierces his side and a flood of graces flow from his heart, engulfing me in unimaginable blessings. With this book I encourage you to join me at his cross. Come with me to Golgotha where you also will discover the life-transforming power of the holy gesture and open yourself more fully to its wonderful graces.

I invite you to explore with me the multidimensional realities of the sign of the cross. If you accept—and I hope you do, for I know you will not regret it—we will discuss together the following six truths that will enhance your experience of the ancient prayer. The sign of the cross is

- an act of faith that brings us into God's presence,
- a way to renew our Baptism,
- an affirmation of our decision to follow Christ,
- a decision to accept our share in Christ's suffering,
- a defense against the devil, and
- a means to overcome our faults and to grow in likeness to Christ.

When Jim Manney, my friend and editor, heard me speak about these truths, he said that the sign of the cross summed up the entire Christian life and that he wanted me to write a book about it. I agreed with his assertion and his request. I wrote this book to present this most ancient Christian prayer gesture as a simple and reliable way for us to renew our Christian lives.

### *A Fount of Blessing*

My enthusiasm for the sign of the cross, multiplied by the enthusiasm of the early writers whom I cite, may lead you to a false conclusion about how it works. Let's be clear up front that the gesture does not *cause* blessing or empowerment. Rather, the sign of the cross *opens* us to God's blessing and power. Distinguishing sacramentals from sacraments will help us get this right.

The Church calls the sign of the cross a *sacramental* because it operates like a *sacrament*. But a sacramental differs significantly from a sacrament. A sacrament is a sign or symbol that causes what it signifies. For example, in Baptism, God uses water, a symbol of cleansing, to wash away all of our sins. A sacramental does not confer divine graces the same way a sacrament does, but rather it prepares us to receive God's blessing and disposes us to cooperate with it. When we make the sign of the cross, for example, we open ourselves to the Lord's doing something in us. We are preparing ourselves for his blessing and expressing our desire to receive and use it. A sacrament causes; a sacramental invites.

Every time we make the sign of the cross, we invite the Lord to bless us, and he always responds. We may sense

his action as Solzhenitsyn did when he recovered hope. But most often when we sign ourselves, we don't feel anything. That's because God is using the movements of our body to reach our spirit, and our senses cannot register much of what he does there. Yet each time we make the sign, the Lord gives us a new burst of divine energy. When we touch our forehead, breast, and shoulders in his name, he touches our spirit with the blessings of the cross.

The Church uses the word *grace* to describe the blessing bestowed on us through the sacraments and sacramentals. *Grace* refers to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that comes to us as God's free gift. *Sanctifying grace* is the presence of the Spirit that saves us and makes us holy. *Actual grace* refers to a specific gift of divine energy that supports our Christian life. Solzhenitsyn, for example, abided in the sanctifying grace that flooded him at his Baptism, and the divine intervention that gave him hope to endure the gulag was an actual grace.

Like all sacramentals, the sign of the cross disposes us to make better use of sanctifying grace and calls on God to give us actual graces. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes this reality:

For well-disposed members of the faithful, the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals sanctifies almost every event of their lives with the divine grace which flows from the Paschal mystery of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. From this source all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power. There is scarcely

any proper use of things which cannot be thus directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God.<sup>6</sup>

Here the *Catechism* adopts and recommends the ancient Christian practice of consecrating daily life with sacramentals, the chief of which is the sign of the cross. Invoking the blessing of the sign at key moments elevates ordinary activities into opportunities for drawing nearer to God—activities such as waking up, eating, driving the children to school, starting your workday, responding to your email, shopping, relaxing with your family, and going to bed.

Blessing others and objects with the sign of the cross is also an ancient Christian practice. We make the sign in the air over a person or thing while invoking the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Church extensively employs this form of the sign of the cross as a blessing in the liturgy. During Mass, for example, the celebrant makes the sign over the bread and wine to prepare them for the sacrifice, and at the end of Mass, he signs a blessing over the people to strengthen them for their service of God and others. Outside the liturgy, priests bless religious objects like rosaries, medals, scapulars, or small crucifixes.

I find it difficult to apply the recommendations of many spiritual books. They overwhelm me with recipes of seven, twelve, or 144 things that I must do to achieve spiritual success, or with complex programs of spiritual disciplines that require more effort than I can muster. While I admire the wisdom of such books, I rarely am able to do what they suggest. You may feel the same way. But the advice I am giving in this little book requires only the effort of making



a simple gesture and praying a simple prayer. Christ did the hard work when he endured his excruciating Passion and death and made his cross a fount of blessing for us. You can start right now to enjoy more fully the blessings and power of this ancient sign. Just trace it on your body with reverence and faith. Go ahead, do it—even if you are reading this in a public place.

Before we consider together the six truths that will broaden your understanding and experience of the sign of the cross, I want to tell you how Christians have made it in the past, and how we have come to make the large and little signs that we make today. But if you are not curious about the history of the ancient prayer, you may skip to chapter three and plunge into the core message of this book.