

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

The Cross stands, both ritually and theologically this week, at the center of the great Three Days – the Triduum—in which we celebrate the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus. Those days begin on Holy Thursday with our remembrance of Jesus’ gift of his own body and blood in the Eucharist and his command to give of ourselves in service to our sisters and brothers. The Triduum concludes with the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night on Saturday as Jesus reveals to us the powerful promise of eternal life for all who remain faithful to him in this world.

But the power of the Cross, at the center of these days, is the ultimate sign of the true source of life for believers, life that can come in its fullness only for those who are able to “empty” themselves as Jesus did and surrender to the will of the Father. We can’t give of ourselves to others unless we let go of our own self-interest; we can’t rise to new life unless we “take off the old self” in order to “put on” the life Jesus holds out to us. The Cross calls us to embrace those truths each day.

We focus on that great sign of our faith, not just on Good Friday, but at every Mass. But the Cross, like any powerful symbol, can only retain its power if it’s used sparingly and thoughtfully, which is how we embrace it in our common prayer. We sign ourselves with holy water when we enter and when we leave the church as a reminder of our baptism which commits us to communal worship and then sends us into the world to live our faith. And the Cross literally leads us into worship and leads us out again at the end. As I observed in the series of bulletin articles last year, the Processional Cross carried by an altar server is considered the **primary** cross in a church, even if there is a substantial cross such as we have permanently gracing the sanctuary. Many churches built in the last twenty or thirty years emphasize that by making the Processional Cross a physical part of the stationary cross – carried in procession, but inserted into the larger cross during Mass.

We sign ourselves with the cross only three times **during** the Mass: at the beginning of the Introductory Rites, when we are blessed by the Presider at the conclusion of Mass, and when we make that three-fold sign before the Gospel, praying silently: *May the Lord be in my mind, on my lips and in my heart*. While some may still make the Sign of the Cross before or after receiving Communion, that’s certainly OK, but it is not a prescribed part of Catholic ritual. And it certainly isn’t appropriate to make the Sign of the Cross at the conclusion of the Penitential Act when the Presider says: *May almighty God have mercy on us....* Although the New Roman Missal calls that brief prayer an “absolution” it also emphasizes that it is not the “sacramental absolution” of the Sacrament of Penance and therefore shouldn’t be treated or understood in that way.

And there is only one other time when the Sign of the Cross is made during the Mass: when the Presider blesses the gifts of bread and wine during the *epiclesis* or “invocation of the Holy Spirit” before the Institution Narrative, or prayer of consecration.

The Cross of Jesus is that powerful sign of our faith that stands at the center of the Three Days we celebrate this week. St. Paul, in his first letter to the Church in Corinth, refers to the “paradox of the cross”: *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God....For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength*. When we sign ourselves with the Cross and embrace its weakness, we open ourselves to receiving the strength and wisdom of the God who sent his Son to teach us how to truly live, and die, and rise again.