

St Pius & St Anthony Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross Year C (2025)

Today is the Feast of the Holy Cross! The Cross/Crucifix is the most recognized symbol/sign of Christianity. In our Catholic faith we have the wonderful practice of making the Sign of the Cross on ourselves! In a way, we are following the command of Jesus as He tells us two times in Luke's Gospel, in Lk 9:23, "Any who wish to follow me,must take up his cross daily" and in Lk 14:2, each of us must 'carry his own cross'. So anytime we make the sign of cross, that's our reminder to carry up the cross of Jesus with him. We can wear a cross/crucifix on a necklace, or a bracelet or a ring, or even wear it as tattoo, or we can just simply enough, trace it out as a prayer gesture upon our bodies. I'd say we are taking St Paul's advice when we make the 'sign of cross' as he mentions in Galatians 6:17, "I bear the marks of Jesus on my body" *(some say that refers to him having the gift of stigmata, too, like Francis Assisi or Catherine Siena, St Theresa Avila, and when he says in 2 Cor 4: 10 "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body", but It sounds somehow showing the cross in/on our bodies).*

So that's the cross, but the question comes up after doing it, "Now, what does 'making the sign of cross' mean? I'd say, it identifies us. It is a gesture that marks my identity as a disciple of Christ, much like when show our American identity publicly by the bodily gesture of standing during the National Anthem & also when we place our hand over our heart as we recite the Flag's pledge. So the Sign of Cross is a mark of our identity as Christian. I say it is a salute to God! But, we also make as an invocation of God *(a blessing request "God help me" and a quick call on His name, even if we can't speak)*

But more significantly, a lot of our central Christian Doctrine is compressed into that seemingly small gesture of making the 'sign of cross'. The ritual gesture, compactly expresses the two dominant doctrines of our Faith – 1) Doctrine of the Incarnation- that God became human so we could be saved, *for how best God shows us that he saves us body/soul, than for Him to join us in our human nature, suffering like us in body, and dying a death like ours on His cross* and the 2) Doctrine of Trinity -Father-Son-Spirit. I think of the sign of cross as us invoking God to protectively surround us with grace, top to bottom & side to side *(just like the St Patrick Prayer has us saying, 'God be behind me, God go before me-God to my right & God to my left' cover me with your grace)* –And I find the specific naming of the persons of the Trinity at certain body areas seems a great fit too. For example, we name the Father first at top of our heads indicating the generating origin of the Father's revelatory mission (the communicating of the Father's

Will/Father's Word that Jesus will embody). And then the naming of the Son as we come down the length of our body (just as He came down from heaven to join/share in our nature) and then the Holy Spirit is named at our shoulder arms in an outward movement-don't we call that 'our wingspan' as in Holy Spirit Dove Wingspan (*I think I heard once that the great basketball player Michael Jordan had a wingspan of 6' 11" fingertip to fingertip*) We do say that the Spirit 'overshadows-envelopes' us and **moves** us. So the Sign of Cross invokes God's presence upon me, and it expresses my commitment to follow Him as well as asking for help to accomplish what He calls me to!

That seems to cover the why/what meaning behind the sign of cross, but let's take a look now at our specific gospel reading today. What is Jesus talking about that the Son of Man 'be lifted up as Moses lifted up a serpent in the desert'? (Jn 3:14)

This mention by Jesus of Moses and the Serpent, alludes heavily to a back story about Moses from the Book of Numbers 21:4-9. What happened there, was that a harassing attack of serpents occurred in the Camp of Moses, People were bitten by serpents, with painful wounds and even death resulting before they called out to God "Help us Moses-Go to God for us" Moses does and God hears the cry of the people and comes to their aid.

Yet, how did this 'snake threat' ever even take place in the first place? Well, Numbers 21 tells us that the people complained and wandered off God's path -Numbers 21:4 says they 'became impatient' or 'wearied', and strayed from God. They sought other paths - Their OWN way (instead of Yahweh)! And they wandered off into 'snakey' risk areas away from what God set for them.

I know as a Cub Scout I was always taught, "***Stay on the path to hike***, --snakes aren't likely to lay where they'd be trampled on (foot vibrations on the path will ward them off) But danger comes from getting off the path. Or in a similar way, helping my grandad with some yard work once at his farm, he'd said, to only "Weed-eat areas that looked like they'd been weed-eaten before-- Keep out of the ditch and away from the overgrown property line, because that's where the poison ivy is thick! And don't we know that a weedeater doesn't really 'eat' anything, it just chops it up and sends its pieces flying all over-perfectly breaking leaves to release their toxic oils from leaves and then tossing it all at you! (*just go ahead, and create that ivy tornado coming at you with a weedeater!*) But that's the risk from getting off path. The case with Moses' people, they strayed & started looking elsewhere, going all disobedient on God and just like how the first sinful tendency we have is ***do our own thing***, also count on it, ***there is***

always a snake waiting to take advantage of us turning away from God (as it was for Adam/Eve so it was for the people in Moses' time)

But staying on the God's marked path, there's no fear, no ivy, no snakes.

But since Moses' people wandered off into the snake area, pain came! But God heard their cry, and gave Moses the solution. Here it was: Take a bronze serpent image, and raise it up on a pole in center of the camp, and as people look upon it-they are healed. Even just looking at it, brought healing/life back to them. *(is this a version of the psychotherapy technique of 'desensitizing' phobia terrors by safely viewing them in comforting presence of God – Keep with God-staying in the camp's center and the snake phobia loses its power-threat fades).*

Yet, what does personally does a raised serpent say/mean to us? I'd suggest that 'Looking upon the serpent' means 'owning up to our role in bringing hardship upon ourselves when we turn away sinfully from God – going on our own path'. It is a way of facing (admit) our sin. We need to turn to God realistically facing how our waywardness invites danger pain/suffering upon us. We need to recognize our need of God, and stay on His path-His way for us. My way leads to hurt-death, yet His way leads to life-healing.

And what is God's Way but Jesus Christ revealed as humble obedience on cross -sign of His obedience to Father's will ('Not my will but yours be done' Mat 26:39, Mk 14:36, Lk 22:42). A life of humility and service to God as God designs..... I am fulfilled when I accept, even sacrifice, and follow thru on what God has for me to do, not doing what I please, but what is for the service and glory of Him. I must say 'No to ego' and 'Yes to God'. I must be on His Way. That is the cross. It's a surrender to God's will, doing as Jesus did – loving others as He did, serving others as He did. Even to the point of 'suffering for them' Yes, even sacrifice. We take up the cross of Jesus, carrying it-feeling it in the body for the redemption (saving) of the world.