

**THE SIGN OF THE  
CROSS IN THE  
WESTERN LITURGIES**

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The sign of the cross in the western liturgies by Ernest Beresford-Cooke

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**ERNEST BERESFORD-COOKE**

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Athena Club Tracts

VII

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LITURGIES . . .



BY THE REV.

ERNEST BERESFORD-COOKE

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## PREFACE

It has been the writer's endeavour, in the following pages, to consider some of the more important features which disclose themselves upon an examination of the use of the Sign of the Cross in the Western Liturgies, and especially in the canon of the mass.

No attempt has been made at anything like a complete account of this ceremony. To do so would obviously have been quite beyond the scope of an Alcuin Club tract.

What has been written, however, is published in the hope that it may do something towards making the use and purpose of this sacred gesture more intelligible to those who may not have been able to give to this subject the attention which it deserves. It will be noticed that the reader's attention has been especially called to (1) the extension of the celebrant's arms *in modum Crucis*, while pleading the merits of our Saviour's death and passion, to (2) the use of the sign of the cross in consecration and (3) to the "signings" over the already consecrated elements—the host and chalice,—such a prominent ritual feature in the Western canon of the mass. In regard to the first question, it has been the writer's wish to call attention to the almost universal prevalence of this ceremony in the Western Church. So far as the last is concerned, it is his belief that he has pointed out some grave reasons why the practice of signing the already consecrated elements should be regarded as a liturgical anomaly.

When the question of a greater restriction in the use of the sign of the cross, in benediction of the elements, is touched upon, the writer realises that there is perhaps room for a difference of opinion among members of the Anglican Church as to how far such restriction should be carried.

But, however this may be, to multiply the signings as is sometimes done, even by Anglican priests, appears to many minds to take away much of the meaning of that ceremonial action.

Mr. Edmund Bishop has stated in his interesting tract, "The genius of the Roman Rite," that two distinctive marks of the ancient Roman liturgy were "sobriety and sense." Would it not be well that this rule should be applied to the Anglican liturgy as regards the matter considered in these notes? Moreover, a ceremony that needs so much explaining as some of the crosses made in the canon of the mass require, ceases to have any ritual value.

It ceases to be intelligible, and therefore to be a reality. The great value of a ceremonial action consists in its giving expression to some ritual principle: and if it can be said of any ceremony what has frequently been said, with much show of justice, of the crosses made in the canon after the words of consecration have been spoken, the *raison d'être* of that ceremony disappears. At least this is how the question appears to the view of the present writer, and as such he submits it to the reader's thoughtful consideration. I have also dealt briefly with some other uses of the sign of the cross during the mass, including the blessing of persons and incense, and have said a few words on the manner of making the sign. But I have merely glanced at the signings made at the offertory and have not attempted to deal with those connected with the embolismus, the commixture or the pax, the treatment of which would have overrun the limits of a short tract and must be reserved for another occasion.

It remains now to express my grateful thanks to Rev. H. A. Wilson, of Magdalen College, Oxford, for his great kindness in giving me some information, out of the abundant store possessed by him, concerning the use of the sign of the cross in the early MS. Sacramentaries of the Western Church. I have made free use of that information in the text of this tract.



# THE SIGN OF THE CROSS IN THE WESTERN LITURGIES

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## THE EXTENSION OF THE CELEBRANT'S ARMS, IN *MODUM CRUCIS*

This sacred ceremony has, of course, a primary reference to the position of our Lord's arms during the time of His crucifixion. It dates back, however, to earlier times. Thus, St. Justin Martyr refers to the extended arms of Moses while the Israelites were fighting against the Amalekites, as a type of the Cross.

Tertullian speaks of the Christians of his time not only raising their hands in prayer, but also extending them.<sup>1</sup>

Minucius Felix speaks of praying with the hands extended, and says that they worshipped God with a pure mind, and their hands stretched forth in the form of a cross: "Crucis signum est, cum homo porrectis manibus Deum pura mente veneratur."<sup>2</sup> Paulinus describes St. Ambrose praying to God while he was dying, with his hands spread out in the form of a cross: "Ab hora undecima diei usque ad illam horam qua emisit Spiritum, expansis manibus in modum crucis orabat."<sup>3</sup> We learn from Eusebius that the Emperor Constantine had his own image impressed upon his golden medals, in which he is depicted stretching forth his hands to God.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *De Orat.* cap. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Dialogus &c.* Oxford, 1678 p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Paulinus Mediolanensis, *Vita Ambrosii*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Vita Constantini*, lib. 4. cap. 15.

A similiar reference is made to this custom by many another early writer. It was natural, therefore, that this posture of the celebrant should have been widely adopted to symbolise the pleading of Christ's death and passion during the prayer *Unde et memores* in the canon of the mass. Durandus, writing in the 13th Century, speaks of this custom in such terms as to prove that it evidently was well established in his day. "Sacerdos igitur hoc repraesentans, dicendo tam beatae passionis, manus in modum crucis extendit, ut habitu corporis manuumque Christi extensionem in cruce repraesentet," &c.<sup>1</sup>

In France this custom was held in great repute. Grancolas says that at the prayer *Unde et memores* the priest extends his arms in the form of a cross, thus representing the extension of Jesus Christ's hands upon the cross, and refers to Gabriel Biel in support of his statement.<sup>2</sup>

Claude de Vert is a strong supporter of the custom. He says, "at the word *passionis*, of the prayer *Unde et memores*, he, the priest, extends his arms in the form of a cross, to signify that of our Saviour, the principal instrument of his passion."

The priest, he says, makes an express memory of the passion of our Lord by this gesture. De Vert quotes Nicolas Plova, Durandus, Gavantus, Scortia, Suarez, and Gabriel Biel, as testifying to the custom and its import. Speaking of the modern Roman rubric, De Vert admits that it does not positively order that the gesture must be made "en form de Croix," but it says nothing, he contends, to the contrary, and he cites the missals of 1537, 1553, and 1555, as containing the following rubric *extensis aliquantulum brachiis*. He tells us that the missal of 1551 ordered that *In oratione, Unde et memores, ubi specialis fit commemoratio Passionis, aliquanto fiat prolixior distensio brachiorum*; and that another missal of 1559 reads *brachia aliquantulum*

<sup>1</sup> *Rat. Div. Off.* iv. cap. xliii, Lyons, 1592, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> *Traité de la messe et de l'office Divin*, Paris, 1714, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> *Explication des cérémonies de l'Eglise*, Paris, 1720, t. i. pp. 237-8.

*extendit ad modum crucis.* Also the missal of the Dominicans has, *extendit brachia plus solito*, and the same custom is observed by the Carthusians and the Carmelites; the ordinary of the former reading *elevat et expansas tenet manus in modum crucifixi*; the rubric in the missal being "*expansis brachiis et manibus dicit, Unde et memores.*"

De Vert refers to some who seem to have thought it improper to extend the hands, after consecration, outside the corporal, and thinks that this may have been the reason why in certain missals the rubric requires the hands to be extended before the breast; but his remarks concerning the "rubricaire" who framed the rubric *extensis brachiis ante pectus*, are certainly not very flattering; and he adds that before the time of Pius V. the Roman missals—among others, that of 1540—simply ordered the extension of the arms, *extensis brachiis*, without the restriction, *ante pectus*.<sup>1</sup> De Moleon says that at Orleans the priest has his arms extended in the form of a cross, in saying *Unde et memores*, as many monastic orders do.<sup>2</sup>

The same ceremony is prescribed by the rubrics of the Ambrosian Missal, "*extensis brachiis in modum crucis, dicit Unde et.*" In the Dutch tract called "Dat Boexken van der Missen," there is a woodcut showing the celebrant standing with his arms spread out *in modum crucis*, at the prayer *Unde et memores*, and the explanation given in the text is, "How the priest, after the elevation, stands with his arms stretched out like a cross, praying for the people;" though, as the editor of the tract has remarked, "praying for the people" is not a very accurate description of the prayer *Unde et Memores*.<sup>3</sup>

In a tract containing directions for saying mass, called "Indutus Planeta," which is found in several editions of the Roman Missal printed chiefly in France

<sup>1</sup> *Ib. ut supra*, pp. 238-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.* p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> *Voyages Liturgiques de France*, Paris, 1757.

<sup>4</sup> *Missale Ambrosianum*, Milan, 1902.

<sup>5</sup> *The Booklet of the Mass*; Alcuin Club Collections, V. p. 91.