

Focusing on Some Catholic Symbols and Gestures

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Kneeling and praying with beads, crosses depicting a crucified Jesus, and sprinkling holy water on this and that are telltale Catholic practices. The meaning behind them relates to the body and soul — the dynamic between the material and spiritual worlds.

The sign of the cross

The most common Catholic gesture is the sign of the cross. Latin (Western) Catholics make the *sign of the cross* by using their right hand to touch the forehead, then the middle of the breast, then the left shoulder, and finally the right shoulder. As they do this, they say, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen." This one complete gesture makes a cross — an intersection of a vertical line from forehead to breast and a horizontal line from left to right shoulder.

Byzantine Catholics make a similar sign of the cross but go to the right shoulder first and then to the left. Byzantine Catholics are former Eastern Orthodox Christians who split from Rome in 1054 and who came back into full communion in the 17th century by accepting the authority of the [bishop](#) of Rome as [pope](#) and head of the Church. They include the Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Greek Catholic, Melkite, Romanian, and Italo-Albanian Byzantine Churches. In addition to the Byzantine, Eastern Catholics also include Maronite, Coptic or Chaldean Catholic Churches, which are in union with Rome as well.

Most importantly, the sign of the cross symbolically reaffirms for Catholics two essential Christian doctrines: The [Holy Trinity](#) — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and humankind's salvation through the cross of Christ.

The genuflection

Another telltale sign of a Catholic is *genuflection*, which is touching the right knee to the floor while bending the left knee. The sign of the cross is made simultaneously with this gesture. Catholics only genuflect in front of the [Holy Eucharist](#). The Holy Eucharist *is* the real body and blood of Jesus, so Catholics show the ultimate form of respect by genuflecting or kneeling before him. The Holy Eucharist is kept in a large metal container or vault called a *tabernacle*, or sometimes, the Eucharist is displayed behind glass in a gold container called a *monstrance*.

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1235 The *sign of the cross*, on the threshold of the celebration, marks with the imprint of Christ the one who is going to belong to him and signifies the grace of the redemption Christ won for us by his cross.

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2157 The Christian begins his day, his prayers, and his activities with the *Sign of the Cross*: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." The baptized person dedicates the day to the glory of God and calls on the Savior's grace which lets him act in the Spirit as a child of the Father. The sign of the cross strengthens us in temptations and difficulties.

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1378 *Worship of the Eucharist*. In the liturgy of the Mass we express our faith in the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine by, among other ways, *genuflecting or bowing deeply* as a sign of adoration of the Lord. "The Catholic Church has always offered and still offers to the sacrament of the Eucharist the cult of adoration, not only during Mass, but also outside of it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the utmost care, exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and carrying them in procession."