

CHAPTER ONE
EXPERIENCING
THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

My grandfather, Fr. Andreas Andreopoulos, was a priest. (In Orthodox Christianity, priests may marry before they are ordained.) I had a very close rapport with him. He taught me how to read and write before I went to school. This was our game: I still remember in the afternoons, when I was four, he would ask me to “fetch the book.” The “book” was an old, dated, decrepit grade-one reading text that had not been used in the school system for over a decade, but somehow found its way into my grandfather’s belongings. And he trusted me with it.

The old man, impressive with his long white beard and his priestly garments, well in his eighties at the time, would then proceed to teach me the letters of the alphabet, words and phrases, which I absorbed so fast that by the age of five I could read as well as any adult. This learning game of ours is one of my earliest and fondest memories.

The old man loved to tell me stories from his adventurous past, mostly from the 1922 war with Turkey where he survived by a miracle. As the Greek army was withdrawing, he was saved at the battlefield by an officer who happened to know him and put my grandfather atop his horse. He also liked telling me stories from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, from the Chronicle of Alexander the Great and from the ancient past. Before any other stories, these were told to me first.

Only later were stories from the life of Jesus and the Bible added. Having learned to read at such an early age, I was quickly given books and was left alone to devour them, something that could not have pleased me more.

The stories from the pagan and the Christian past continued, but as I grew older and started going to school, there was less time for me to spend with my grandfather. I did not notice it then, but gradually there was less talking and more doing. Instead of listening to tales of the past, I was taught how to pray, how to cross myself, how to identify the parts of the church and the saints on the walls of the richly decorated church of St. Barbara, where my grandfather celebrated the liturgy.

I still remember how he taught me the sign of the cross: “Here, Andriko. Three fingers together, like this. Three fingers, for the Holy Trinity. Now we cross ourselves from the forehead, to the breast, to our right shoulder, to our left shoulder (and then we pat our belly). It is in rhythm: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

As the old man performed the gesture, so did I, following suit in style and rhythm. This was the first encounter with the sign of the cross that I remember well (my first unremembered encounter being when I was baptized and the sign was made over me many times during the ritual.)

Sometimes my grandfather would take me inside the altar of the church during the liturgy. This experience was so powerful that it has overshadowed my early impressions of normal church life, and therefore my memories of the altar precede my memories of the nave, the main part of the

church. The fragrances, the faces of the saints in the icons, the priestly vestments, everything was so amplified there, whereas in the nave people very often ignored the liturgy and talked to each other casually, as if they had simply met in the street.

I was too young to understand the words of the liturgy or the significance of the rituals, but somehow taking all this inside me, internalizing it, seemed natural, like being introduced to a practice that was somehow already familiar to me.

And the cross was everywhere. Greek churches fashion a huge cross at the back of the altar, which altar boys and priests kiss every time they pass by. The wall icons were not framed, but separated from each other by decorative designs, often by many small crosses that blended into each other. The impressive, colorful, and glistening liturgical vestments of my grandfather and the other priests also reprised this: Some were decorated with many miniscule crosses, sometimes with prominent crosses. Some crosses were so subtle that to most they remained unnoticed.

Within the church, there was no place the cross was not represented. Very often during the liturgy, priests and lay people would cross themselves en masse. Later I discovered that this happened mostly at the beginning or at the end of something important—such as a prayer or the Gospel reading—or whenever something especially important was mentioned, such as the Trinity; the Theotokos, the Mother of God; or even the saint of the day.

Yet, there are instances when I do not understand why people cross themselves other than, as Tevye from *Fiddler on*

the Roof would say, “It’s a tradition that nobody knows how it started, but it is tradition nonetheless!”

This practice of the sign of the cross was not restricted to liturgy. We crossed ourselves before meals. At lunchtime, when the entire family was summoned, my grandfather always blessed the food, and when I was old enough to learn it by heart, I recited the Lord’s Prayer. We all crossed ourselves at the beginning and at the end of the blessing. Sometimes a second prayer was recited at the end of the meal, and naturally it involved additional crossing.

Prayer was something interwoven with social and family life and activities. The sign of the cross was an indispensable part of these activities. But even when there was no time for a proper prayer, for example in the beginning of a journey, the sign of the cross would suffice, being the simplest symbol of prayer and request. Interestingly, ancient writers noted that during prayer the shape one’s body takes forms the figure of a cross.¹ In ancient Christianity as well as in pagan religions people prayed extending or lifting their hands, as priests still do today.

Here is what is so fascinating about the sign of the cross: its simplicity. A cross is how illiterate people sign a document, because it is the simplest recognizable sign they can draw, signifying their acquiescence to an official form. And though the cross is perhaps one of the simplest things in Christian ritual, it clearly connects with some of the greatest Christian mysteries. The Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the Second Coming were narrative events that my childish mind had no difficulty accepting with a simple explanation.

It stood to reason that if God loved us, he could come down to earth, that he could not be killed without rising from the dead, and that some day he would come again. With some of the more abstract or more enigmatic parts of the faith, this proved to be more difficult. And even now, writing as a professor of theology, I have to admit that what puzzled me most as a child still puzzles me today: The Crucifixion, the self-sacrifice and death of God, and the riddle given to me by my grandfather at the same time he “gave” me the sign of the cross: “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a trinity consubstantial and indivisible.”

Here I have to say that the sign of the cross is one of the most fascinating elements of ritual symbolism. The most profound and incomprehensible mysteries are connected with such simple objects or symbols, which somehow manage to evoke them immediately, at an impulse, a gesture. An icon of a saint, for example, may express in just a few daring lines what requires volumes to be explained verbally. Likewise, performing a gesture on a regular basis may do a lot more for one’s spiritual disposition than reading an entire library of books. Most likely, this is how some of those simple symbols became established and then were accepted. Perhaps the symbol that combines simplicity and profound meaning to a greater extent than any other symbol is the sign of the cross.

Where did this symbol and practice begin? Neither the cross as a symbol nor the practice of crossing oneself were given to us in a direct way by Jesus himself—unlike, for instance, the sacrament of Communion, which Jesus directly instituted. Nor was the sign of the cross in popular use

among the earliest Christians. Though some biblical background supports the importance of the cross as a religious symbol (most explicitly in Saint Paul's assertion in first Corinthians that "we preach Christ crucified"), it would more likely have appeared as an objectionable symbol to the Roman world, similar to how an electric chair, a noose, or another violent instrument of execution would appear to us.

In the days of the early church, Christians were fond of other symbols of recognition, similarly ritually charged, such as the famous symbol of the fish that, recently rediscovered, can be found pasted on many cars driven by Christians. Despite the ritual history of the fish, there is little visual symbolic power to it—it serves as a reminder of the acrostic *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*, which in Greek happens to spell "fish." The fish was eventually surpassed by the cross as a visual symbol. The simplicity and the archetypal power of the cross made it popular.

One exceptional factor explains why the cross overshadowed all other symbols of Christianity: The cross could be performed as a simple and immediately recognizable gesture. Many ancient writers refer to the "sign of the cross" even when they mean any physical cross, even a crossroads, and not only in reference to the cross of Christ. The importance of the physicality of the symbol may not be something that naturally occurs to us, used as we are to our literate Western world. But very few people in late antiquity and the Middle Ages could read and write, and therefore few could appreciate or internalize something as complex as an acrostic. However, Christianity in the early stages of development did not

spread so much through the upper social circles of learned theologians and philosophers as through the lower socioeconomic strata: fishermen, carpenters, tanners, and slaves. The common people took their catechism seriously, and expressed their religious faith much better with a prayer and a gesture than through daily reading.

No conclusive evidence points to a date or place for adopting the cross as a symbol, although possibly the cross was already in use during apostolic times. We see traces of the symbol appearing in the second century, in the writings of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus of Lyons. Eventually adopted as a symbol of historic, spiritual, and liturgical significance, the cross came into use as Christianity grew and matured. Theologians explored the mystery of the death of Jesus Christ, remembering the actual cross on which he died. Then suddenly, in the fourth century, the cross became the established symbol.

In the fourth century the search for the True Cross led Helen, the mother of the emperor Constantine the Great, to Jerusalem, where she discovered Jesus' cross by its miraculous healing power. The discovery and raising (or Exaltation) of the True Cross by the patriarch Makarios of Jerusalem is now, more than fifteen centuries later, an important feast day of the church. The reasons for the veneration that quickly followed may be difficult to understand by today's standards. But pilgrims began to flock from all over the world to see this valuable relic whose cult started assuming idolatrous proportions.

But at almost the same time as this spread of the worship of the actual materials of the cross, a more spiritual interpretation

of the Cross and the Crucifixion was being developed in the desert. The early martyrs such as Saint Stephen, who were witnesses of the divinity of Jesus, were succeeded in the Christian Empire by monastics. The monastics—monks, nuns, or ascetics—who lived in the desert, sometimes in religious communities, sometimes alone, sacrificed themselves, or rather *crucified* themselves to the world, following the example of Jesus. In this way they began to bring into spiritual truth the nature of the cross. The sign and symbol of the cross were understood among them not so much in relation to the historic relic, but as the archetype of the crucifixion of the self, of their own humility and surrender of the will and of the self—the ascetic way to subjugate the passions of the body and the soul. This simple symbol fulfilled the spiritual need of the early church for a reminder of Jesus’ historic and willful death for humankind. This symbol also was raised up for those who wished to leave the world behind them and fight demons in the desert.

Perhaps the aspect of Christianity that more than others transmitted the significance of the cross to common people was the ritual tradition. The church provided Christians with a systematic method to transform the secular world into a spiritual world, via liturgical practice and signs and symbols within tradition. The liturgy has developed, to a great extent, around the image of the cross. Both in ancient times and now, the cross is the final image of the liturgy. This suggests that Christians, after participating in the Eucharist, the sacramental body and blood of Jesus, should go out into the world and “bear their cross,” as followers of Christ.

The basilica, the Roman public building adopted for use by early churches, was replaced in the East by a church building in the shape of a cross. This shape was also reflected in the way liturgical services were celebrated. Even now, this cruciform liturgical structure is seen in Eastern churches and monasteries, where the axis from the entrance to the altar of the church is supplanted by the axis between the two choirs (the semi-domes on the left and right of a church where sometimes two choirs or chanters are placed). The church building in this form represents the entire universe, heaven and earth. And the liturgical processions during several services on the West-East axis as well as the antiphons on the North-South axis mark this representation of the universe with the sign of the cross.

The sign of the cross developed alongside the cruciform sign of blessing with which most Christians are familiar. Both liturgical life and icons point to the cross. This sign, made as a gesture, acquired several meanings as it developed and was performed by bishops and priests. However, lay people use the sign of the cross as their own gesture of blessing when they bless food or when they bless each other. Within one movement, this puts into perspective the significance to the religious life of the sign of the cross: It encompasses historical memory, prayer, asceticism, and blessing.

Delving deeper into Christian tradition, we keep finding ways that the theology and the symbolism of the cross are integrated and reflect many aspects of Christianity. This book's particular exploration, however, tries to translate the significance of the cross into something personal and immediate.

When we trace the cross on our body, we actively invite it—we *become* the cross.

The difference between understanding the mystery of the cross and performing this simple gesture is perhaps as big as the gap between knowing what is right and practicing it. It may not have the same importance in each Christian denomination, but wherever the gesture is practiced, it says, “I am a Christian. I invoke the power and the mercy of the cross of Christ, and I try to sanctify myself and to live keeping in mind the sacrifice of Jesus and the mystery of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” This practice and the implications go through my mind when I cross myself. Just as my grandfather taught me.

CHAPTER TWO
THE SIGN OF THE CROSS
ITS HISTORY

The origins of the sign of the cross are lost in the unwritten tradition of the church. Our information is sparse because this ancient practice emerged naturally, as something that made sense to most Christians. Nevertheless, tracing its historical development allows us to better understand what the sign of the cross expresses and its importance for those who perform the gesture.

In the fourth century Basil of Caesarea wrote, “The doctrines and the kerygmata [teachings] that are preserved in the church are given to us in two different ways: the doctrines are given to us in written teachings, and the kerygmata have been given to us secretly, through the apostolic tradition. . . . To start with the first and the most common among them, who has ever taught us in writing the sign of the cross, which signifies our hope in our Lord Jesus Christ?”² The observation of Basil, this erudite bishop of the early church, rings out like a warning in our pursuit of the history of the sign of the cross: This sign was a custom of the church that nobody had reason to defend or explain, a tradition seen as ancient by the fourth century, and for this reason most of what is important about it was never put to writing.

Throughout Christian history, the sign of the cross was rarely an object of study. Most of the information we gather

comes from periods of crisis, during which people felt the need to explain what should have been obvious to everyone.

Similarly, despite Basil's implicit warning, this book examines and illumines the historical development of the sign of the cross in the life of the church, so that what is obvious to a practitioner may be understood by outsiders (as much as one can understand a spiritual practice from without).

Basil expresses a view that has changed little over the centuries. The sense of "tradition" in the church implies a tacit acceptance of what has been handed down to us from the past. Yes, there are certain traditions that have accidentally become corrupt and need to return to their original meaning, or traditions evolving because the world is now ready to accept them. But those are more theological, academic views of the issue. For others, the millions of people who pray and worship God every day, this matter is not complicated. Every child who goes to church picks up naturally what people do there, adopts it as a way to express his spirituality, and passes it on to the next generation. The image of many people performing the sign of the cross at the same time in church, or the image of an old man who, scared by a sudden noise, traces the sign of the cross on his body, show how powerful this tradition is for many people.

We do not know much about how the gesture of the sign of the cross in the ancient church was performed. The simplest way to perform it would have been to trace it over the forehead with one finger, most likely the thumb—since some priests still "seal their forehead" in this manner before reading

the Gospel. The sign over the forehead, sometimes in the form of an X, is confirmed in early icons and coins, suggesting a standard way to cross oneself. Tertullian, a learned and influential writer of the second and third century, mentions this in one of the earliest testimonies we have about the sign of the cross, where he writes:

At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at the table, when we light the lamps, on the couch, on the seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.³

We may imagine the early Christians, emerging from the age of persecutions, some of them having suffered or lost family members as martyrs, and some having been baptized or initiated into Christianity by a saint, giving their entire lives to Christianity. The sign of the cross was performed over everything they wished to consecrate—their food, their pillow, and each other.

The sign of the cross was a blessing so necessary to them, in a time when the world was turning upside down. And in this chaotic time, Christians chose to bless themselves with the sign of Christ. The few witnesses to this from the early church suggest how immediately widespread this gesture must have been, and how important in the everyday life of Christians.

Like Tertullian, who wrote about the sign over the forehead, St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote about the sign of the cross in the fourth century:

Let us then not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Let the cross as our seal, be boldly made with our fingers upon our brow and on all occasions; over the bread we eat, over the cups we drink; in our comings and in our goings; before sleep; on lying down and rising up; when we are on our way, and when we are still. It is a powerful safeguard; it is without price, for the sake of the poor; without toil, because of the sick; for it is a grace from God, a badge of the faithful, and a terror to the devils; for “he displayed them openly, leading them away in triumph by force of it.” For when they see the Cross, they are reminded of the Crucified; they fear him who has “smashed the heads of the dragons.” Despise not the seal as a free gift, but rather for this reason honor your benefactor all the more.⁴

The idea of a sign made on the forehead did not originate with Christianity. References to a sign, or rather to a mark on the forehead, appear in the Old Testament as well as in other pre-Christian civilizations. Cain was perhaps the first person in history to associate his name with a mark on the forehead. In the book of Genesis, God makes a mark on Cain (and biblical scholars assign the place of the mark as the forehead) identifying Cain as someone who has killed, and also as someone being protected from being killed.

Similar references are found throughout the Old Testament. A sign on the forehead, and sometimes also on the hands, is a sign of castigation, a way to set aside a sinner.

This is reflected in the ninth chapter of Ezekiel where God commanded, “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and who cry because of all the abominations that are done in the midst thereof.” Even a sore on the forehead could mark a person as unclean, as chapter 14 of Leviticus suggests. There is no mention of a mark on the forehead in the New Testament, except in the book of Revelation, where such a mark sometimes appears as a sign of the people of God, but also as a sign of the Antichrist.

The mark on the forehead as we see it in the Old Testament and in the Book of Revelation reveals something spiritually significant about the person who bears that mark, usually declaring something about the spiritual condition or identity of that person. The mark on the forehead is something like a “reading,” an exposition of what this person is really like inside, as God sees him or her. Unlike a gesture or sign on the forehead, the mark is something permanent. The forehead is chosen as the most conspicuous place of display. In later Hellenistic Platonist and Neoplatonist tradition, which identified the mind with the true self, the forehead could be connected with the mind, but this connection does not bear out in the biblical tradition, where the heart and not the mind is identified as the center of the human being, the true self.

In the Old Testament, the mark on the forehead is given by God, even though the Old Testament references suggest a negative connotation. The book of Revelation treats the mark as one might a military insignia or a flag, as a means

of identification, in this case identifying oneself with the side of God or with the side of the beast in the apocalyptic war.

Keeping this in mind, the act of tracing a sign on one's forehead reprises or rather anticipates the mark given by God. Interestingly, according to chapters 14 and 22 in the book of Revelation, the sign on the forehead is nothing other than the name of God, nothing other than the Hebrew letter *tau*, which was written as a cross. Although *tau* is not one of the letters used in spelling the name of God, it was seen as a symbol of God since it is the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. *Tau* was viewed as the end, the completion and the perfection of all things, after which there is nothing else, and so it was viewed as a symbol of God in Jewish culture.

The early church writer Origen studied the Hebrew tradition extensively and gave this testimony: “[The letter *tau*] bears a resemblance to the figure of the Cross; and this prophecy (Ezek. ix. 4) is said to regard the sign made by Christians on the forehead, which all believers make whatsoever work they begin upon, and especially at the beginning of prayers, or of holy readings.”⁵

Origen suggests the possibility of thinking of the Christian version of the sign both as a cross, and also as an X, after the Greek letter *chi* which is the first letter in the Greek word Χριστός (Christ), the specifically Christian equivalent of the name of God. The Hebrew *tau*, the Greek *chi* and the sign of the cross would have looked similar when traced on the forehead, as they are all performed with two movements of the hand. The X and the cross likely appeared at the same time in different parts of the Christianized Roman Empire.

Origen, writing in the third century, is clearly aware of the sign on the forehead as the sign of the cross. On the other hand, the use of the sign of the initial of Christ was still in effect in the fourth century: Early Christian images, such as the mosaics of the Piazza Armerina in Agrigento, Italy, which date from the time of Diocletian, as well as other early Christian artifacts, represent Christians with an X on their forehead.⁶

Tertullian, who writes, “We make the sign,” may be referring to the sign of the cross or to the sign of the name of Christ. Even earlier, Justin Martyr, the great Christian apologist of the second century who connected the Bible with the Hellenistic tradition and Plato with Moses, connects the symbol of the cross with the pagan philosophical tradition, making no distinction between the cross proper and the X.⁷

The use of the cross as a sign has also had political implications, especially when we consider the vision and the actions of the Emperor Constantine the Great in the early fourth century.⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, the biographer of Constantine, attests that a great luminous cross appeared in the sky, with the inscription “Conquer by this,” the day before an important battle. Seen in battle by Constantine and his troops, the cross was adopted immediately as an imperial military symbol.

Although Eusebius writes about the celebrated vision of Constantine referring to a luminous cross in the sky, the imperial insignia Constantine introduced also included the Greek letters X and P, which spell the name of Christ in Greek. It is possible that Constantine did this to point to the

exact meaning of the cross. In conjunction with the name of Christ, the cross would be seen as a Christian symbol, even by people who did not know much about Christianity. In this way, both the cross and the Christogram (a combination of letters that form an abbreviation for the name of Jesus Christ) were promoted in the symbolism of that era via flags, coins, and other symbols, as though they were interchangeable. Quite likely, both symbols were understood and accepted in connection with each other. We have no reason to assume that Constantine was interested in instituting a specific symbolism; his interest seemed to be in showing that a Christian identity was evident.

This interest in a “Christian identity” may seem distant from us, but the conversion of Constantine and the legalization of the Christian religion was an event that shook the world of Christians. Since the death of Jesus on the cross, Christianity had suffered continuous persecution. Yet, against all odds, this persecuted minority spread its spiritual message to the ends of the powerful Roman Empire, converting even its persecutors. Nevertheless, this change occurred suddenly, as far as most Christians could see.

Nobody could anticipate the vision and the conversion of the head of the state, and for some Christians it was difficult to believe that the emperor had become a defender of Christianity. This change in the personal faith of the emperor eventually brought about a change in the entire empire, a change fully accomplished within a few generations.

To appreciate the magnitude of this transition and the importance of the Christian identity, we can try to imagine

something similar in our culture. When, after World War II, Eastern Europe fell under the power of the USSR, this meant more than a political alliance. The national symbols of these countries often included the hammer and sickle and photographs of Soviet leaders. Russian became a second language or culture for many populations in the satellite states. National and cultural heritage were filtered to a great extent through party ideology. In other words, in only seventy years, a political condition changed not only the lives but also the sense of identity of millions of people. The change that occurred in the fourth century in the Roman Empire, where the emperor had been worshiped as a god for centuries, would be difficult to understand by many people. The Empire had to eventually redefine its identity, its laws, and its world view. The pursuit of a “Christian identity” through a Christian flag was only the beginning.

We have already looked at the sign of the cross and the letter *tau*, which in the Jewish tradition symbolized God, the letter that was written as a cross. But the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet was *aleph*, and this was written as an X in Hebrew as well as in Aramaic. These two letters are closely connected in Jewish theology.

“Truth” was seen as the most complete perfection, carried through to the identification of *truth* with *Christ* in many Gospel passages, especially in the Gospel of John, where Jesus himself says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The Hebrew word for truth is *emet*, spelled *aleph-mem-tau*, the first, middle and last letters of the alphabet. The cultural equivalent of *aleph*

and *tau* in the Hellenistic culture prevalent during the time of the writing of the Gospels is *alpha* and *omega*, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The same letters are identified with the person of Jesus in the book of Revelation. The *alpha* and the *omega* have become a standard insignia in iconic depictions of Jesus as the Pantokrator, or King of Majesty, and are used in early Christian monograms of Christ.

The *alpha* and the *omega*, as also the *aleph* and the *tau*, symbolize the beginning and the end, the absolute, and perfection. In this context, the cross and the X are fused into a single symbol that is not solely the *aleph* or solely the *tau*, but both at the same time.

After this symbolism became Hellenized in the *alpha* and the *omega*, most Christians were aware of this symbolism and of the connection between the cross and the X. But the early Christian communities certainly knew it very well. This is why the X appeared as an alternate form of performing the sign of the cross only in early Christianity. Jesus Christ was the truth, the *alpha* and the *omega*, the *aleph* and the *tau*. In his person the *alpha* and the *omega*, or the X and the cross, were fused; he is the beginning and the end at the same time, the manifestation of the absolute and perfection.

If not since the time of Origen, at least by the time of Cyril of Jerusalem, the significance of the sign had switched securely from the name of Jesus Christ to the symbol of the cross, while the Hebrew letters receded to the background and were forgotten. Soon, a little later in the West, Augustine