

The Cross and Personal Piety

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If you pay attention to *what's hot* and *what's not* these days, you're no doubt aware that crosses are definitely *hot*. Time was when you'd be hard pressed to find a cross anywhere besides most churches and some Christian homes, but now crosses seem to be cropping up most everywhere, and in the oddest places. Pop culture seems to be "raining crosses," with the familiar cruciform symbol decorating everything from CD jackets to body parts. For some among the more disillusioned and distressed fringes of our society, the cross seems almost a fetish, signaling a dark obsession with violence and death.

A faithful evangelical Christian trying to navigate his or her way through the troubled waters of today's culture is left with something of a dilemma: to wear or not to wear? How best can we avoid giving the wrong impression while still providing a strong visual confession?

Perhaps the best solution is to follow the familiar maxim: "Be who you are." Not being swayed by the godless influences of the world around us nor captivated by forms of piety that contradict the faith we confess, Lutheran Christians will want to publicly confess the faith as... well, Lutheran Christians.

You see, we Lutherans have a heritage of faith and confession that is thoroughly *evangelical*, that is, centered in the good news of Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the sins of the whole world. "For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:22-24) "God was in Christ reconciling the whole world unto Himself, not counting their trespasses against them." (2 Corinthians 5:19) At the same time, Lutherans are "small 'c' catholics" – that is, our teachings go back to Jesus and His apostles. We seek to maintain an unbroken, faithful connection with what the church universal has always taught, not falling prey to the errors of the Church of Rome on the one hand or to Protestant aberrations on the other. So the use of the cross in daily piety fits squarely within the mainstream of our inheritance.

While there is nothing magical about cross symbols and while Christian faith can thrive very well with them or without them, Lutherans have always prized the cross as an emblem of faith and godliness – that is, piety. Piety, you see, is nothing more than the way Christian faith takes up residence in a Christian's life. The way we pray, the way we worship, the way we live: all of these are expressions of what we believe. Therefore they are all aspects of personal piety. Wherever faith intersects with life,

there piety takes shape. What could be more native to us Lutherans, therefore, than for the cross to be part and parcel of our natural piety?

Is there any danger that people will mistake our crosses for emblems of destruction and darkness? Not if our confession is clear. If Jesus Christ crucified for sinners is confessed by what we say and do, the crosses publicly displayed in our homes, offices, or perhaps worn around our necks will be visual reflections of the faith we profess: a faith that brings us forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus' name.

There is another more personal appropriation of the cross that we may want to consider: using the sign of the cross in the context of our prayer life. Dr. Luther teaches us in the Small Catechism to start and end our days by tracing on our own bodies the same holy sign we first received when we were washed in Jesus' name: "When you get up/when you go to bed, *make the sign of the holy cross* and say: 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen'" (page reference)

While only an outward action, the sign of the cross becomes a powerful kinetic expression of inner faith and conviction, the very emblem of our salvation. It is the sign of our Savior's victory over sin, death, and hell; the seal of our redemption, purchased and won with the holy, precious blood of Christ and with His innocent suffering and death. With this sign and seal we confess our faith to others and ourselves as well. In fact, we boldly declare before both the holy angels and the hordes of hell alike that Jesus Christ alone is our strong and sure defense. It is an outward emblem of the invisible breastplate of righteousness we wear by faith, the armor of our defense against every evil (Ephesians 6:14). With this sign we make public confession of our personal faith: by faith we take and bind unto ourselves the strong and powerful Name into which we were baptized: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Our pastors often accompany God's Word of blessing with the sign of the cross: when they dismiss us at the communion table, for example, or when they place God's Name upon us as we depart the Divine Service: "The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you, the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you [✚] peace." Only a gesture, you say? A gesture, yes - but certainly not an empty gesture! For baptized believers, the sign of the cross is an emblem packed with meaning. It is the visual reminder of who we are - and *whose* we are: one of Christ's very own, marked by His cross. Our forgiveness stands forever sure, signed and sealed with His own blood. If we choose, we may exercise the freedom we have in Christ to "grab" that sign our pastor makes over us and claim it publicly as our very own, tracing its outline from forehead down to heart, then shoulder to shoulder and back to heart again in token that we have been redeemed by Christ the crucified.

Fashions come and go, but piety is always "in." Whichever form of personal piety you choose for yourself, the cross is never just stylish or trendy - but the emblem of your

salvation in Jesus Christ your Lord. Wear it proudly, by faith in Him who loved you and gave His life that you might live eternally!

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