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The Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year (C)

Through Amos, the shepherd turned prophet, the Lord condemns his people "by the pride of Jacob" (Amos 8:7). What is this pride for which they are condemned? It boils down to the fact that they care more about themselves than they do about others. They are willing to use whatever they can to make a profit, even at the expense of the poor among them and at the expense of the worship of God. In effect, they are willing to, and indeed do, serve themselves rather than the Lord. This is the pride of Jacob and it is a pride in which each of us shares.

Jesus addresses his strong words, "You cannot serve both God and mammon," to remind us of our pride and to move us away from it (Luke 16:13). By these words he commands us to renounce our pride and to follow his way of humble love by dedicating ourselves entirely to his service, to be the stewards of all he has given us in his tender care. What then is the antidote to our pride? How do we overcome our self-centeredness? The answer can be found in the sign of the Cross.

It is, on the one hand, a most simple gesture and, on the other, a most profound statement of faith, yet it is one that all too often we give very little thought to. We enter the church, dip our fingers in the holy water, and make some hurried

gesture as if swatting away flies, not recognizing the great power that is in the sign we seek to make.

When we enter the doors of the church, we pass, as it were, from earth to heaven and we become aware of our sin and pride. We make the sign of the Cross to place ourselves at the service of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is great power in this sign that we make. Through this privileged sign, we

invoke the ineffable splendor of the Most High himself in his triune majesty; and it places those who utter it under his reign. Hell cannot speak this formula. Hell hates it. Everything in me that is reminiscent of hell - all haughtiness, and vanity, and malice, and venality, and cravenness and pusillanimity and concupiscence - quails before this invocation.¹

Nothing that is of Hell can tolerate the sign of the Cross because by the Cross Hell itself was conquered, sin vanquished and death destroyed. The sign of the Cross "is a formula not to be spoken lightly."²

Because of its power, and because it calls to mind the essential elements of the Christian faith, the faithful have been signing themselves with the Cross for nearly two millennia. We have, in the writings of the North African Christian Tertullian (d. c. 220), the first mention of the sign of the cross. He says,

¹ Thomas Howard, *If Your Mind Wanders at Mass* (Steubenville, Ohio: Franciscan University Press, 1995), 53.

² Ibid.

At every step, when going in and out, when putting on clothes and shoes, when washing ourselves, when kindling the lights, when going to sleep, sitting down, and in every action we place the sign of the cross on our foreheads."³

We would do well to do the same, and to do so with attentive reverence and love.

The priest, our parents and our godparents traced the sign of the Cross upon our foreheads on the day of our baptism. The priest explained that each of us has been "claim[ed] for Christ our Savior by the sign of his Cross."⁴ The sign of the Cross is, then, a sign of ownership; it is the sign that marks us out as belonging to Christ and to no other.

In the ancient world, the brand of the master was often put on the forehead of his slaves. We might recall that scene in *The Lord of the Rings* where the orc stands before Saruman and the white wizard asks him, "Whom do you serve?" "Saruman," the Uruk-hai responds, and the mark of the white hand is placed on his head. The orc now belongs to Saruman and must do his bidding, being always his servant. So it is with us who have been marked for Christ, we belong to him, and it is for this reason that we cannot "serve two masters" (Luke 16:13).

But the sign of the Cross is much more than a marker of ownership. It is also a statement of faith. Through it we

³ In Klemens Richter, *The Meaning of the Sacramental Symbols: Answers to Today's Questions*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 132.

⁴ *Rite of Baptism*, 41.

confess belief in the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and of the divinity and humanity of Christ. When we sign ourselves with the Cross we are reminded that "though our Lord Jesus Christ was rich, he became poor, so that by his poverty [we] might become rich."⁵

Considering the Lord "who gave himself as ransom for all" (I Timothy 2:6) we are moved to "praise the Lord who lifts up the poor" (Psalm 113:1a, 7b). In this way we come to learn that the Lord will raise up those who humbly devote themselves to his service "to seat them with princes, with the princes of his own people" (Psalm 113:8).

Whenever we cross ourselves - either when entering the church or when asking the Lord to be in our mind, on our lips and in our heart before the Gospel, or at any other time - let us seek to be conscious of the mystery we invoke.

When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross. Instead of a small cramped gesture that gives no notion of its meaning, let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us, our thoughts, our attitudes, our body and soul, every part of us at once, how it concentrates and sanctifies us. It does so because it is the sign of the universe and the sign of our redemption... It is the holiest of all signs.⁶

⁵ Gospel verse of the day. Cf. II Corinthians 8:9.

⁶ Romano Guardini, *Sacred Signs*, trans. Grace Branham (St. Louis, Missouri: Pio Decimo Press, 1956), 13f in Adolf Adam, trans. Robert C. Schultz, *The Eucharistic Celebration: The Source and Summit of Faith* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 21.

By marking ourselves with the Cross of our salvation, let us seek to renew our service to Christ, dedicating ourselves to his service alone.

By signing ourselves with the Cross, we place ourselves under the protection of the Cross, hold it in front of us like a shield that will guard us in all the distress of daily life and give us the courage to go on. We accept it as a signpost that we must follow.. The Cross shows us the road of life - the imitation of Christ.⁷

Let us then look to the Lord, lifted high on the Cross, to know him and to be known by him, that we may keep his commandments and rest in his faithful love. Amen.

⁷ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2000), 177-178.