

THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION OF
SIGNING OF THE CROSS:
THE CHURCH OF CARTHAGE, 200-250 CE

[The following testimonies from the Church of Carthage provide a theological background to the ancient Catholic devotion of signing the cross (upon one's forehead). Though these texts date to the early third century, they reflect an ancient "tradition" practiced in at least the second century CE.]

Tertullian (Presbyter?)

“Cast not,” saith He, “your pearls to swine, lest they trample them to pieces, and turn round and overturn you also.” “Your pearls” are the distinctive marks of even your daily conversation. The more care you take to conceal them, the more liable to suspicion you will make them, and the more exposed to the grasp of Gentile curiosity. Shall you escape notice when you sign [the cross on] your bed, your body; when you blow away some impurity; when even by night you rise to pray? (*To His Wife* 5; c. 205 CE)

Premising, therefore, and likewise subjoining the fact that Christ suffered, He foretold that His just ones should suffer equally with Him—both the apostles and all the faithful in succession; and He signed them with that very seal of which Ezekiel spake: “The Lord said unto me, Go through the gate, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set the mark *tau* upon the foreheads of the men.” Now the Greek letter *tau* and our own letter T is the very form of the cross, which He predicted would be the sign on our foreheads in the true Catholic Jerusalem.... (*Against Marcion*, Book III:22; c. 207 CE)

[Mentions the use of the sign in initiation rites:] And since the soul is, in consequence of its salvation, chosen to the service of God, it is the flesh which actually renders it capable of such service. The flesh, indeed, is washed, in order that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is signed (with the cross), that the soul too may be fortified; the flesh is shadowed with the imposition of hands, that the soul also maybe illuminated by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on its God. (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8; c. 210 CE)

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 table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.

If, for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them, custom as their strengthener, and faith as their observer. (*De Corona* 3-4; c. 211 CE)

[When bitten by poisonous creatures:] We have faith for a defence, if we are not smitten with distrust itself also, in immediately making the sign and adjuring, and besmearing the heel with the beast. Finally, we often aid in this way even the heathen, seeing we have been endowed by God with that power which the apostle first used when he despised the viper's bite. (*Scorpiace* 1; c. 213 CE)

Cyprian (Bishop)

Thus also Uzziah the king,-when he bare the censer and violently claimed to himself to sacrifice against God's law, and when Azariah the priest withstood him, would not be obedient and yield,-was confounded by the divine indignation, and was polluted upon his forehead by the spot of leprosy: he was marked by an offended Lord in that part of his body where they are signed who deserve well of the Lord. (Treatise I, On the Unity of the Church, 18; c. 250 CE)

For that those only can escape who have been new-born and signed with the sign of Christ, God says in another place, when, sending forth His angels to the destruction of the world and the death of the human race, He threatens more terribly in the last time, saying, "Go ye, and smite, and let not your eye spare. Have no pity upon old or young, and slay the virgins and the little ones and the women, that they may be utterly destroyed. But touch not any man upon whom is written the mark." Moreover, what this mark is, and in what part of the body it is placed, God sets forth in another place, saying, "Go through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark [*tau*] upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof." And that the sign pertains to the passion and blood of Christ, and that whoever is found in this sign is kept safe and unharmed, is also proved by God's testimony, saying, "And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses in which ye shall be; and I will see the blood, and will protect you, and the plague of diminution shall not be upon you when I smite the land of Egypt." What previously preceded by a figure in the slain lamb is fulfilled in Christ, the truth which followed afterwards. As, then, when Egypt was smitten, the Jewish people could not escape except by the blood and the sign of the lamb; so also, when the world shall begin to be desolated and smitten, whoever is found in

the blood and the sign of Christ alone shall escape. (Treatise V, An Address to Demetrius, 18; c. 250 CE)

That sign [of circumcision] did not avail women, but all are sealed by the sign of the Lord. (Treatise XII, First Book of Testimonies Against the Jews, Testimony 8; c. 250 CE)