

Homily of Abba Bulus al-Bushi

On Making the Sign of the Cross

When you begin to pray, sign yourself with the Sign of the Cross in all piety and reverence, for you are placing upon your flesh the Sign of Life. Remember that by this Sign you acquired eternal life. It is your pride in the struggle against the opposing spirits, and your only light in the hour of darkness.

Do not Cross yourself hastily or hurriedly, but let your heart accompany the words and the motion. Remember the Father Who loved you, giving His Only-Begotten for you, and the Spirit Who sanctified you. Reverence with your spirit the Master, for—by the signing of the Cross—you recall your Baptism, which is the beginning of salvation, death to the world, and the life of righteousness. When you Cross yourself, remember that those who have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. They are no more under the passions of sin and the authority of the flesh, for those who are Christ Jesus' have crucified the passions with the flesh.

The Church instructs us to make the Sign of the Cross before prostrating. This is not a habit, but rather has a beautiful and precise meaning. We make the Sign of the Cross before prostrating, because the Only-Begotten humbled and emptied Himself, taking the image of the servant, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. Therefore, when we bow, we affirm our subjection, humility, and obedience to the Lord by the Cross, which we carried with Him when we renounced Satan and accepted the holy instruction in the Mystery of Spiritual Birth.

When the deacon says, "Bow your heads to the Lord," the people sign themselves with the Cross, then bow. This is because, in Christ, we all live, having our dependence on Him, and through Him, we have our hope in the eternal life. When we see the Lamb on the Altar, with its human members broken and slaughtered, in order to affirm our union with Him in the Mystery of His Love, we put the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads, because we have acquired salvation and eternal life by the Divine Seal of which Ezekiel prophesied.

Let us make the Sign of the Cross earnestly, especially during the Divine Liturgy, for the Cross binds us to the Sacrifice that is being offered for us on the Altar. Many believers Cross themselves before the Altar, and, out of a sort of reverence, bow their heads. This is a tradition that some do not care for. When we Cross ourselves before the Altar, we confess that we have an Altar, and that the Sacrifice which is offered on It is for our salvation. This Altar is an essential pillar in our lives, for from It we receive the Antidote of eternal life. When we make the Sign of

the Cross, we take from the Altar the Mystery of Salvation, and we place it on our foreheads, not symbolically, but in the truth of Him Who said “I am the Truth.”

When the priest signs the Sacrifice, the whole people cry “Amen,” because the Lifegiving Sign has been placed on the Bread which, by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, becomes the Body of our Lord. This Sign is put on It as a Seal, for when the Bread is sealed, It unites—by Grace—to the Cross, no longer remaining bread, but a Sacrifice of which we are watchful, not giving It to unbelievers, for by Faith alone we are admitted to this Communion, and without It we have no sacrifice.

My children, the signing of the Cross accompanies sanctification, for it is a part of it, and a sign that this Bread which we break has passed through to the depth of the unseen Mystery, and has become of it, that is Mystical. Let us remember this, that when we make the Sign of the Cross, we are sanctified by It, and are proud of Its might, whereby we become the Lord’s.

Let us Cross ourselves in humility, asking of the Lord to make us a sacrifice and an offering to His Heavenly Father.

The Apostle says that the apostate has deemed the Blood of the New Covenant impure. Those who apostatise conflict with the Cross before all else. The Incarnation, my beloved, is the wondrous act of humility and boundless love. The Cross, however, is the dispensation of forgiveness, for by It alone we attained acceptance before God by the Blood of the New Covenant. This is why our Church received a tradition from the Fathers to sign the Cross with the right hand, for it is the hand that is placed on the lamb of the holocaust for the confession of sin. This hand bears the Heavenly Sign, for it was raised at Baptism for the profession of Faith and the confession of Christ. Whoever confesses Him as Only-Begotten and Word acknowledges his sins, for the revelation and manifestation of the Only-Begotten came about because of our sins, and foremost because of the mercy of the Father and His love. But when He became man and was crucified, it was to restore us who were lost. Woe and woe again to whomever is ashamed of the Seal of the Covenant, or is hesitant to make Its Sign, for if he had heard the saying of the Apostle Paul, who joys in the Cross, he would have said, “But far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Whoever is afraid of the Seal of the Covenant falls into the trap of apostasy, and sets himself up to become a prey to the merciless lion who tried to devour Peter, who, upon learning of his ruthlessness, cried out to the believers in the First Catholic (Epistle), “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith.”

We make the Sign of the Cross with the right hand, for when we make the Sign of the Cross, we place our hands on the Sacrifice, proclaiming the death of the Only-Begotten for us, and, by truth and grace, it is as if we have acquired life and salvation. This salvation is in your hand. Sign yourself with the Sign of the Cross in order to live, “For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.”

When the Desert Fathers greet one another, they make the Sign of the Cross. The Fathers of the Wilderness of Abba Macarius also say that it is not only because of the deception of the devil alone, for if they were false monks or phantoms they would flee, but for the sake of fulfilling charity.

This is why the Elders sign themselves with the Sign of the Cross prior to the Holy Kiss in the Mystery of the Divine Bridegroom, to show their love for one another, for the Cross precedes reconciliation, and by it we attain fraternal agape.

The scholar, Presbyter Isaac, mentions that the deacon lifts the Cross during the recitation of the Prayer of Reconciliation, and all comply. He then exits and stands at the door of the Sanctuary and says, "Greet one another with the apostolic kiss," and lifts the Cross, signifying that the reconciliation between humanity and God has taken place through the death of the Only Begotten for us.

Let us reconcile our brethren, love, and forgive them, for by this the Signing of the Cross is completed. If anyone has anything in his heart towards another person, let him forgive him. He should Sign himself with the Cross, so that he may put to flight the demon of anger. This is why the Church instructs us to make the Sign of the Cross at the beginning of prayer, so that we may be sure that there is no anger or resentment in our hearts.

I once saw one of the brethren burning with the flames of rage, and it was as if he had become a lion. But he signed himself with the Sign of the Cross, for the Spirit was in sorrow over him, and dew from heaven came down upon him and extinguished his anger, bringing him to humility. When I asked him, he said to me that an Elder from the Wilderness of Abba Macarius taught him to recall the Death of Christ whenever his anger ignites, and to sign himself with the Life-giving Sign, for it brings life and forgiveness to the heart. Ever since he obeyed his instructor, he has been advancing in the struggle against anger. He also mentioned to me that the passions of the fight are difficult, but are cooled by the Cross.

Our Father, the Righteous and Great Cross-Bearer, Abba Antony, told us to Sign ourselves with the Cross whenever the opposing spirits draw near to us. So, before conversing with the brethren, let us be careful to always put on the Sign of Reconciliation so that there may be no bitterness, and so that the conscience may not be defiled.

Whoever is defiled by evil and in him is the mediation of the wicked ones must know the Living Spring whose Living Water do not dry, the Life-giving Cross. Let him come forth and wash. Many travel for a myriad of days in search of a wise physician. Some come from Tabennisi to Alexandria, seeking the counsel of those who are knowledgeable in the medicine of the body. Lo, the Fountain of Life is in us, rather in our hands, but despite of this, we ignore it. Poor is he who has the remedy and uses it not out of ignorance. He is careless, audacious, and bound with the shackles of rebellion who sees the Door of Life wide open before him and enters not.

Are we complacent about the Cross and Its Sign? The Cross is with us in every rite. Not just in Baptism and the Mysteries, but let us come forth to the whole foundation to observe the rocks of the foundation. When the presbyters are ordained, the High Priest signs them on their forehead with the Sign of the Cross. If an ailing individual comes to Church, he is anointed, with the Oil of the Temple, with the Sign of the Cross. The priest declares a pure marriage with the Cross, because the Bridegroom offered His dowry to the Bride on Golgotha.

The confessor signs himself with the Cross, and the Father signs him after the prayer of absolution. For the confessor confesses his sins on the basis that he has forgiveness. For if there was no forgiveness, there would have been no repentance or confession. When he signs himself with the Cross, he confesses that all the virtues and good works are incapable of absolving him of his debts. But the One Who forgives the debtors for the plenty and the little is the Good Master.

The Spiritual Father signs the confessor so that he may say that by the Cross his disciple is saved, and that he is a partaker of It. Abba Isaac, in his homily to those who accept the hearing of sins, says, "The Spiritual Father must sign the confessor with the Sign of the Cross with a heavy heart, participating with the Master in His passion. For the world acquired remission through the suffering, sweat, and blood of the Lord."

Let the confessor know that He Who became a Sacrifice for his sake did not offer Himself cheaply, but through great pain. Let the Spiritual Father know that remission is not offered through words, but rather by the Blood of the Only-Begotten, and the Work of the Holy Spirit. For when the Lord said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," He signed His Disciples and blew in their faces. He signed the Disciples to make them know that the pains of death will come upon them, but the power of the Resurrection is by the Holy Spirit, Who has found a habitation in them. He also made known to them that they must preach Him crucified, and to speak of the Cross and the Great Mystery of the Passions by the Power of the Spirit, not by wisdom, cunning, or ambiguity. They bore the sins of those who were baptised and others, and they shared with them in the passions of piety, to the extent that the Apostle Paul likened himself to a woman who is in agony and travail.

The Fathers, the Teachers of the Church, appointed that the one who is coming to the Spiritual Baptism is to be signed before, during, and after Baptism. He is first anointed with the Oil of the Catechumens at the outer steps of the Church. He is then anointed with the Oil of Exorcism, which is called the Oil of Hagielaion, that is the Oil of Gladness, for what is more gladsome than for the enemy to be cast out. After this, his name is recorded in the Book of Life by the prayer of the priest and the supplication of the people for him. He is then anointed before the Exorcism, so that he may have power to resist the devil, and after it, in order to know that the Lord did not overcome Satan alone, but gave this victory to those who follow Him as a Master Who has derided a slave and has put him away, and so he becomes cast away from all the servants for the sake of the Master's derision of him.

The priest signs the water first with his arm, in order to know that the Master carried the Cross by himself, and by His arm wrought salvation. He then signs the water with the Holy Myron, which we acquired from the Apostles, to sanctify the water and to endow it with the Mystery of both Death and Life, for the One Who died fell on the earth as a grain of wheat, but He by Himself rose alive.

After he rises from the water, the baptised is anointed 36 times, because the human members are 36. It is also the number of crosses in the Life-giving Mysteries that we place on the Body and Blood from after the offertory to communion. Remember what our Righteous Father, the Sadamanti, said in his homily on Holy Baptism: “The baptised is signed like the Body and Blood, for he was baptised to be like his Master, and he is being prepared for death and martyrdom, if he is found worthy of them.”

Ignatius, the disciple of the Apostles and who is likened to the Teachers, said, “Throw me to the lions so that I may become food for them, whereby I may complete my Baptism.”

The Holy Martyr Mark, who shed his blood in this place, said to them in Arabic, “Loosen me so that I may make the Sign of my Master.” When they loosened him, he made the Sign of the Cross with his nails on his forehead, and his blood flowed. He said, “Now only will my Master be pleased with me, for I desired the flames, rather the Cross, so that my suffering may be more.” He went forth to the fire by the power of the Sign, and it offered him up as corban to the Saviour.

The Holy George survived dying from poisoning by the Life-giving Sign, for the Divine Saying of the Gospel according to the Beholder of God was fulfilled; “When they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all.”

I have mentioned to you all that was ordered by the Church, not as a wise teacher, but out of a sort of faithfulness that I spoke and wrote, so that the Truth may not be hid from anyone. If anyone knows anything about the Lord, he ought not to hide it and keep it to himself, especially so that he may not hear the hard saying from the mouth of the Compassionate to him who buried his talent. For He utters forgiveness for all, but utters condemnation at times to those who do not wish to follow Him.

Appendix: It was reported that an Elder was asked about the gift of discernment. He said that he who does not know the Cross has no discernment, for it is the Tree which the Prophet threw into the bitter water and became sweet. He alone reveals the bitter and the sweet, and the Voice of the Lord from the voice of the rebellious.

An Elder then came from the inner wilderness, and one of the brethren asked him, “Is the opposition of the spirits difficult for us?” He replied, “Yes, but our opposition to them is difficult as well.” They said, “What is this saying, Father? We never heard anyone say that he is opposing the spirits.” The Elder said, “My patience for you, O branches, is long. Satan wars with us, but

we war with him by the Cross, as the Blessed Schema-Bearer Antony taught us. Will the father of weariness not himself become weary whenever we remind him of the shame and disgrace that he received from our Saviour?”

I also found that Abba Michael, Bishop of Samanoud, in his homily on Abba Antony says, “There is no one who taught the Church not to fear Satan as the Blessed Antony. He knew that the evil adversary is deceptive, but trembles from the Sign of the Cross in fear of it. Let us not grow weary of the warring of the enemy, as if he is the Mighty One who falls not, for the one who is proud of his might fell and was vanquished, and his defeat was before the Cross.”

The writing of these things is easy and not cumbersome, but keeping them and imitating their sayers is the struggle itself. Blessed are they, for they knew the Source of Power and relied on It. As for us, let us throw ourselves at the feet of the Lord, imploring Him to fight for us, the weak, and to accept the supplications and incense of the Cross-Bearers, for their frailty, poverty, and humility rose up as incense before the Throne. They put on the Cross and followed their Master, so their marriage feast is with Him at Golgotha. He made them toil and endure hardships all the days of their life, so that they may receive a crown. It was said of Abba Mark, disciple of Antony, that he would kiss his members that are in pain, saying to them, “O blessed of the Lord and bearer of His pain. May His Name be blessed, for he granted that I may taste drops from the sea of the sufferings of Golgotha.”

In order that the sufferings of the Fathers may not be forgotten, an Elder said that he signs his members that are in pain with the Cross, not so that he may be healed from the suffering, but so that it may be a suffering for the sake of the Lord.

Another Elder said, “I joy in the Cross, and I sorrow in the Cross.” So one of the brethren said, “How do we joy and sorrow in one thing?” The Elder said, “The wise alone will understand this. Joy in the Cross is a joy in salvation and impassible life. Sorrow in the Cross is the constant remembrance of our sins, for which the Only-Begotten was raised (on the Cross), and because of which He was humbled, and was taken by sorrow and affliction, as was said by Isaias the Prophet (Isaiah).

It was mentioned that Abba Jacob of Roha asked the presbyters of the Monastery of the Holy John the Short about the reason behind the signing of the Corban at the time of the Offertory with the Cross, then with wine. The hegoumen replied, “Where the Cross is, there too is the offering and the corban. There is no corban without a Cross. We do not offer the bread and the wine from our hands as if it is an offering that comes from us, but we rather offer it by the Cross, and therefore it becomes a sacrifice to God.”

It was said that the Elder Al-Asaad Abd al-Massih once dialogued with one of the Hijra concerning the reason of Christ’s death on the Cross. The one from the Hijra denied the Passions of the Lord which He bore for our sins. So, the true servant of Christ replied, “Did your mother not suffer for you when she bore you?” He said to him, “Yes.” He said, “Was she not brought to

the verge of death so that you may come to life?” He said, “Yes.” He said to him, “Explain to me this: How can a new life come about through suffering?” The one from the Hijra became silent. The Elder Al-Asaad said to him, “This is truly the Mystery of the Cross, that the Lord bore suffering for us so that He may bring us to the knowledge of Truth, to the knowledge of the Father, and His love and mercy, and the Spirit Whom He poured over us. We were not known to Him by birth alone, but by death also, for the One Who gave the Saviour unto death, gave Him also unto the Resurrection, whereby we knew eternal life through the Holy Spirit.”

I have relayed all that I know, and may God, Who gave us a Sign by which we may flee from the face of the arrow, support us by the power of His Cross, so that we may pass the days of our sojourn on this earth in peace and faith free from impurity in the struggle that is before us so that we may be saved. To His Name be glory.

The Homily on the Cross of our Father Abba Bulus al-Bushi was transcribed by the Deacon Hanna Ibn al-Sadek, servant of the Church of the Martyr Mercurius, so that it may be studied. Our Father Abba Bulus al-Bushi reviewed its words, and found it in accordance with his personal copy, which he kept for himself after sending this universal epistle to Abba Athanasius, Bishop of Upper Shothb. It was also transcribed by the Reverend Presbyter Hanna Ibn al-Nazer, servant of the Church of our Virgin Lady in the Monastery of Isous in the Bahnasa region in the year One Thousand Sixty-Eight of the Pure Martyrs. May the blessing of the prayers be with us. Amen.

Transcribed (in Arabic) by Dr. George Habib Bebawi on October 22, 1969. Translated by Subdeacon Ramez Rizkalla on March 20, 2013 (Second Day of the Feast of the Precious and Life-giving Cross).