



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **The Most Holy Trinity - Year A**

#### ***And he made the sign of the cross***

*Readings: Exodus 34: 4b-6, 8-9, Daniel 3: 52-56, 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13, John 3: 16-1*

I can pretty much remember the moment when I decided that, as a practising Christian, I would make the sign of the Cross on my body as part of my regular devotion. This will sound odd to Catholic ears but I was a relatively recently converted Anglican evangelical at the time and evangelicals didn't do that sort of thing. Indeed I can remember one of my fellow students refusing to take a curacy in a church which had a cross displayed on the altar as it 'smacked of Catholic idolatry'. We left overt displays of this nature to those with high church inclinations.

I was in the central highlands of Serbia in 1978 visiting the monasteries of the Orthodox Church. We were being taken around Studenica monastery by the great war hero bishop, Stefan. The murals were stunning, even allowing for the damage of history. One of our visiting brethren enquired why one of the most beautiful was black at the bottom with holes in it and some defacement. Bishop Stefan paused for a moment, then spoke. 'The faces were damaged by the Ottoman Turks.' As Muslims they regarded Christian devotional art as idolatry. There is a lot of collaborationist chatter on the

media these days about the civilising and cultural power of that brutal empire. Tell that to the Balkan Slavs and Greeks who lived under their rule from the collapse of Constantinople in 1453 and paid the price in centuries long taxation, second class citizenship and the enslavement of their children.

Bishop Stefan turned to the blackened base of the wall.

‘This is where the Austrians tried to burn us out.’

The lumbering mongrel Empire of the Habsburgs had a schizophrenic relationship with the little landlocked firecracker kingdom on its southern border, a relationship that would trigger the descent into the Great War with the fatal shooting on the streets of Sarajevo.

Bishop Stefan turned to the holes at chest height.

‘This is where the Nazis shot our priests’.

The resistance of the Serbs was heroic, not least in the face of the Croatian Ustase (Nazis) who condemned hundreds of thousands to Jasenovac camp, known as ‘the Auschwitz of the Balkans’.

Bishop Stefan concluded: ‘We are still here’. And he made the sign of the Cross.

The damaged mural of the crucifixion took on a new and haunting beauty to which I have often returned in my mind. The great representation of the one true eternal sacrifice had been hallowed by the blood of generations of the martyrs who had dared to proclaim the Cross at the cost of their lives. To refuse to publicly proclaim my loyalty similarly now seemed a piece of puritanical nonsense and a failure both of conviction and nerve.

So in the heartland of the resistance to anti-Christian tyranny I learnt to cross myself. And in that Orthodox crossing is a proclamation of the central tenets of the Christian Faith. The tips of the thumb and first two fingers conjoin. The remaining two fingers tuck in together. The first configuration represents the Holy Trinity. The Christian differentiates himself from others believers in one God by proclaiming his personal encounter with the triune God in the persona of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How he comes to the knowledge of that revelation of the mystery at the heart of God's relationship with Man is hidden in the two remaining fingers which represent the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human. In Christ Jesus God and Man co-inhere. There is no other pathway into the eternal Presence of the Divine mysterium. In this simple sign then resides the key to our salvation and the purpose and mission of the Church.

If you have ever followed an orthodox into his church you will notice two differences from western practice. One is that he crosses himself right to left, thereby mirroring the priestly blessing bestowed upon him. The second is that his first crossing may well involve touching the ground, thus covering his entire being. It is certainly never an half-hearted scuffle across the chest. It is a total proclamation from the heartland where it has often been most costly to witness.

Today, on Trinity Sunday, we proclaim what we proclaim at the beginning and end of every prayer from the Mass downwards – the sign of the Cross and the mystery of the nature of God which it reveals – the Holy Trinity. We can know the infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, Lord of all because He has chosen to reveal Himself to us in His only Son and, by the power of His Holy Spirit, to incorporate us in the Body of that Risen, Ascended and Glorified

Christ.

In the Trinity we experience the relationship of the Divine and on the Cross we see the mystery of that love as the twofold nature of Christ grants fallen Man a gateway back into Paradise.

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