

If you watch me leading worship, you'll see that I cross myself a lot during worship. It's an old habit I learned when I was young, but it remains important to me. And it means many different things.

When the gospel is announced, I cross my forehead, my lips and my heart, at the same time quietly saying to myself: God, be in my thoughts, my words and in my heart.

In the Eucharistic prayer at the altar, I'll cross myself when I ask Christ to dwell in us and we in him, pulling him close and fastening him in.

When I was young, I attend a parochial school taught by some Roman Catholic Sisters. They were big on teaching us ritual such as attending church, genuflecting before entering a pew and so on. This week I recalled how they use to teach us to cross ourselves. Here is what they taught me to make the sign of the cross:

God be in my head. (Touch forehead.)
 God be in my heart. (Touch center of chest.)
 on my left. (Touch left shoulder.)
 and on my right. (Touch right shoulder.)

Practice and say it with me: *repeat above*

As an argumentative innocent young thing, I loved to squabble with those nuns. We didn't have time for bible study in the school, but every chance I had, especially when we did that crossing ourselves lesson, I would pressure those nuns to tell me why we cross ourselves. People crossed themselves before going swimming in the ocean, so I wanted to know if God was going swimming with us. Athletes cross themselves before going up to bat or after catching a touchdown pass, so I wanted to know if God liked sports.

One day, I finally got one answer that satisfied me. One elderly nun, who the younger nuns kept sending me to talk to, told me that Jesus said we are to take up our cross and follow him.

She also told me that since I was her cross to bear she wanted me to practice making the sign of the cross often over myself so that I would be taking on myself the cross of God as a protector, as a shield, as a reminder.

God be in my head. (Touch forehead.)
 God be in my heart. (Touch center of chest.)
 on my left. (Touch left shoulder.)
 and on my right. (Touch right shoulder.)

For certainly this wise wrinkled nun continued, you will have many crosses to bear in your lifetime and you better take the cross of God with you wherever you go, for sometimes you have to deny yourself and how you think you can handle things and make decisions and let God help you. You can't do life all by your lone-some, Martha Jane, she'd say.

She continued to teach me: So carry God in your head, your heart, and on your shoulders so that you are prepared for whatever lies ahead.

The great Lord God of all ancestors, be in my thoughts, live in my heart, walk with me whatever I face and go thru this day..... (Cross self)

Okay...yes...her wise words have meant more to me now as an adult than when I heard them as a 5th grader. But I had to question her again about this cross thing.

This happened shortly after hearing the very same gospel we heard read today. Jesus says: take up your cross and follow me.

So I took her on....."you said to follow God and to cross ourselves for God to be in our head and" But Jesus said to follow HIM! (*of course in fifth grade I really didn't have a good conception of the trinity and the relationship of Jesus as God*).

With a frustrated sigh and a glance up to the heavens (for divine intervention, probably), Sr. Cabrini sat me down and said very simply: Yes, Martha, you are exactly right. We ARE to follow Jesus.

And yes, we are to take up our crosses, but did you ever think that Jesus is in front of us, leading us, like in follow-the-leader, to God? God is the great one and Jesus leads us there. We are to follow.

So take on the protection of the cross, look and listen to Jesus, who brings us to God, our home, our love, our.....Sr. Cabrini trailed off, probably realizing that her words were getting too much for my 5th grade understanding.

But her words resounded in my thoughts this week when I heard Jesus, in this gospel, rebuke Peter and say: Get behind me, you Satan. (this really means 'adversary' in Greek).

Get behind me you adversary!

Get behind me so I can lead you and get your life in order!

And all of a sudden, it dawned on me. I saw Sr. Cabrini smile!

If we take up the cross, and live as Christians as faithfully as we can, then we ask Jesus Christ to be with us, to walk with us, to be ahead of us, so that we can follow....so that we can be led to God. So we can be behind him, instead of in his way as an antagonist. Everything Jesus says and does points us to God, not to himself.

And if God is in our head, where our thoughts reside, we think differently, putting a Christian slant and consideration into our decision making. That doesn't mean getting things right and wrong all the time, maybe it means that if God is in our hearts, between our shoulders, we know we are loved and that we can love in return, so we add a touch of love to our actions and decisions for those near us and those whose names we don't even know.

And if God is on my left and on my right, protecting my heart place, then I know that I am surrounded by the great I AM who I cannot begin to comprehend, but who I can feel and who I know upholds me when I stumble. God picks me up by the shoulders and lets me walk again and sets my heart forward looking and thinking, hope returns. And if I'm doing this in the name of Jesus, then I am playing follow-the-leader in life, letting Jesus show me the way to God.

No, I don't get faithfulness correct all the time. No, I don't understand God most times. But I try. And that's what we're all called to do. To try.

Even Jesus fell when carrying his cross and needed someone else to help him.

So I attach myself to the cross of Christ, asking to learn to get behind Jesus as a follower and not putting my own way ahead of him, getting in the way of God.

So I attach myself and take up my cross, knowing that it means full protection towards me, full love for me, from God and with God.

No, Sr. Cabrini's words don't teach me anything which Jesus didn't already put out there for us, but her words bring me a way to live and a way to try and a way to love others.

God be in my head. (Touch forehead.)
God be in my heart. (Touch center of chest.)
on my left. (Touch left shoulder.)
and on my right. (Touch right shoulder.)

For in the way of the cross I find my life and love and forgiveness and comfort and protection.

The great Lord God of all ancestors, be in our thoughts, live in our hearts.

Christ walk ahead of us and hold us up with whatever we face this day or decide this day.....
(Cross self)

Amen.