

Ask Fr James

Why do we make the sign of the cross with the right hand?

With no offense to left handed people and not to denigrate the left hand, Christians have always sought divine aid and God protection by imitating the power of the right hand of God as contained in the biblical verse; "O sing unto the Lord a new song; for He hath done marvellous things: his **right hand**, and his holy arm, has given victory" (Psalm. 98:1).

Many Gospel passages all the more convinced Christians about the importance of doing things with the right hand and being at the right hand of God. Gospel passages like: "on the last day, he would put the goats at his left and the sheep at his right" (Mt. 25:31-46); John, the disciple whom he loves was reclining towards Jesus at the right hand at the Last Supper (John 13:23); at his trial, Jesus responded to Pilate and the Jewish leaders that they will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power [Luke 20:21-44; 22:69]. After his resurrection; Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty (Mark 16:19; Acts 5:30,31 and The Apostles Creed).

There are other narratives about the right hand of God in many other New Testament passages. For example, the martyr Stephen speaking as he is just about to be stoned to death, says; 'Look I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56); Similarly in Hebrews 4:14-16 we read, 'Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, (we are talking here about the ascended Jesus who had passed through the heavens and is exalted at the right hand of God).

These narratives about the right hand of God made the first-century Mediterranean world adopt the right hand tradition for making the sign of the cross. They raised the right hand in oaths taking; the right hand is pointed towards heaven, swearing "by the heavens," the dwelling place of God (drawn from Gen 14:22). They gave offertory envelopes with the right hand, ingest Holy Communion with the right hand and shake hands in church during the kiss of peace with the right hand with which they made the sign of the cross.

The imagery of using the right hand was equated with being at the right hand of God. Parents forced the use of the right hand on their naturally left-handed children because of the believe that **God's right hand** is a source of blessing and power. However, the church does not have a law urging the use of the right hand to make the sign of the cross but without being sarcastic, one theologian concluded that God must be left-handed because Christ is sitting on his right hand.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.