

# Sign symbolizes faith's mysteries

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Matthew 28:16-20; (R1) Deuteronomy 4:32-32, 39-40; (R2) Romans 8:14-17.

This Sunday is Trinity Sunday. One of the great Trinitarian symbols is the sign of the cross, which symbolizes our faith's twin mysteries: the Trinity and the Redemption.

At the reported apparitions of Our Lady to St. Bernadette at Lourdes, people were struck by the way Bernadette made the sign of the cross. It was a great, almost gleaming sign, slowly and broadly made. In making it, Bernadette said she was simply imitating Our Lady.

The way some people make the sign of the cross, you wonder whether it is a pinwheel or a brushing of something away from the nose.

In tracing the sign of the cross on yourself with extended hand, you go from forehead to breast, then from left to right shoulder. Eastern Catholics, however, go from right to left shoulder. The reason for this divergency is very simple: Westerners write from left to right, whereas Hebrews and Arabs write from right to



## WORD FOR SUNDAY

left.

The sign of the cross reminds us that we must "suffer with Him so as to be glorified with Him" (R2). To make this sign on ourselves says, in effect, we are willing to carry our share of Christ's cross.

The sign of the cross strengthens us to bear the crosses of life. After St. Isaac Jogues had undergone frightful tortures at the hands of the fierce Mohawks, he could hardly pray because

of the pain. So with mangled hands he carved crosses on trees and drew strength from merely contemplating them.

The sign of the cross shields us against Satan's onslaughts. At the time of the exodus in Egypt, the lamb's blood sprinkled on doors caused the angel of death to pass over the marked homes. So the sign of the cross devoutly made drives away the devil. Often the devil came in bodily form to tempt St. Theresa of Avila. She said when she made the sign of the cross, he fled away in terror.

The words used in making the sign of the cross express the Trinity's mystery.

We begin with the words "In the name of ..." A name tells us what a thing is. When I ask, "what is that?" you name something or someone. "Name" answers the question "what" and refers to the nature of something.

We say "in the name of," not "in the names of," because there is only one "what," one divine nature in God. If I were to ask you, "what is the Father," or "what is the Son," or "what is the Holy Spirit," you would give just one answer to all three questions: God (because each Person is God).

In this one God, there are three divine Persons, so we say, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

When we say, "the Father," we touch our foreheads, for the Father is the head, so to speak, in the Trinity.

When we say, "and of the Son," we touch our breast, for the Son told us of God the Father's love for us.

When we say, "and of the Holy," we touch our left shoulder; and at the word "Spirit," our right shoulder. For the Holy Spirit is the strength of God, who makes us strong to shoulder life's burdens. Should we fail at times and sin, forgiveness is possible through Him. Sin puts us on the left side of God in the day of judgment, but the forgiveness of sin brings us to the right side.

Finally, the two "ands" in the formula are of superlative importance. "And" is a coordinate conjunction. It expresses equality. Used between each Person, the "and" denotes their equality with each other.

When we make the sign of the cross, we say "we are blessing" ourselves. And that is precisely what each sign of the cross devoutly made does: it brings the most Holy Trinity's blessings down to us.

# Does humor belong in a Catholic newspaper?

By Karen M. Franz  
Editor in chief

Several weeks ago, we received a brief note from Elmiran Francis E. Whitford, who asked whether we could identify sisters who have changed their names by both their current and previous appellations. He also asked whether we could spell out the abbreviations for religious orders when used after a member's name.

In response to similar inquiries we moved several years ago to the use of religious names as well as birth names in the context of obituaries on deceased women religious. But we don't follow this practice with respect to living sisters; we merely identify them by the names they currently use — unless the sisters themselves request otherwise.

With respect to the abbreviations on religious orders, we do try to use the full order's name later in the article that contains the abbreviation — or on "second reference," as we term it. In other words, we might write: "Father John Smith, SJ, will give the talk. The Jesuit priest ..." Of course, we don't spell out the fact that "SJ" stands for "Society of Jesus," which is the formal name for the Jesuits. And in shorter items, we may not bother to explain the abbreviations at all.

Our concern about making a policy



## BETWEEN THE LINES

of *always* using former names and full titles is that these items could serve to clutter up our stories and distract readers from more important points. Moreover, some religious orders have fairly lengthy formal titles. But what do you think? Would spelling all of this material out — all the time — be a help or a hindrance? I'll be especially interested in how women religious respond to the prospect of using their previous names in all mentions.

Mr. Whitford also asked a third question, which unbeknown to him, leads me into a broader question. He

asked, "When are you going to include some humor?"

That question struck me — especially since his other questions related to women religious — because it arrived just a day before another letter chastising us for publishing ads for "Reverend Mother," singer/actress Phyl Contestable. Contestable, who starred in the play "Nonsense," does a comedy routine tailored to the guest lists of office parties, anniversaries, and other social events.

My second correspondent found the tongue-in-cheek ads "gross, contemptible." She likened Contestable's performance to that of Whoopi Goldberg in the two *Sister Act* films — and she didn't intend that as a compliment.

Over the years, we've received a handful of similar letters in response to photos of professional and student productions of "Nonsense," and to photos of men dressing as sisters for Halloween or similar occasions.

Common to these letters is the notion that the religious habit and the style of religious life prior to Vatican II are *not funny*. Making jokes about either or both constitutes derision of elderly sisters who dedicated their lives to the church, these readers assert.

Thus humor, whether in editorial

matter or advertisements, is a touchy subject. A religious joke that amuses one person may strongly offend another.

So, I'd like to open the question to you — especially those of you who are (older) women religious: How do you react to humor in the vein of "Nonsense" and *Sister Act*? Is it acceptable to joke about religious habits and religious life prior to the council? And does the Catholic faith — and the Catholic press — leave any room for humor?

I look forward to publishing responses (500 words or fewer, please) among our letters to the editor.

In next month's column, I plan to revisit the topic of advertising and how it fits into a Catholic newspaper — both contextually and financially.

Until then, we hope you'll save this week's "Summer Guide" as a reminder of many activities happening through Labor Day. Here's an overview of what's coming up in June: a Page One article on small Christian communities next week; our annual Graduation Supplement June 9; an update on the clustering of diocesan parishes June 16; an overview of the new Catechism of the Catholic Church June 23; and the debate over population control June 30.



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