

Be to the world ‘what the soul is to the body’

A few years ago, I revived a personal tradition my parents taught us when we were small — to make the sign of the cross each time I hear the siren of an ambulance or police car. It is a small gesture, but it carries great significance.

Why did my parents teach us to do that? They wanted us to know that the blare of a siren not only rattles our nerves and pains our ears — it also signals that someone is in trouble and needs our prayers. Making the sign of the cross, we ask God to look after them, and we remind ourselves never to be indifferent to suffering.

Most of the time the siren passes by at breakneck speed and is quickly forgotten, but even more often we pass suffering persons in the hallway or walking down the street. There is no siren, but lines of worry across their brows hint their pain and draw us to love them.

My parents wanted us to learn to notice those who need us.

I think my parents had another motivation in teaching this simple tradition: They wanted us to be comfortable making public expressions of our Catholic faith. We rarely ate at restaurants, but when we did we began with the sign of the cross and a prayer, just as we did at home — publicly saying we were a Catholic family, that we belonged to Jesus Christ.

Public expressions of faith

I don't recall when I stopped making the sign of the cross when a siren passed, but I have a feeling it had something to do with embarrassment at such a public gesture of faith. To be honest,

it is embarrassing now to write those words. How could I ever be embarrassed to send a signal that I belong to Christ?

One of the wonderful aspects of being Catholic is that small gestures and signs link daily life with our faith in Jesus Christ — the sign of the cross, the crucifix on the wall of our home, the family prayer before dinner, the visit to the cemetery, the bow, the genuflection, the rosary in our pockets, the ashes on our foreheads.

These are public signs — and while they do proclaim to others that we belong to Christ, they first of all serve as reminders to *us* that we belong to him.

It dawned on me, for example, that in shying away from making the sign of the cross in public I was shying away from Christ, creating a separation between

my faith in him and the events of each day. He is with me, within me, at every moment, and the more I remind myself of his presence and

his grace, the better I will follow him and live my faith in the simple opportunities that life constantly brings me.

If I hesitate to proclaim, even in small ways, that I belong to Christ, what am I saying to him?

A critical aspect of living our faith in Jesus Christ is that by doing so we have an effect on the world — we change the environment in which we live. It is not a matter of drawing attention to ourselves, hitting others over the head



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with our faith or imposing it on them. It is a matter of giving witness to the presence of Christ and allowing him to use us as his instruments.

Making room for Jesus

It is a matter of making room for him in our homes, our workplaces, our communities. It is a matter of humbly allowing him to guide our actions and our words. It is a matter of belief that he is the Savior of the world, and that he sends us to proclaim him, to live our faith in him.

The Letter to Diognetus, a second-century Christian document, put it this way: “The Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body ... It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together ... Such is the Christian’s lofty and divinely appointed function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself.”

There is a huge variety of public expressions of faith, and I use the example of the sign of the cross simply as a starting point for reflection. The greatest public expression of faith is love. We Christians know that our

love — lived publicly and privately, in ways great and small — has as its origin Jesus Christ, whose disciples and instruments we are. It is he who loves through us. It is he who draws others to himself through us.

“I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me.” (Gal 2:19–20)

When we find ourselves shying away from publicly expressing our faith in Jesus Christ, we can remind ourselves: He will never shy away from us.

“Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence.” (1 Pt 3:15)

DO YOU HAVE AN INTENTION FOR ARCHBISHOP SARTAIN'S PRAYER LIST?

You may send it to him at Archbishop Sartain's Prayer List, Archdiocese of Seattle, 710 Ninth Ave., Seattle, WA 98104.