

# Voices: Christian theology in a gesture

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My wife and I regularly visit New York City—our daughter is one of the Radio City Rockettes—and we have visited just about every museum that cultural center of America has to offer.

During a visit to the famous Metropolitan Museum of Art, we especially enjoyed their exhibit of Medieval and Byzantine artwork. In that collection are scores of paintings, mosaics, stained glass windows and relief sculptures of Jesus. Almost all of these portray him making a most unusual hand gesture.

I asked one of the gallery attendants if he knew what that hand gesture meant. Much to my surprise, the attendant didn't have a clue. So, I informed my wife I needed to research what in the world that oft-depicted hand gesture meant. My excitement as a theologian especially was kindled in what I discovered.

## Origin of Jesus' gesture

The gesture emerged as a sign of benediction—blessing—in early Christian and Byzantine art. Its use continued through the Medieval period and into the Renaissance.

The gesture always is made with the right hand, the only appropriate hand with which one would make blessings in that day and age.

The symbol gained great popularity shortly after the Roman Emperor Constantine issued his famous Edict of Milan in A.D. 313. His decree

officially recognized Christianity for the first time as a legitimate religion throughout the Roman Empire. With Christians now free to gather and worship without threat of persecution, Christian art began to flourish.

## Meaning of Jesus' gesture

As Christian artwork evolved into the Middle Ages, Christ's hand gesture became more than a simple greeting, benediction or blessing. It took on some deeper theological significance.

The three open, upward digits came to represent the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—while the two closed fingers were meant to portray the dual nature of Christ as both human and divine.

In A.D. 1054, the Christian Church split into what would become the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Greek Orthodox Church in the East.



For the Greek Orthodox Church, the gesture came to symbolize a common abbreviation of the Greek version of Christ's name. In this expression, the first finger is held erect, representing an 'I'; the second is bent in the shape of a 'C'; the thumb and third finger cross to form an 'X'; and the pinky, like the second finger, curves into a 'C.' Thus, the five digits together spell out "IC XC," an abbreviation of the Byzantine Greek name of Jesus Christ—IHCOYC: Jesus; XPICTOC: CHRIST—taken from the first and last letters of both parts of his name.

There you have it, some impressive Christian theology in a gesture. The next time you visit a museum and view artwork of the Medieval and Byzantine period, impress guests and gallery attendants with your impressive knowledge of the history and meaning of Jesus' hand gesture.

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