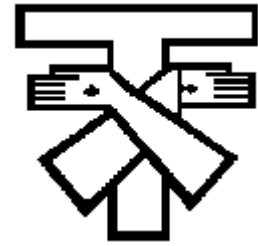


The Tau in the Franciscan Tradition

The first recorded reference to the TAU is from Ezekiel 9:4, "Go through the city of Jerusalem and put a TAU on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it." The TAU is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and looks very much like the letter "T".



The Hebrew people, like many other ancient cultures, progressively elaborated a theology or a complementary spiritual interpretation proper to each letter of their alphabet.

Because the Hebrew scriptures, and therefore the Hebrew alphabet was not formally codified until almost two hundred years after the birth of Christ, many letters were sometimes shaped in a variety of forms depending on the regions where Jews were living, either in Israel or in the diaspora: somewhere outside of Israel, usually in the Greek speaking world.

For our purposes, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet represented the fulfilment of the entire revealed Word of God. This letter was called the Tau (or Taw, pronounced "tav" in Hebrew) which could be simultaneously written: / \ X + T. When the Prophet Ezekiel (9:4) uses the imagery of the last letter of the alphabet he is commending Israel to remain faithful to God until the last, to be recognised as symbolically "sealed" with the mark of the Tau on their foreheads as God's chosen people until the end of their lives. Those who remained faithful were called the remnant of Israel, often the poor and simple people who trusted in God even without understanding the present struggle in their lives.

Although the last letter of modern Hebrew (א), is no longer cross-shaped as described in the variations above, the early Christian writers commenting on the Bible would have used its Greek version called the "Septuagint". In this Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (which Christians call the "Old Testament") the Tau was written as a T.

Naturally, then, for Christians the T came to represent the cross of Christ as being the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises. The cross as prefigured in the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, represented the means by which Christ reversed the disobedience of the old Adam and became our Saviour as the "New Adam".

During the Middle Ages, the religious community of Anthony, the Hermit, of which Saint Francis was familiar, was very involved in the care of lepers. these men used Christ's cross shaped like the Greek T as an amulet for warding off the plague and other skin diseases. In the early years of his conversion, Francis would have worked with these religious in the Assisi area and may have often been a guest in their hospice near S. John Lateran in Rome. Francis often spoke of meeting Christ disguised in the form of a leper as the turning point of his conversion. It is no doubt then that Francis eventually accepted an adapted the T as his own crest or signature combining the ancient imagery of life-long fidelity to the passion of Christ which carried with it the command to serve the least, the people with leprosy of his day.

Even more specifically intensifying the tau imagery, when Pope Innocent III called for a great reform of the Roman Catholic Church in 1215, Saint Francis would have heard the pope open the Fourth Lateran Council with the same exhortation as the Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel: " We are called to reform our lives, to stand into the presence of God as righteous people. God will know us by the sign of the Tau, T, marked on our foreheads."

At the Fourth Lateran Council, on November 11, 1215, Pope Innocent made reference to the TAU and quoted the above verse in reference to the profaning of the Holy Places by the Saracens. It is widely accepted that St. Francis was present at the Fourth Lateran Council and that he heard the words of Pope Innocent III when he said, "The TAU has exactly the same form as the Cross on which our Lord was crucified on Calvary, and only those will be marked with this sign and will obtain mercy who have mortified their flesh and conformed their life to that of the Crucified Saviour. From then on, the TAU became Francis' own coat of arms.

Francis used the TAU in his writings, painted in on the walls and doors of the places where he stayed, and used it as his only signature on his writings. For example, look at this Tau, (to the right), painted by S. Francis found by the Magdalen's chapel (also called Virgin Mary's Chapel) in the Franciscan Sanctuary of Fonte Colombo in Rieti (Region of Lazio, Italy).



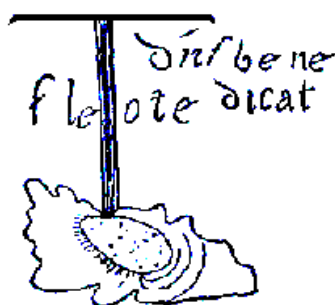
This symbolic imagery, used by the same pope, Innocent III who commissioned Francis' new community a brief five years earlier in 1209, was immediately taken to heart as his own call to reform. With arms outstretched, Francis often told his brother friars that their religious habit was in the same shape as the tau, T, meaning that they were called to be walking "crucifixes", models of a compassionate God and examples of faithfulness until their dying day.

S. Bonaventure said, "This TAU symbol had all the veneration and all the devotion of the saint: he spoke of it often in order to recommend it, and he traced it on himself before beginning each of his actions."

Br. Thomas of Celano, another Franciscan historian writes, "Francis preferred the Tau above all other symbols: he utilized it as his only signature for his letters, and he painted the image of it on the walls of all the places in which he stayed."

In the famous blessing of Brother Leo, Francis wrote on parchment, "May the Lord bless you and keep you! May the Lord show His face to you and be merciful to you! May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace! God bless you Brother Leo!" Francis sketched a head (of Brother Leo) and then drew the TAU over this portrait.

Blessing to Brother Leo



[It was written by S. Francis in his own handwriting on Mt. Alverna in September 1224, immediately after receiving the stigmata. Bro. Leo was his confessor-secretary and nurse.]

Due, no doubt, in large part to Francis' own affection for and devotion to the TAU, it has been a well recognised and accepted Franciscan symbol among Franciscans of various denominations and of all orders within those denominations for centuries.

Today, followers of Francis, as laity or religious, wear the tau cross as an exterior sign, a "seal" of their own commitment, a remembrance of the victory of Christ over evil through daily self-sacrificing love. The sign of contradiction has become the sign of hope, a witness of fidelity until the end of our lives. The TAU carries with it all of the symbolism of the Cross of Christ as well as Francis' ideal of life and dream for himself and his followers.

"For even while he [Francis] lived among humans, he imitated angelic purity so that he was held up as an example for those who would be perfect followers of Christ. We are led to hold this firmly and devoutly because of his ministry to call people to weep and mourn, to shave their heads, and to put on sackcloth, and to mark with a Tau the foreheads of those who moan and grieve, signing them with the cross of penance and clothing them with his habit, which is in the form of a cross".

S. Bonaventure, "The Life of St. Francis, Prologue n. 2

Compiled by Fr Paul Butler, 21st November 2025