

“He favored the sign of the Tau over all others.”

“The Lord said to him, ‘Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.’” (Ezek. 9:4)



In the “Prologue” to his *Major Life of Saint Francis*, St. Bonaventure likened Francis to an angel in Chapter 7 of The Revelation to John, writing that he “is considered not without reason/to be like the angel ascending from the rising sun/bearing the seal of the living God.”¹ What is the seal? For Bonaventure it is the Tau, and he presents an image of Francis “marking his followers with the Tau, the sign of salvation given to the poor and humble, and denied to the rich and powerful.”² Elsewhere among the early documents, in *The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*, Thomas of Celano wrote that Francis “favored the sign of the Tau over all others. With it alone he signed letters he sent, and painted it on the walls of cells everywhere.”³

The sign of the Tau (last letter of the Hebrew alphabet) as a holy and protective seal is biblical in origin. Commentators point to Chapter 9 of the Book of Ezekiel, in which the Lord commands a “man clothed in white linen with a writing case at his side” to “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.” The Hebrew word for the “mark” is the letter T (Tau)⁴ and in this passage from Ezekiel, it serves as a protective sign, sparing those so marked from God’s punishment.

What led to St. Francis adopting the Tau as his personal sign? During the first millennium of Christianity, the Tau assumed various meanings. St. Anthony of Egypt in the fourth century revered the Tau, and it is sometimes called St. Anthony’s Cross. By the Middle Ages, it was increasingly associated with penance, as evidenced in a 12th century Benedictine text. In the early 13th century, certain charitable groups of penitents, such as the Brothers of St. Jacopo d’Altopascio and the Hospital Brothers of St. Anthony the Hermit, incorporated the Tau as part of their habits.⁵ So by Francis’s time, the connection between the Tau and penance and conversion was clearly established.

Yet to come, however, was a greater and more striking emphasis placed on the symbol during the Fourth Council of the Lateran by Pope Innocent III who chose the Tau as a spiritual emblem for the reforms he envisioned for the Church. When he spoke to the bishops gathered in Rome for opening of the Council in November 1215, Innocent identified the Tau with the Cross of Christ. Alluding to the verses from Ezekiel, he said, “We are called to reform our lives, to stand in the presence of God as righteous people. God will know us by the sign of the Tau marked on our foreheads.”⁶ Francis was strongly influenced by the Lateran Council, and certainly Innocent’s words would have stoked Francis’s enthusiasm for the Tau as an outward sign of the interior conversion he had undergone and the gospel life he was striving to live. From then on it became his personal sign, signature, and effectively, his coat of arms.

In the ensuing 800 years, the Tau came to be viewed chiefly, though by no means exclusively, as a symbol of Franciscans, both religious and secular. In the wake of the Rule of 1978, for many Secular Franciscans it replaced the scapular and knotted cord as their “habit,” or in the vocabulary of the General Constitutions of 2000, as “the distinctive sign of membership in the Order.” Specifically, Article 43 of the Constitutions states that in each country, the national statutes establish the “distinctive sign,” specifically indicating “the Tau or other Franciscan symbol.” While there are many venerable Franciscan symbols (the San Damiano Cross comes to mind), the distinctive sign of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States is the Tau, pure and simple. It can be worn in any number of ways: pendant, ring, pin, embroidered patch, etc. In whatever form, it should always be worn visibly and publicly by all members of the Order.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that this “distinctive sign” is presented along with the Rule during the Rite of Admission when a candidate becomes a member of the Order. The minister says, “As you turn toward Christ in the Spirit of St. Francis, receive this sign of the Secular Franciscan Order and become one with us.” At that moment, the Tau becomes for the candidate a personal sign of conversion and vocation as well as a symbol of fraternal solidarity and an invitation to a new way of life. Upon profession, it remains, for the rest of our lives, a sign of Franciscan unity and joyful conversion—a mark that identifies us as God’s own.

From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members. [*Rule*, 22]
- The national statutes establish:
 - the minimum age for profession which, however, may not be less than eighteen years completed;
 - the distinctive sign of membership in the Order (the "Tau" or other Franciscan symbol).[*Constitutions*, 43]

For reflection and meditation

- Pope Innocent III said, “who bears the Tau affirms by this: in nothing else do I wish to glory except in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ... Who bears the Tau will find mercy, in this sign of a life converted and renewed in Christ... Therefore, be champions of the Tau and of the Cross!” Do you equate the Tau with the Cross? Are you comfortable wearing it publicly? Is it a treasure or a burden...or both? Has it been an occasion for: conversation, witness, identity, persecution?

¹ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., et al., editors, *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Volume 2, The Founder* (New City Press, 1999), 527.

² Armstrong, vol. 3, *The Prophet*, 11.

³ Armstrong, vol. 2, 402.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., et al., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall, 1990), 314.

⁵ Raffaele Pazzelli, *St. Francis and the Third Order, The Franciscan and pre-Franciscan Penitential Movement*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1989, 34-35.

⁶ secularfranciscansusa.org/wp-content/uploads/Tau-Cross-Statements.pdf.

Image: Tau said to be inscribed by St. Francis on the wall of the chapel at Fonte Columbo.