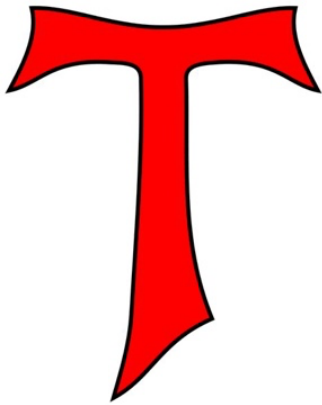


THE TAU

“The external sign of the SFO [O.F.S.] in the United States is the TAU.” (*National Statutes*)



Damien Vorreux, O.F.M. states that at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215: “Commenting on a text from the prophet Ezekiel, [Pope] Innocent III called upon the participants to mark themselves and all Christians with the Tau of penance and of the cross: ‘Tau is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and its shape designates a cross, at least before the fixing of Pilate’s proclamation. Such is the sign one bears on one’s head if one manifests the radiance of the cross in all one’s behavior; if, as the apostle says, one crucifies one’s flesh with its vices and sins, and if one affirms: I do not desire to put my glory in anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through whom the world has been crucified for me and me for the world. ... Be, then, champions of the Tau and of the cross!’ And after recalling that God does not will the death of a sinner but his conversion, he [the Pope] ordered them to preach penance and forgiveness everywhere. [Much like Francis and his followers had been commissioned by the Pope in 1209.]

“At this point Francis chose the Tau as the symbol of his penitential life and as the résumé of his preaching: as the concrete emblem of the participation of his order in the reform of the church and of souls. The Tau would serve him as a signature for his letters and as a standard up until the day when the stigmata would reproduce in his very flesh the content of this mystical letter imprinted in his heart.”¹

Early in his life of conversion, St. Francis had seen this sign used by those caring for lepers in Rome. Francis used this symbol to sign his letters, as is clearly seen in the letter he wrote to Brother Leo. Also, the early friars sometimes marked their cell with it.

In this same vein, Thomas of Celano talks about St. Francis in his conversion: “From that moment [the beginning of his conversion at San Damiano] the memory of the Lord’s passion was stamped on his heart with a deep brand-mark, and as conversion reached his deepest self, his soul began to melt, as his beloved spoke. And he also enclosed himself in the cross itself when he put on the habit of a penitent, bearing the image of the cross.

“Though for him the more the habit reflected poverty, the more appropriate it would be to his plan, the saint approved in it even more the mystery of the cross, because just as, internally, his mind had put on the crucified Lord, so, externally, his whole body put on the cross of Christ. And, in the sign by which God had vanquished the powers of the air his army [the Franciscan family] would battle for God. ... He 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. That man of God, Pacifico, seer of heavenly visions, saw with his bodily eyes a great sign of the Tau on the forehead of the blessed father. It was many-colored and flashed with the brightness of gold.”²

Bonaventure speaks of the Tau associated with St. Francis and the early friars: “When the holy man [Francis] saw that he [a composer of worldly songs] had been completely converted from the restlessness of the world to the peace of Christ, he called him Brother Pacifico. Afterwards this man advanced in holiness; and, before he went to France as provincial minister – indeed he was the first to hold that office there, he merited again to see a great Tau on Francis’s forehead, which displayed a variety of different colors that caused his face to glow with wonderful beauty.

“The holy man [Francis] venerated this symbol with great affection, often spoke of it with eloquence, and signed it with his own hand in the letters he sent, as if his whole desire were, according to the prophetic text, to mark with a Tau the foreheads of those moaning and grieving, of those truly converted to Jesus Christ.”³

We recall that Tau is a letter of the Greek alphabet. As referenced in Ezekiel (9:4): “Pass through the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and mark an X on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the abominations practiced within it.” [Not all translations use the word Tau; the X can be substituted for a T.]

For O.F.S. members, the Tau symbolizes: cross – promise – hope – commitment – reconciliation.

Cross – The Tau has the shape of a person fastened to the cross, the brutal instrument chosen to do away with Christ, but which has become our means of salvation! With Christ, we take up our cross daily. It offers freedom from sin and death! We are reinstated as children of God, given the offer of eternal happiness, and resurrection!

Promise – The message of the Tau being marked on the foreheads of those to be saved gives us assurance about our future – like an inoculation against dreadful diseases, like the blood of the lamb on the doorposts in Egypt.

Hope – Given this promise, that the Franciscan way of life is effective and life-giving, so we can respond to such a promise by our virtue of hope. We trust God is telling us the truth about our eternal futures if we stay with Him.

Commitment – A sign that is not only the cross of Christ, but also the cross we freely embrace on the path of conversion in following St. Francis’ approach to God, when we deny ourselves daily to be the Lord’s disciples.

Reconciliation – As the cross brought the eternal healing of redemption for all peoples, so it becomes the reminder of our own re-union with our God (who gave us His new and eternal covenant), who loved and loves us so much as to have sacrificed so much on our behalf. This sign reminds us that we are on good terms with God again, and can stay that way.

Undoubtedly, we as Franciscans are “**people of the Tau**”!



Q1. How do I view the Tau? What significance does it contain for me?

Q2. How can the Tau be a focus of MY prayers for meditation and contemplation?

Q3. In what ways do I explain to others the meaning and purpose of the Tau in the life of O.F.S. members?

Q4. What is the symbolism of the shape of the Tau when related to the “habit” Francis adopted for his way of life (which the Franciscan Friars still use today)?

¹ *First Encounter With Francis of Assisi*, D. Vorreux, 2012, pp. 32-33

² FA:ED, *The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*, 1250-1252, Vol. II, pp. 401-402, Chapter II, v. 2

³ FA:ED, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, 1260-1263, Vol. II, p. 556, Chapter Four, v. 9