



Tau Cross Statements

1. In early civilization, the joined vertical and horizontal lines were symbolic of human relationships supported by a vertical relationship to the gods.
2. Biblical writers referred to landmarks as Taus. A landowner placed stones at the edge of his property; other, seeing the Tau, would interpret ownership or belonging.
3. The Tau was the cross of the great desert father, St. Anthony of Egypt, and Antonine monks staffed the leprosarium outside of Assisi and the Tau was their logo. It was there that Francis first encountered the lepers.
4. Francis had accepted hospitality in hospices run by the Antonines, an order of brothers who did hospital ministry. The Antonines used the Tau as their symbol because of its history in the Old Testament story of Moses. Moses held up a Tau with a serpent wrapped around it and all who looked on it were healed. It is still used as the insignia of physicians today.
5. Many times Old Testament prophets proclaimed that the faithful of Yahweh would be known by the mark of the Tau on their foreheads.
6. The Tau is a Hebrew and Greek letter. The origin of its use as a sign is in Ezekiel (9:4) "Pass through the city (Jerusalem) and mark a T on the foreheads of those who moan and groan over all the abominations that are practiced within it." [Not all translations use the word Tau.] When Pope Innocent III opened the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, he preached on this text and St. Francis was there. The Pope set forth the Tau as a sign of penance and renewal in Christ. Francis embraced this sign as an expression of Christ's cross. In hearing the story, Francis experienced a confirmation of the LIFE and MISSION of his new order. The Tau became for him a symbol of exodus and pilgrimage with which he wanted his companions signed as "the new and humble people of God."
7. Pope Innocent III opened the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, using the same exhortation as the Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel, "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." This symbolic imagery, used by the same pope who commissioned Francis' new community a brief five years earlier, was immediately taken to heart as the friars' call to reform. With arms outstretched, Francis often told his brother friars that their religious habit was in the shape of the Tau, meaning that they were to become "walking crucifixes," models of a compassionate God and examples of faithfulness until their dying day.
8. Since the shape of the Tau indicated a cross, Francis chose it as a symbol of his penitential life and as a résumé of all his preaching.
9. The Tau is the mark of Jesus, the sign of his work of love. It has always been the mark of the Christian. The Book of Revelation has reference to this ancient significance when it speaks of the faithful having the Name of God written on their foreheads. Thus, for Francis, the Tau sign summarizes the mystery of faith and marks all who accept that mystery and enter into union with Jesus. In this sign, Francis wanted to be absorbed entirely.

10. Pilgrims traveling to the Franciscan holy places will see a Tau on a window ledge in the hermitage of Fonte Columbo. It is believed this Tau was placed there by Francis.
11. After the death and canonization of St. Francis, a seal or coat of arms was fashioned for the Order bearing the device of the crossed arms of Christ and Francis superimposed on the Tau cross. It symbolizes the love and union of Francis with the crucified, and the Franciscan call to self-reform and the saving of the world through penance and charity.
12. “Brother Pacifico began to experience anointings he had never felt before. Repeatedly he was allowed to see what was veiled to others. For, shortly after that, he saw the great *sign of the Tau on the forehead* of blessed Francis, which displayed its beauty with the multi-colored circles of a peacock.” (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, Early Documents II. *The Second Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano. Chapter LXXII; p. 317. NY: New City Press.)
13. “It was his custom, established by a holy decree also for his first sons, that wherever they saw the likeness of the cross they would give it honor and due reverence. 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.” (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, Early Documents II. *The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano. Chapter II; p. 402. NY: New City Press.)
14. “The abscess healed quickly, his full health was restored, and to this day the sign of the ‘Tau’ remains on the spot.” (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, Early Documents XVII. *The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano. Chapter II; p. 458. NY: New City Press.)
15. “This conviction should be faithfully and devotedly in the forefront of our minds: not only does this advance the mission he held *of calling to weep and mourn, to shave one’s head and wear sackcloth, and to sign the Tau on the foreheads of those moaning and grieving* with a sign of a penitential cross, and of a habit conformed to the cross even more, it confirms with the irrefutable testimony of truth that *the seal of the likeness* of the living God, that is, of *Christ crucified*, was imprinted on his body, not by natural forces or human skill, but by the wondrous power *of the Spirit of the living God*.” (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, Early Documents II. *The Major Legend of Saint Francis: Prologue* by Bonaventure. Chapter 4: 9 p. 527. NY: New City Press.)
16. “He [Brother Pacifico] 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.” (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, Early Documents II. *The Major Legend of Saint Francis* by Bonaventure. Chapter Four: 9 p. 556. NY: New City Press.)

17. **“He said that he had come at his call, and that he carried the means of healing. He touched the source of the pain with a small stick bearing the figure of the ‘Tau.’ The abscess healed quickly, as he gave him perfect health. What is even more amazing, he left the sacred sign of the ‘Tau’ stamped on the spot of the healed ulcer as a reminder of the miracle. Saint Francis signed his letters with this sign whenever charity or necessity led him to send something in writing.”** (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder, Early Documents II. The Major Legend of Saint Francis: The Miracles* by Bonaventure. Chapter X: p. 681. NY: New City Press.)
18. “Before he [Pacífico] became minister in France, as indeed he was the first to hold the office of minister there, he merited 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 man of God venerated this symbol with great affection. He often spoke of it with eloquence and used it at the beginning of any action. In those letters which out of charity he sent, he signed it with his own hand. It was 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. (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder, Early Documents II. The Minor Legend of Saint Francis* by Bonaventure. Chapter II: p. 693. NY: New City Press.)
19. “Soon Saint Francis appeared to him carrying a small staff on which was the figure ‘Tau,’ and touched the source of the pain. The abscess broke and he immediately was cured, but the sign of the ‘Tau’ always remained over the spot. Saint Francis used to sign his letters with this symbol.” (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Founder, Early Documents II. Related Documents: Dominican Hagiography and Sermons*. p. 805. NY: New City Press.)
20. “Therefore the Tau of divine protection was first signed on Francis. But it is also his office to sign with the Tau, on the foreheads of the men who are grieving and mourning over the *Rule* as it is tread upon and transgressed, putting a sign on them so that they may not perish in the massacre of imminent distress, when the wrath of God will attack the *Rule’s transgressors*.” (Armstrong, R., Hellmann, J., & Short, W. 2000. *Francis of Assisi: The Prophet, Early Documents III. The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus: Book Five*. Chapter Four, p. 189. NY: New City Press.)

Facts

- * The 19th letter of the Greek alphabet.
- * Tau is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and, as such, speaks of finality, ending, forever.
- * Has the same form as the cross on which Jesus was crucified.
- * For St. Francis, the Tau was a symbol of hope amidst the confusion in the Church of his day.
- * Was used as Francis’ personal signature.
- * The external sign of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States.
- * Francis saw it as a sign which meant redemption and salvation.
- * The Tau was a symbol of exodus and pilgrimage.
- * It represented the genuine hope and response in Trust to the Faithfulness of God.

- * The Tau spoke of the universality of salvation, *by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.*
- * It was a sign of permanent conversion and of total disappropriation.
- * The Tau called Francis to mission and the service of others because it reminded him that the Lord Himself became our servant even unto death. Thus, Francis also became the servant of God and the servant of his brothers in all that he did, in his prayer as in his preaching.
- * It was a sign of the goodness and of the love of God; it was his title of glory and the source of his perfect joy.

The Tau Cross [adapted from *Catch Me A Rainbow Too* by Fr. Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap.]

Franciscans use the Tau as a symbol of commitment to Jesus through the O.F.S. Way of Life. *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, art. # 23 states, “. . . the distinctive Franciscan sign [is] regulated by the statutes.” *The National Statutes*, art. #16.4 states, “The external sign of the O.F.S. in the United States is the Tau.”

The Tau cross is **the** sign of the O.F.S. in this country, not the San Damiano crucifix, not a medal of St. Francis, not a scapular and cord (such as were mandated under the *Rule* of 1883), and not a modified religious habit such as the friars wear!

The Tau is worn with pride and joy. Francis saw the Tau as a symbol of the cross of Christ. It was the sign of salvation. It was a sign of belonging to God, being chosen and saved. Francis embraced it with love. It was pregnant with meaning for him. Franciscans wear it as a sign of their commitment to Jesus and the Gospel way of life.

Write inside the Tau

your own words

to describe this

Secular Franciscan

Symbol!

