

What is the history and symbolism of the Tau?

It is possible that Francis first encountered the Tau (a Greek upper-case letter T) on the habit of the Anthonians, a religious community of men founded in 1095 to care for the sick. It is also widely accepted that he heard Pope Innocent III's exhortation drawn from the Prophet Ezekiel (9:4) in opening the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215: *"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, T, marked on our foreheads."*



The Tau symbolized the call to penance, having *"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 Savior."*

Thomas of Celano noted that *"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."* Bonaventure added that Francis *"traced it on himself before beginning each of his actions."* With arms outstretched, Francis often told his brother friars that their religious habit was in the same shape as the Tau, meaning that they were called to be walking *"crucifixes"*, models of a compassionate God and examples of faithfulness until their dying day. For the followers of Francis, the Tau continues to represent commitment to a Gospel life of daily, self-sacrificing love of all God's creation.

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