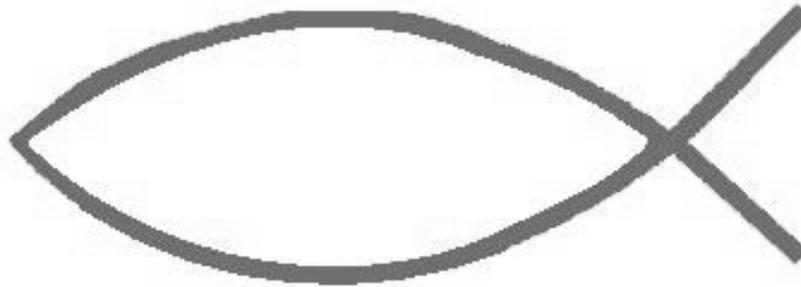


## THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

Symbols are quite extraordinary because, they both reveal and conceal the message hidden within them. To those who do not know the secret meaning of the sign they may seem interesting or strange. It does not matter if they are poorly drawn like the symbol of “the fish” for early Christians, because for those who were baptised, initiated into Christian life, it was instantly recognizable as the Christian symbol and carried within it, the image of the first apostles, who were mainly fishermen and their experience of Jesus the Fisher of Men.



## THE POPE CALLED FOR A SPIRITUAL CRUSADE

In the time of St Francis, Pope Innocent III, aware of the sad state of the world in which they lived, looked back to the prophet Ezekiel in the Old Testament for inspiration and found the place where it says: *“Go all through Jerusalem, and mark a “Tau”<sup>1</sup> on the foreheads<sup>2</sup> of all who deplore and disapprove of all the evil practised in the city.” I heard him say to the others, “Follow him through the city and strike. Show neither pity nor mercy, kill and exterminate them all. But do not touch anyone with the sign of the Tau.”<sup>3</sup>*

The Pope chose the sign of the Tau as a spiritual logo, for the reforms he wished to bring about in the Church. During his address to all the Bishops gathered in Rome for the Fourth Lateran Council on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1215, he went so far as to say that this sign of the Tau was also a sign of the Cross of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

*Sign the men on the forehead with the sign of the Tau<sup>5</sup>. The Tau is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and it has the shape of the cross. One carries the sign of the Tau to express that in all of their conduct they carry the splendour of the Cross; one carries the Tau if one*

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<sup>1</sup> The Vulgate version of the bible translated by St Jerome says “a Tau”

<sup>2</sup> On ash Wednesday we mark the sign of the Cross on our foreheads.

<sup>3</sup> The text is Ezekiel 9:4

<sup>4</sup> Arguments about the exact shape of the cross on which Christ died have been a constant discussion seemingly forever.

<sup>5</sup> The very word “logo” comes from the Greek “logos” meaning “Word”. The Greek bible says, *“In the beginning was the Word; “Logos” the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* A logo therefore, to be effective must contain “a word” a message. It would be a valuable exercise here to look at the Logo of different Companies and Organizations to get some idea of how a message can be carefully crafted by artists specifically trained in designing a Logo. One example may suffice, the logo of the Commonwealth Bank. It is a specific yellow shape whose angles pinpoint the stars of the Southern Cross on a black night; most people are unaware of its symbolic reference.

*crucifies one's flesh with its vices and sins; one bears the Tau if one affirms: "I want nothing else than to glory in the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ..." Whoever carries the Tau will find mercy, a sign of a penitent life, renewed in Christ. Therefore, be champions of the Tau and of the Cross!"*<sup>6</sup>

With the words, "*Be champions of the Tau and of the Cross*" Pope Innocent III called for nothing less than a spiritual crusade throughout Christendom – a call for interior conversion and outward signs of penance, such as caring for the poor and the afflicted. This spoke powerfully to the vision and goals of St Francis, who saw all creatures as his brothers and sisters.

### **ST ANTHONY'S BRIEF**

Saint Anthony was a great friend of Saint Francis. He was a wonderful preacher, who often had to battle against those who treated people badly and even the devil. St Anthony composed a special prayer, now called St Anthony's Brief, to be said when resisting the temptation to do something wrong. Holding up the Tau cross he said:

*Behold the Cross of the Lord!  
Be gone you enemy powers!  
The Lion of the tribe of Judah,<sup>7</sup>  
the root of David  
has conquered. Alleluia!*<sup>8</sup>

### **THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE**

In 1212, some years before Pope Innocent III called his great Council, the Tau was used as the emblem of the so-called "Children's Crusade".<sup>9</sup> The Children's Crusade was started by two youths one in France and one in Germany during the summer of 1212. Thousands<sup>10</sup> of children caught up in the enthusiasm of the idea of freeing the Holy Land by love instead of by force, marched towards Italy gathering more young people along the way. If in fact this Crusade of love did take place (some historians say it did not) then Pope Innocent would have been aware of their emblem being the Tau and it may have been this also, that influenced his choice of a symbol for his call for a spiritual renewal.

### **THE SHAPE OF THE CROSS**

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<sup>6</sup> Address of Pope Innocent III to the IV Lateran Council. "Be champions of the Tau and of the Cross" is a challenge to knights.

<sup>7</sup> The title "The Lion of the tribe of Judah" this royal title referred to King David and King Solomon, but is taken up by Saint Anthony as a title for Christ.

<sup>8</sup> These words were later inscribed by Pope Sixtus V, (1520 – 1590) a Franciscan, on the obelisk he erected in the piazza in front of St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

<sup>9</sup> Historians have some difficulty with the facts of this crusade. It seems that the Latin word for boy may have been mixed up with the word for homeless poor and that this might have been a movement of what might be called refugees and dispossessed poor children who got caught up in the enthusiasm of crusade.

<sup>10</sup> The story says up to 50 thousand young people from France and Germany with the numbers growing along the way to Italy, but this number seems unbelievable.

However, the assertion of the pope that the Tau is the shape of the cross on which our Lord was crucified comes more from the mystical tradition of the Church than its historical tradition. Let us look a little closer at this mystical tradition and how it came about.

The cross took on an extraordinary, powerful symbolism for Christians after the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Cross summed up and became the sign, the final revelation of his great love for us. In time, as a symbol the wood of the Cross came back to life and began to bud on the ends in a spring time of new life. It became the green wood of the Cross – the flourishing Tree of Life, bringing good health to those who meditated on its meaning, like a tree with medicinal properties.

### THE VIRTUES

These medicinal properties of the Cross are often seen as the theological virtues of Faith Hope and Charity and the virtues of : *patience, kindness, forgiveness, trust, endurance, integrity, compassion...* They include the four cardinal virtues: *temperance, prudence, fortitude, justice.*<sup>11</sup> It is important to know about and understand these virtues if we are to become truly inspiring people and excellent friends.

### THE CROSS: THE TREE OF LIFE

In this the Cross took on huge, mystical power as one of the two trees in the garden of paradise that Adam and Eve were forbidden to touch.<sup>12</sup> These two trees were: *“The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil”* and *“The Tree of Immortal Life”*. St Bonaventure in his work *The Tree of Life*, proclaims:

*“O Cross, salvation-bearing tree!”*<sup>13</sup>

### THE HEBREW TAU

The Cross,<sup>14</sup> which was the instrument of the death of Christ, became the sign not just of his death – the end, but ironically also the sign of his power over death. The Tau Cross made red by the blood of Christ signified the end of Christ’s life on earth. It was the last word; the last syllable; the last letter. Early Christian mystics saw a poetic harmony between the cross, on which the Word of God died, and the letters of the Alphabet that are the essence of words.

In particular they saw a resonance between the Cross of Christ; the last message and the last letter of the Hebrew Alphabet the “Tau” shown as a “T” shape. In this way the Cross of Christ took on an apocalyptic tone as the end of the Hebrew Alphabet the last word, the end of the world. In Hebrew the Tau has the numerical equal 400.

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<sup>11</sup> See “Virtue”: Wikipedia. Virtues are good habits where vices are bad habits.

<sup>12</sup> There were two trees in Eden, the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Immortal life. Genesis 3:22-24 *“He must not be allowed to stretch out his hand next and pick from the Tree of Life also, and eat some, and live forever.”*

<sup>13</sup> Bonaventure’s *Tree of Life* is a book written to teach the friars how to meditate on the Passion of Christ. In it Bonaventure proposed we contemplate the life of Christ which he has ordered into 12 fruits for meditation.

<sup>14</sup> In fact a piece of the “True Cross” traditionally found by St Helen the mother of the Emperor Constantine, even if it is the smallest splinter that could enter your finger receives special veneration by the Church above all other relics and sacramentals.

Drawing to itself all these meanings the Tau took on the specific meaning from Ezekiel 9:4 as the sign of those chosen by God, a sign of those who will be saved at the end of the world.

### **THE TAU AS A SIGNATURE**

We are told that St Francis became so excited by the meaning of this symbol that he used the Tau as a signature or sign on his letters much like people who cannot write their name use an **X** to indicate their mark, which is then verified by a notary who writes *“This is the true mark of ...”* indicating that they witnessed the act of the person making it. Therefore mark becomes the signature of the person’s name.

It is odd that St Francis who could write should also use a sign as his mark. It would seem then that the Tau became for St Francis a kind of seal, a coat of arms, a flag or standard, indicating that he saw himself as a *“Champion of the Tau and of the Cross”*

### **THE SAN DAMIANO CROSS**

This call to renew the Church spiritually fitted in very well with the vision of St Francis in front of the San Damiano Cross where Christ spoke to him from the Cross saying:

*“Francis, go repair my Church  
which you see is falling into ruin!”*

### **THE TAU AND THE FRANCISCAN HABIT**

St Bonaventure says that the Franciscan Habit is nothing less than the Cross of Christ to which the friar is tied by the cord with three knots symbolizing: POVERTY, CHASTITY, OBEDIENCE. The habit, when a friar stands with his arms outstretched, is also more like the Tau sign than the normal historical cross. Franciscans both religious and laity wear the Tau Cross today as a sign of their commitment to Christ and the power of his love, his message, his grace, to transform us into the very best person we can possibly become.

### **THE TAU AND THE TORAH**

In the tradition of the Hebrews the Tau also signified the *“Torah”* meaning *“The whole of the law”* of the Old Testament. So the Tau takes on a powerful legal symbolism as a sort of seal of the law. Jesus, in answering the question which is the greatest of the commandments refers to Deuteronomy 6: 4-9:

*Listen Israel; God our God is one God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart. You shall repeat them to your children and say them over to them whether at rest in your house or walking abroad, at your lying down or your rising; you shall fasten them on your hand as a sign and on your forehead as a circlet; you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

And also on the Book of Leviticus 19:18:

*“You must love your neighbour as yourself.”*

However, Jesus gives a new commandment John 13:34:

*I give you a new commandment:  
Love one another,  
just as I have loved you  
you must also love one another.  
By this love you have for one another,  
everyone will know  
that you are my disciples.*

Just as Jesus himself becomes the law of love, by dying to self on the cross, so the cross becomes the seal of the law and the Tau receives the fullness of its power as a sign.

### **THE MIRACLE HEALING OF ST FRANCIS WITH THE TAU**

Not only did Francis use the Tau during his life, but he even used it after his death. This story is recounted by Celano: *An inhabitant of Cori, in the diocese of Ostia, had totally lost the use of his leg... St. Francis was not able to remain deaf to his appeals... and so he appeared to him in the company of another friar.(St Anthony) He told him that he had hastened to come to him, at his insistent prayer, so as to heal him. Then St Francis touched the painful spots with end of a small staff, which was in the form of a Tau. The abscess burst, and the sick person regained his health.(3 C 159.*

### **A CALL TO PRAYER**

The Tau is a reminder and a call to prayer; to enter into a deep and sincere relationship with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to love God *“Our Father in heaven...”* for we are in Christ, all children of the Father; let us strive to love each other as brothers and sisters so that there will be a better more fraternal world.

For Franciscans, St Francis himself has become a Tau. As such he has become a sign, a logo that leads us into a personal relationship with Jesus.

### **The Hebrew Alphabet**

Aleph  
Beth  
Ghimel  
Daleth  
He  
Waw  
Zain  
Heth  
Teth  
Yod  
Kaph  
Lamed  
Mem  
Nun  
Samek  
Pe  
Ain  
Sade  
Qoph  
Resh  
Shin  
Tau