The IHS appears on the Crest of our new Holy Father. What does it mean?

If you do a Google Image search for IHS logo, dozens of images will come up. Very many of them are associated with Jesuit works and houses and individuals, but not all.

The use of IHS as a symbol for Jesus goes back well before the Jesuits were founded in 1539. It is an authentic symbol used by the whole Church, much wider than the Jesuits, but is used especially by Jesuits. So the IHS is placed over the door of the oldest Jesuit House in Australia, at Sevenhill put there by the Brothers when the first stone house was built in 1854. And you see it in the surviving little Jesuit churches throughout our diocese, such as on the front of the church of St Francis Regis in Crystal Brook. But it is also prominent on the front façade of St Margaret’s Church at Port Broughton, and that was never a Jesuit church. Devotion wider than the Jesuits uses this symbol of the Holy Name.

The IHS has been used by individuals who are not Jesuits themselves, but who wish to pay tribute to the influence the Jesuits have had on their formation. Thus Archbishop Denis Hart, who grew up in a Jesuit parish, and was taught by the Jesuits both at school and in the seminary, includes the IHS in his Crest. So does Bishop Bill Wright, Bishop of Newcastle/Maitland, who went to St Aloysius College in Sydney as a boy, and he states explicitly that the Crest is there because of that association. It also features in the centre of the Crest of the present Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie! And it features in the Crest of the Holy Father.

What does it mean? IHS has been given all sorts of meanings down the ages, from I have suffered, to in His steps, to the far less reverent meaning given by students at Jesuit Colleges where it was interpreted I hate school!

The full word would read IHSOUS, which is the Greek way of writing the name of Jesus. In Greek, an abbreviation consisted of using only the first few letters, and hence IHS is an abbreviation for the holy name of Jesus. Ignatius Loyola insisted that the Order that he founded be called the Society of Jesus, and he and the early Jesuits always used the IHS as the sign on their letters, and it became part of the official seal used by the Jesuit Superior General.

In time a cross was placed over the bar of the H, and the three nails of the passion were added beneath the holy name. In Ignatius time these nails were not there, but instead there was a crescent moon, reflecting the desire of Ignatius to work to convert the Muslim people. With the wars and disruptions of the time he was never able to fulfil that dream and his energies were turned to serving the Church in Europe and Asia. The rays of the sun were added around the IHS at a later date also. They symbolise the beauty and present of the Risen Jesus.

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