

# More than the patron saint of lost items: The life of St. Anthony of Padua

There have been some 10,000 persons identified as saints going back to the time of the apostles; of those saints, 36 have been named [Doctors of the Church](#), the first being named so in the 13th century. A saint lived a life of heroic virtue, of holiness and sanctity. A Doctor of the Church is singled out for excellence in teaching, writing, preaching of Catholic beliefs that endure in every era. Fernando Martins de Bulhões (aka, St. Anthony of Padua) is one of the individuals given both these Church honors.

Born in Lisbon, Portugal, on Aug. 15, 1195, Fernando was 15 when he experienced God's call to serve. Accepted by the Augustinian Order, he went first to a nearby monastery and later to Holy Cross Monastery in Coimbra, Portugal, where he remained for eight years devoted to prayer and the Scriptures. This was the beginning of his evolution as a Bible scholar and a renowned Christian teacher.

## Missionary

In 1220, he became aware of five Franciscans who had been martyred while evangelizing the Good News to Muslims in Morocco. Fernando asked if he could join the Franciscans for the express purpose of going as a missionary to Morocco. His request was granted, and that same year, he arrived in Morocco. It was then he took the name Anthony. He believed God wanted him to evangelize to the Muslims, and he was ready to give his life for Jesus. But such was not the case; in a few months, illness forced him to return to Europe. Now God's purpose for him would be realized: a priest, a theologian and one of the great preachers of the Church.

His propensity as a preacher became known quite by accident. Most who knew Anthony in 1221 saw him as a pious individual but without any special talents, especially that of an orator. Anthony, without warning, was asked to preach at a gathering of Franciscans and Dominicans. So forceful, simplistic, even eloquent was his presentation that he was quickly asked to preach all over Italy and areas of France. His theological expertise and inspirational oration were not lost on the leader of the order, St. Francis, who soon enlisted Anthony to teach theology to other Franciscans. This was a unique honor, as he would have a great impact on the future of the order and, by extension, the Church.

In the 12th- and [13th-century Europe](#), various heretical groups, but primarily the [Albigensians](#) of southern France, were growing in number with the intention of rejecting most Church teachings, bringing down the pope and destroying the Catholic faith. St. Anthony was sent to dissuade and return these misguided people to the flock. By his devotion to Church beliefs, unpretentious manner, lack of insult and well-articulated debate, he was able to turn certain of these heretics back to the Church. Anyone who came in contact with Anthony was impressed by his sincerity, his humility; some recognized the Spirit of God speaking through him.

## **Jesus, the Church, Franciscans**

Six hundred years after the death of Anthony, the Bishop of Tulle, France, gave this exacting description of the saint: "His commentaries on the divine pages may be likened to a golden harp sending forth magnificent harmonies to the glory of the Word Incarnate. The Child Jesus himself touched his lips with his fingers, that they might pour forth golden words." Anthony never strayed in his commitment to Jesus, the Church or the Franciscans.

He had a remarkable love for the Eucharist, and one story, perhaps a legend, exemplifies such love. St. Anthony was

confronted by a heretic who denied the Catholic belief in the Eucharist. The heretic challenged Anthony, saying that he would starve his mule for three days and then bring the animal in front of himself and the saint. The heretic would have food that the mule normally ate; Anthony would have the Blessed Sacrament. If the mule ignored the food and instead knelt down in front of the host, the heretic would become a Catholic. On the third day, the animal went straight to Anthony, who was holding the Eucharist, and knelt down.

In 1230, Anthony settled in Padua, Italy. People flocked to hear his sermons, sometimes there were as many as 30,000 attendees. He became a champion of the poor in Padua; among other acts, he influenced the local government to pass legislation protecting the poor from prison if they could not pay their debts. The saint is the source of St. Anthony's bread, which people baked in his honor and gave to the poor. Today the bread is symbolized in any action inspired by St. Anthony that aids the needy. It was near Padua that Anthony died from exhaustion at age 36.

Less than one year after his death, June 13, 1231, Anthony was canonized. According to a book by Father Ubaldo Da Rieti, OSF ("Life of St. Anthony of Padua," Angeles Guardian Press, 1895), there is evidence that some in the Church opposed the quick canonization, particularly a certain influential cardinal. Because of the cardinal's objection, Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227-41) demurred.

Soon, the cardinal had a dream that he and the pope were at the dedication of a church, but they had no relic for the altar. Nearby was a casket containing the remains of Anthony from which they extracted a relic and placed it in the altar. Following the dream, the cardinal encouraged the pope to canonize Anthony as soon as possible. The canonization (quickest in history) took place on May 30, 1232. Pope Gregory IX said that the world should not be deprived of venerating such a holy man who was the source of many proven miracles.

Such a virtuous life cannot be hidden.

## Legacy

In 1946, Venerable Pope Pius XII (r. 1939-58) proclaimed Anthony as a Doctor of the Church. The richness of his preaching and writing, that continue to benefit the Church, prompted this selection. As a Doctor of the Church, he is the only one with the title, Evangelical Doctor. His knowledge of the Scriptures also resulted in him being known as the “Ark of the Testament.”

St. Anthony left the Church a legacy of sermons, including Sermons for Sundays, Sermons for Marian Days and Sermons for Festivals. These provide detailed Scripture reflections and suggested homily preparation designed for the preacher.

### SAINT OF LOST ITEMS

Anthony had a prized book of psalms that was missing and he thought possibly stolen. He prayed that the book would be found. A novice who had taken the book suddenly returned it.

Accordingly, Anthony is known as the patron saint of lost things. For centuries Catholics around the world have invoked his help when they lose something, saying: “Tony, Tony come around, something’s lost and can’t be found.” He is also the saint of the poor, missing persons and the elderly.

In the prologue to the first group of sermons, Anthony writes, “Nowadays, preachers and congregations are so shallow that if a sermon is not full of polished and studied phrases, and a dash of novelty, they are too critical to take any notice of it. So in order that the word of the Lord should come to them in a way they will not disdain or scorn, to the peril of their souls, I have prefaced each Gospel with a suitable prologue, ... and explanations of the meanings of the words, expounded from the standpoint of morality. I have brought together in one place the headings of all the texts quoted, from which the theme for a sermon may be readily gathered: and I have noted

beforehand, at the beginning of the book, the places in which they are to be found, and whatever things are appropriate to the matter" (Sermons, Vol 1).

Pope Benedict XVI (r. 2005-13) once said that the Church has three missions: to worship God, to evangelize and to care for the poor. Benedict could have pointed to St. Anthony, who 800 years before, satisfied all these missions.

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