

SAINT ANTHONY OF PADUA
(Our parish patron saint did all for the love of his Eucharistic Lord.)

This Monday, June 13th, is the feast day of our parish patron saint, Saint Anthony of Padua. In Portugal, St. Anthony is known as Saint Anthony of Lisbon because he lived the first two-thirds of his life in that city. His name then was Fernando de Boelhoes. He changed it to Anthony when he joined the Franciscans. He took the name Anthony after one of the early Desert Fathers, Anthony of Egypt.

Saint Anthony was from a noble family in Lisbon; his father was a knight. He entered the Augustinian community in Lisbon as a young man and was ordained a priest as a Canon regular of the Augustinian Religious Order. His task in the monastery in which he lived was as porter, Master of hospitality) which means he answered the door and dealt with the requests that came to the monastery. One day there was a small group of mendicant monks who followed the way of Francis of Assisi (thus the name Franciscans). They were begging for some food and alms on their way to North Africa, to Morocco, to preach the gospel to those who believed in Islam. They fully expected to be martyred there. Five of their confreres had already gone to Morocco and been beheaded by the Moslems there. This was the early 13th century. Fra Fernando was so taken with these zealous Franciscans that he asked permission to join them and go with them. His Augustinian superiors at first denied his request. Eventually he was allowed to leave the Augustinians and join the Franciscans. He linked up with another small group of Franciscans who were on their way to North Africa for the same purpose. Anthony longed to die a martyr's death while preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ.

On the sea journey across the Mediterranean he grew very ill and upon landing in Morocco his fellow monks decided it was too arduous for him and sent him back to Portugal. On the way back his ship encountered a severe storm that blew it way off course. Eventually he landed in Sicily and upon learning that a General Chapter of the Franciscans was convening in Assisi, he traveled north to attend. At the end of the Chapter, still very weak and not knowing the language, he was assigned to a Provincial Superior in the northern part of Italy and was given kitchen duty. Few knew that he was truly a learned man in both Scripture study and theology. It was not until a scheduled ordination arrived without a chosen preacher that Anthony was pressed into service to preach. His impact was stunning and all who heard him recognized immediately his spirituality and depth of learning. Anthony's life changed from that moment.

Anthony was immediately placed on the Retreat circuit. He went about Italy and Southern France preaching the gospel and defending the Catholic faith from attacks by those who no longer believed. He was very successful in this task. St Francis himself then placed him in charge of the formation of young Franciscans so that they would be properly formed in theology and in the study of the Gospels. He continued to preach and his sermons attracted hundreds, then thousands and then tens of thousands. He held some of his conferences in large, open fields just to accommodate the crowds. He would hear confessions for hours on end and often fast for long periods of time. His life was all about Christ and telling people about Christ and giving his own personal witness to Christ. However, Anthony's health was never really good and it continued to deteriorate. He asked for, and received permission for, the opportunity to live the life of a hermit. He had a small tree house built about thirty miles north of Padua. For the last eighteen months of his life he lived mostly there, praying and meditating on the Scriptures he loved so much.

As his health worsened he asked to be brought back to Padua. He was transported in a cart but never made it back to Padua. He blessed it from its outskirts. Anthony received the final anointing, absolution and viaticum (last reception of Holy Communion). His gaze was transfixed, as if he were seeing something. He was asked, "Father Anthony, what do you see?" "I see my Lord." That was the

last thing he said. He was thirty-six years. He finally got to see his Eucharistic Lord. The year was 1231.

Anthony was buried amid great acclaim and his sanctity was attested by a series of miracles received by those who prayed to him for his intercession before the Lord. The people of Padua chose to build a large basilica in his honor. Once it was built his body was disinterred so as to be translated into a crypt in the cathedral. When they dug up his remains they found that his body had deteriorated but not his tongue and not his vocal chords. They believed that this was a sign from God that Anthony's preaching was pleasing to the Lord. The tongue of this great saint has been placed in a reliquary behind the Main Altar in the Basilica which bears his name.

Saint Anthony is known for many things but probably most commonly as the saint to whom we pray when we can't find something or someone or have lost something of value. How did Saint Anthony come to be known as the patron saint of things missing or lost? During his lifetime he had some Franciscan novices assigned to him for their spiritual formation. One of them decided that he did not have a calling to be a Franciscan and decided to leave. He wanted to take a memento with him and decided to pilfer a small book of psalms that Saint Anthony used all the time. He stole the book and left. Saint Anthony realized what had happened and he decided not to pursue the culprit but to pray for the book's safe return. Far away there was something going on in the soul of the lad who had taken the book. Whether it was remorse or the promptings of the Spirit within him, the young man came to his senses and returned to Anthony and returned to him the book. From that time to this Anthony has been the one to whom we pray for the proper return of that which is lost. It is a testimony to his love for Christ the Good Shepherd who always seeks out what is lost.

St. Anthony is often pictured holding a lily, the symbol of a pure life and an open Bible, symbolizing his love for the Scriptures. He is also associated with the Child Jesus that symbolizes his profound devotion to the Incarnation. St. Anthony's reputation as a finder of lost things began in his own lifetime and was rooted in his own faith and conviction about the power of prayer.

For Anthony, his life was all about Jesus, his Eucharistic Lord. Anthony saw himself as part of the Body of Christ. That was always his message. "We are the Body of Christ." So he brought his gifts to the Lord and placed them on the altar, asking the Lord to accept what he presented as his return gift for all he had been given. Anthony brought his gifts to that table—his words, his love for the Scriptures, his love for people and most especially his love for the Lord. That got me to thinking. What is my gift? What has the Lord given to me that He desires me to return to him as my gift to him at his table? And what is your gift? What does the Lord desire from you as a return for all that has been given to you? Would you please pray this prayer with me? "Lord, what do you want me to bring to your table? What have you granted to me that you desire of me? Lord, open my mind that I may know. Lord, open my heart that I may accept. Lord, open my will that I may do. Lord, may I give to you my very best thing—my heart." As the Father has given his very best to us—his Beloved—as bread for our journey, may we give to the Lord that which satisfies his hunger, our very best.