

St. Anthony: a life of Gospel preaching Holy Father sends message for eighth centenary of Franciscan's birth

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The Holy Father sent a message to Fr. Lanfranco Serrini, O.F.M. Conv., who currently holds the rotating presidency of the Union of Franciscan Ministers General, to honor the eighth centenary of the birth of St. Anthony of Padua. In his Italian-language message dated June 13, 1994, the Pope stressed that St. Anthony based his life on Christ. "All his preaching was a constant, tireless proclamation of the Gospel *sine glossa*," the Holy Father said, and "from his thirst for God, from his yearning for Christ, theology was born, which for St. Anthony was radiant love for Christ." Here is a translation of the Pope's message.

To Fr. Lanfranco Serrini, O.F.M. Conv., President of the Union of Franciscan Ministers General.

1. I was very pleased to learn that the four Franciscan families are preparing appropriate celebrations for the eighth centenary of the birth of St. Anthony, a charismatic figure who is universally venerated and invoked.

The whole Franciscan Order, together with the cities of Padua, the center of devotion to St. Anthony, and Lisbon, where the saint was born, is involved in preparations for the jubilee of this its exemplary model.

The centenary commemoration will prove fruitful for the Church if it leads to unanimously imploring St. Anthony to spur the Christians of our time, through his example and intercession, to reach the loftiest and noblest goals of faith and holiness.

For this shared hope to be fulfilled, everyone, pastors and faithful alike, must discover the person of St. Anthony with sincere devotion. They must examine his spiritual journey, understand his virtues and listen docilely to the message given by his life.

2. His earthly life lasted just 36 years. Until he was 14 years old, he attended the Bishop's school in his home town. When he was 15, he asked to join the Canons Regular of St. Augustine; at the age of 25 he was ordained a priest: 10 years of his life were marked by a conscientious and

austere quest for God, by intense theological study, interior growth and improvement.

However, God continued to challenge the spirit of the young priest, whose baptismal name was Fernando. At Holy Cross Monastery in Coimbra, he became acquainted with a group of early Franciscans. They were on their way from Assisi to Morocco to give witness to the Gospel, even at the cost of martyrdom. At that moment the young Fernando was overcome by a new desire: to proclaim the Gospel to pagan peoples, regardless of any threat to his life.

A life dedicated to the tireless preaching of the Gospel

In Autumn 1220, he left his monastery. He joined the followers of the *Poverello* of Assisi, taking the name of Anthony. Thus he set out for Morocco, but a serious illness forced him to abandon his missionary goal.

Hence, the last stage of his life began when God guided him down paths he would never have dreamed of taking. After uprooting him from his land and his plans of evangelizing abroad, God led him to live the ideal of the Gospel way of life on Italian soil. St. Anthony lived the Franciscan experience for barely 11 years, but he assimilated its ideal so deeply that for him Christ and the Gospel became a rule of life embodied in everyday living.

In a sermon, he said: "For you we have left everything and have become poor. But since you are rich, we have followed you, that you might enrich us.... We have followed you as the creature follows the Creator, like sons of the Father, as children follow their mother, as the starving their bread, as the sick their doctor, as the weary their bed, as exiles their homeland..." (*Sermones*, II, p. 484).

3. All his preaching was a constant and tireless proclamation of the Gospel *sine glossa*. A true, courageous and clear proclamation. Through preaching he found the way to kindle faith in souls, to purify, console and enlighten them (*ibid.*, p. 154).

He based his life on Christ. The Gospel virtues, particularly poverty of spirit, meekness, humility, chastity, mercy, the courage of peace, were the constant themes of his preaching.

His witness was so shining that during my pilgrimage to his shrine in Padua on September 12, 1982, I also wished to present him to the Church, like Pope Pius XII before me, as a "man of the Gospel." Indeed, St. Anthony taught in an outstanding way how to make Christ and the Gospel a constant point of reference in daily life and in private and public moral decisions: he suggested that everyone should bolster his courage at this

source for a consistent and enticing proclamation of the message of salvation.

4. Precisely because he was in love with Christ and his Gospel, St. Anthony "illuminated with the understanding of love that divine wisdom he had acquired from assiduously reading the Sacred Scriptures" (Pius XII, Apostolic Letter *Antoniana sollemnia*, March 1, 1946).

For him, the Sacred Scriptures were *terra parturiens* that begets faith, lays the foundations of morality and wins over the soul with its sweetness (cf. *Sermones*, Prologue, I, 1). Absorbed in loving meditation on Holy Scripture, the soul is opened, as he puts it, *ad divinitatis arcanum*. During his journey to God, Anthony nourished his own mind from this mysterious abyss, drawing from it wisdom and learning, apostolic strength and hope, tireless zeal and ardent charity.

From his thirst for God, from his yearning for Christ, theology was born, which for St. Anthony was radiant love for Christ: a wisdom of priceless value and a science of knowledge, a new song *in aure Dei dulce resonans et animam innovans* (cf. *Sermones*, III, 55; I, 225).

St. Anthony threw himself into this method of study with a passion that remained with him throughout his life as a Franciscan. St. Francis himself had appointed him to teach "sacred theology to the brothers," urging them, nevertheless, to take care not to extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion (cf. *Fonti Francescane* n. 252). He used all the scholarly tools known at the time to deepen his knowledge of Gospel truth and to make its proclamation more easily understood. The success of his preaching confirms that he could speak the same language as his listeners and that he was able effectively to convey the content of the faith and to ensure the acceptance of Gospel values in the popular culture of his age.

Writings were rich in biblical teaching and spiritual guidance

5. I deeply hope that the centenary celebrations in honor of St. Anthony will allow the whole Church to become increasingly familiar with the witness, message, wisdom and missionary zeal of this great disciple of Christ and of the *Poverello* of Assisi. His preaching, his writings and above all the holiness of his life also offer the people of our time living and inspiring guidelines for the necessary commitment to the new evangelization. Today, as then, there is an urgent need for a renewed catechesis based on God's word, particularly on the Gospels, to make the Christian world understand once more the value of revelation and faith.

The community of believers should have an ever fresh awareness of the Gospel's perennial relevance. It should recognize that through preaching, the figure of the Incarnate Word appears to us again as occurred in St. Anthony's homilies: genuine, contemporary, current with our history,

rich in grace and able to inspire in people's hearts an intense outpouring of supernatural love.

St. Anthony's writings, so rich in biblical teaching but also deeply imbued with spiritual and moral exhortations are still a model and guide for preaching today. They widely demonstrate, among other things, the extent to which homiletic instruction during liturgical celebrations can enable the faithful to experience the active presence of Christ, who still proclaims the Gospel to his people, to obtain their response in prayer and song.

I, therefore, urge all the members of the great Franciscan Family to commit themselves to spreading a worthy knowledge of the holy Wonderworker, who is so widely venerated in Christian communities throughout the world. Sentiments of authentic fervor in proclaiming the true faith are alive again among the friars of the Franciscan Orders, together with attentive and conscientious care for preaching, knowing and appreciating God's word and for constant, assiduous dedication to the new evangelization, on the threshold of the third Christian millennium.

As I ask the Lord, Master and Shepherd of all souls, to grant that everyone, through the intercession of St. Anthony, distinguished preacher and patron of the poor, will faithfully and generously follow the teachings of the Gospel, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to the entire Franciscan Family and to all who are devoted to this great saint.

From the Vatican, June 13, 1994, in the 16th year of the Pontificate

JOANNES PAULUS, II