

St. Anthony of Padua, Church Doctor

Pope John Paul II

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I hope that the present commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of St. Anthony as a Doctor of the Church may give the whole Franciscan family a renewed interest in studying the saint's theological thought and evangelizing activity, the Holy Father wrote in a Papal letter to Fr. Bonaventura Midili, President of the Union of Franciscan Ministers General, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the granting of the title Doctor of the Church to St. Anthony of Padua. Here is a translation of the Holy Father's Letter, which was written in Italian and dated January 16, 1996.

To: Very Reverend Father Bonaventure Midili, T.O.R., President of the Union of Franciscan Ministers General.

1. The 50th anniversary of the granting of the title Doctor of the Church to St. Anthony affords me a pleasant occasion to recall the significant figure of this master of theology and spirituality. "He whose mind," as one of his contemporaries wrote, "the Lord opened that he might understand the Scriptures and speak among all the people words about Jesus that were sweeter than syrup or honey from the comb" (1 Cel. XVII, 48) shines brightly in the Church's vast panorama of holiness because of the genuineness of the evangelical character of his teaching. For this reason, on January 16, 1946, my predecessor Pius XII enrolled him among the Doctors of the universal Church, pointing to him as a sure teacher of revealed truth. On that occasion the Pope, in his Apostolic Letter *Exulta, Lusitania felix; o felix Padua, gaude* (cf. AAS 38 [1946], 200-246), invited the faithful of Portugal, the land of the saint's birth, and the inhabitants of the city of Padua, where his mortal remains are preserved, to rejoice and exult.

In the letter which I sent to the Franciscan families to commemorate the eighth centenary of the saint's birth, I recalled that "from his thirst for God from his yearning for Christ, theology was born, which for St. Anthony was radiant love for Christ...; St. Anthony threw himself into this method of study

with a passion that remained with him throughout his life as a Franciscan" (n. 4: AAS 86 [1994], 970). The recently concluded celebrations have presented anew the figure of Anthony, that man of the Gospel clothed in wisdom and charity.

St. Anthony offered journey in and with the Church

2. An intense cultural, theological and biblical formation helped the first lecturer of theology in the Seraphic Order to spend his life assiduously searching for God, nourished by an intense piety and an insatiable yearning for contemplation. In this process, Sacred Scripture, constantly meditated upon in the rhythm marked by the Church's liturgy, became the primary source of knowledge for his theology, so that for him it was "a new song sounding sweetly in the ears of God and renewing the spirit" (*Sermones*, I, 255).

Approaching the Scriptures through books of prayer and the Church's celebrations, he contemplated and preached the mysteries of Christ, "the model of humility and patience," "Savior and King," "poor and obedient Servant" to be followed to the Cross, in the company of his Blessed Mother, "the poor little Virgin."

To a social context which was developing innovative ethical and cultural views together with models of spirituality and worship inspired by an evangelism without the Church, clearly and powerfully the Evangelical Doctor offered a new evangelization that was not merely moral exhortation but a journey in the Church and with the Church.

The *sequela Christi*, so dear to the movement of Friars Minor, forced him to insist strongly on *aurea paupertas*, which is not merely detachment from worldly things, but is first and foremost a reaffirmation of God's primacy in human life and an attraction to "heavenly things" (*Sermones*, III, 86).

3. Only the Church, albeit in the weakness of her sons and daughters, but sustained by the action of the Holy Spirit and the dwelling of the splendor of Truth, is the "good and fertile land" where the proclamation of the Gospel bears fruit, because "the truth of faith itself is born of mother Church. Truth, however, has come first, so that the Church can follow it" (*Sermones*, III, 196). And the Church follows Christ who says, "I am the truth" (Jn 14:6). She is, the saint writes, "the *totum Christi corpus*" (*Sermones*, I, 55) "who allows herself to be guided by him so as to be preserved from danger" (cf. *Sermones*, I, 493).

St. Anthony announced this truth, spreading it among his contemporaries through his sermons "as dew falling from heaven and bringing relief to the parched soil," in the image used by my Predecessor, Pope Sixtus V (cf. Bull *Immensa divinae sapientia*, January 24, 1586: *Bullarium Romanum* IV, 181-182).

Thus, listening to the word of God proclaimed and celebrated in the Church, people not only find full meaning in their work but also discover themselves and the light that brings them the gift of interior peace (cf. *Sermones*, I, 76-78).

In prayer he contemplated the splendor of the Trinity

4. The vitality of his preaching pervades all the *Sermones* which St. Anthony has left us. The person who evangelizes, he notes, is one who joyously contemplates God, a witness to the "*vita angelica*," who has achieved "mature knowledge" (*Sermones*, I, 483). Faithful disciple of Francis of Assisi, Anthony left an example of a diligent commitment to evangelization through tireless preaching, accompanied by a heartfelt exhortation to approach the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist.

It must be pointed out, however, that St. Anthony's apostolic activity was constantly nourished by his contemplation of heavenly things. In prayer he lifted up his heart to contemplate with the eyes of faith the splendor of the true sun, God the Trinity, and from that source he drew light and warmth which he then spread to souls (cf. *Sermones*, I, 332). Thus, in full communion with the Church he passed on to others the inner riches of his soul.

5. And so I hope, Very Reverend Father, that the present commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of St. Anthony as a Doctor of the Church may give the whole Franciscan family a renewed interest in studying the saint's theological thought and evangelizing activity.

Academic reflection, combined with well-planned cultural exhibitions, will be able to investigate his rich teaching and its timeliness so that the disciples of the *Poverello* of Assisi, confreres of the Evangelical Doctor, may continue with greater energy in the task of the new evangelization of the contemporary world, in harmony with the Church.

With these sentiments I invoke the aid of the Divine Teacher through the intercession of St. Anthony and cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and the whole Franciscan Order, gladly extending it to all those devoted to the saint.

From the Vatican, January 16, 1996, the 18th year of my Pontificate.

John Paul II