

## 2: *The Humble Beginnings*

### *Childhood and Education*

Near the cathedral of Lisbon, the house of Anthony's birth can still be seen. Fernando, as his parents, Martin Alfonsi and his wife Maria, named him, was born here on August 15, 1195. As the child of a knight in the service of King Alfonso II, Anthony was one of the privileged few, and therefore he was allowed to attend the cathedral school. There he was instructed in the "trivium" (grammar, dialectics and rhetoric) and the "quadrivium" (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music.)

We know nothing about his childhood. However, there are many legends and stories that have been passed from century to century in which Fernando is shown in a dazzling

light. Some stories say that whatever Fernando looked at became colorful and whatever he touched was healed. Most stories of his childhood attempt to reflect God's closeness to him. But mostly these fantastical stories belong to the realm of the imagination, for Fernando was no different than any other child.

### *The Augustinians*

The oldest life story of Saint Anthony, however, tells something about the awakening of the young Fernando's sexuality. Fernando sensed this aspect of his person as something threatening, or even evil. He believed that he could escape it through flight to the cloister. Such a motive of flight may seem quite difficult to understand today, but it corresponds to a time strongly marked by dualism, which required one to bid the evil world (or physical world) farewell.

So at the age of fifteen, Fernando entered the novitiate of the Canons Regular of San Vicente near Lisbon, an order that followed the rule of Saint Augustine. He did not find the serenity he was seeking there. Fernando was unable to focus, because his companions and friends often came to visit and spirit him away to noisy festivities. Seeking out more solitude, Fernando moved to the cloister at Coimbra, the capital of Portugal at the time, where the order had a world-famous center for studies.

At Coimbra, Fernando had access to excellent professors and one of the best libraries of his day. Here he laid the foun-

dation for his broad theological knowledge, reflected later in his sermons and books. Above all, he learned a theological method he would later master with great skill. This skill Fernando mastered was his ability to transcend the words of a text. While not remaining fixed on the words on the page, Fernando crossed the threshold of the text and searched for its practical application and its implication for the future.

While in Coimbra at the Canons Regular of San Vicente, it has been argued that Fernando also became a priest. Though sources do not say explicitly where and when Fernando became a priest, it is understood that whoever entered the Canons Regular would be ordained as a priest and take up pastoral ministry. The entire education at the Canons Regular was directed toward the aim of the priestly vocation. Thus it is probable that Fernando was ordained a priest as soon as the church law and circumstances allowed for it, even before he became a Franciscan in the year 1220.

### *The Franciscans*

On January 16, 1220 six Franciscans were killed in Morocco because they had provoked the Muslims with their aggressive missionary work. Berard, Peter, Accurs, Adjute, Otto and Vitalis had ignored the instructions of Saint Francis, who had wanted the brothers to live without aggression and in peace among the Muslims, even being subjugated to them. Francis

taught his followers that they should simply bear witness to their faith as Christians and avoid conflict. Many at the time believed if Berard and his companions had done this nothing would have happened to them, for during that same time period there were a number of Christians who lived peacefully with Muslims in Morocco. Pedro, the brother of the Portuguese King Alfonso II, had even settled there and maintained friendly relations with the Emir-el-mimenin, the “Lord of the Faithful” or Miramolín, as he is called in our tradition.

Nevertheless, Pedro secretly brought the bodies of these Franciscan “martyrs” for the faith out of the country and then to Coimbra. At the cloister church of the monastery where Fernando lived, they were buried in the vault normally reserved for the kings of Portugal. Fernando was shaken so deeply that Berard and his brothers were willing to die for their belief in Jesus Christ that after painful hours of contemplation and struggle, he decided to become a Franciscan himself.

However, it must be said that this was not Fernando’s first exposure to the Franciscans. In fact, since 1217 the Franciscans had settled just outside of Coimbra in “Sant Antonio de Olivães.” Here they were able to live their solitary life of devotion for longer periods of time before setting off on their preaching tours. The Franciscans undoubtedly

knocked on the gate of the Augustinian cloister more than once to beg for a piece of bread or something else to eat. On many such occasions Fernando had the opportunity for personal contact with the brothers. It is often assumed that it was during these conversations with the brothers that Fernando first became inspired by the words and spirituality of Francis, and his own intentions to become a Franciscan matured steadfastly in his heart.

To be able to enter the Franciscan Order, he needed the permission of his own order. It was given to him, though granted with reservation. As one source tells us, he was considered a promising candidate for the position of Prior at the cloister. The sources tell of another unnamed Augustinian, whose disagreement with the decision was quite vehement, and who suffered as a result of the leave-taking.

From the Franciscan perspective, the situation was much easier. In the summer of 1220 there was not yet a novitiate period, which first became obligatory with the proclamation of Honourous III in September 1220. Additionally, there were not yet any special conditions for acceptance in the order. At the time Fernando wished to join, it was enough that the candidate was passionate about God, wanted to follow the Scriptures literally, divided his property among the poor, was Catholic and, in the case of Fernando Martini Alfonsi of Lisbon, had the permission of his previous Order.

Once permissions were granted, the Franciscans pulled the simple robe over Fernando, and he was from that point on a Franciscan. Unlike most Franciscans, who kept their Christian-given name, Fernando took on a new name. Fernando chose to call himself Anthony, after the name of the Franciscan settlement. At the time he wished to “fall into namelessness,” or in keeping with his humble nature, to be anonymous.

One might say that the sole motive for this radical change of place was Anthony’s desire for martyrdom. Though Anthony had admired the Franciscans during his stay with the Augustinians, it was not until he witnessed the burial of the Franciscan martyrs that he finally made the decision to unconditionally emulate those who were killed on behalf of Jesus Christ. Thus he set off for Morocco in that summer of 1220 in order to serve as a witness for Christ, or even, he hoped, to die for him. But malaria forced him to change his direction and head back to Portugal. En route, a violent storm drove his ship to the shores of Sicily.

The place where Anthony’s ship washed ashore and where he stayed on the island are not known. Various localities such as the “Bay of Saint Anthony,” a hermitage near Messina, Cefalù and Vizzini, San Mauro di Castlemonte and others vie for some of the fame that would later surround Anthony. We only know that he found brotherly care somewhere by Franciscans and remained there for a long time affected by illness, lethargy and passivity.

### *The Principle of Passivity*

One of the key points or aspects in Anthony's spiritual journey came during his illness, when, for the first time in his life, Anthony was forced to be a passive recipient of God's call. At no other point in Anthony's life did he relinquish his free will to God. In fact, wasn't he the one who at the age of fifteen decided to become an Augustinian in order to escape from the evil world? Wasn't he the one who then decided to escape to Coimbra when Lisbon became too hectic? Wasn't it he who had asserted his will in order to become a Franciscan? And didn't he do it only because he, Anthony, wanted to force the cause of martyrdom upon himself? Hadn't he been the one who up to now had always held the scepter in his hand? But where was God in this view of life? Anthony, for the first time in his life, came face to face with this realization, and finally he succumbed to God's call, which in his case came in the form of malaria and a storm at sea. Anthony was finally rendered powerless and was unable to make a decision based solely on his own needs. Anthony was now at the mercy and hands of God and willing to do only what he was called to do.

Another Anthony, Antonio Rosmini, who lived from 1797 to 1855, formulated the spiritual perspective of the "principle of passivity." Antonio Romini described a "behavioral rule by which the Christian through his own initiative gives priority to humility by stepping back into seclusion in order not to disturb God's work through activity.

Nevertheless, he must be prepared to be at God's disposal, prepared to leave his hermitage and prepared to dedicate himself to all the works which answer the will of God." It is certain that what is described here as a general principle of Christian life was reflected in Anthony's behavior in the thirteenth century. The early sources do not leave any doubts open. Even Julian of Speyer wrote: "Anthony was filled with glowing fervor for the House of God. Yet through godly intervention his soul was confronted with emptiness. From then on he lost the desire to be driven by his inner pride. He gave himself over in a more perfect way, filled with trust, to the mystery of God, and he waited in great openness until God would give him a clear sign."

### *The Pentecost Chapter of Mats in Assisi (1221)*

How it was possible for Anthony to take part in the internal Franciscan gathering, the Pentecost Chapter of Mats in Assisi (so named because there was no place for the 3,000 friars to sleep but on mats), while ill remains a mystery. We have to assume that he simply let himself be taken along. We also do not know anything about the route he took there with his brothers. Two places in Calabria—Pizzo and San Marco Argentano—were known to have served as places of repose for the saint along the way.

During Anthony's time, Pentecost Chapters were still great days of celebration and community for all the brothers.

*The Chronicles of the Friars Minor Brothers, Jordan of Giano and Thomas Eccleston* reported that 3,000, possibly even 5,000, brothers gathered below the Porziuncola. The presence of the Cistercian Cardinal, Rainer Capocci, a number of bishops and representatives of other orders added a particular significance to the gathering. The brothers slept out in the open and met during the day, communing under especially set-up shaded areas. The inhabitants of Assisi brought food and drink, in fact so much so that the chapter had to be extended for two days in order that the contributions would not go to waste. Francis was the great spiritual authority here, even though he no longer carried out the office of general minister. At the opening ceremony he read the Scriptures and preached on the theme: "Praise be the Lord, my God, who guides my hands in battle." When he was not speaking, Francis sat at the feet of the Vicar General, Brother Elias, and tugged at his robe every time he had something to say. Elias bent down to listen, and then straightening up said: "Brothers, the brother has something to say." Francis was the absolute embodiment of the brother; it was no longer even necessary to mention his name.

We do not know whether or not Anthony met Francis that day. But we do know that he did not draw attention to himself in any way, and was recognized as a great man of silence at the chapter. He had nothing to say, nor did he have a desire to speak. Thus his education, intelligence, special charisma, as well as his priestly office, remained completely

hidden from view. When the brothers were divided into new groups at the end of the chapter, little interest was shown in him. When the brothers were sent out to different regions, Anthony remained on the sidelines until he asked Brother Graziano, the person responsible for Upper Italy, or Romagna as it was called at the time, to take him along to a little hermitage near Montepaolo.

According to sources written almost one hundred years later, Brother Graziano asked whether or not Anthony was a priest, to which Anthony expressed an affirmation. Brother Graziano, with this news, agreed to take him along. It is important to point out that Brother Graziano's question of Anthony's priesthood in 1221 was incongruous, because the community of Saint Francis was most decidedly a brotherhood. There were a few priests, but it was not the norm. The brothers were first and foremost brothers, and whoever was a priest joined the established way of life. Additionally, before 1224, the year in which the pope allowed the Friars Minor the privilege of using the transportable altar, there were not yet Eucharistic celebrations in Franciscan hermitages. For Brother Graziano to ask this question leaves one to wonder, what had Anthony said or done to perhaps reveal his scholarly position?

### *Montepaolo*

Despite Anthony's admission that he was indeed a priest, accounts of Saint Anthony's life show that he was called on

to be ordained to the priesthood for reasons of pastoral ministry at the hermitage of Montepaolo. Though there is little knowledge today about why or how it came to be that Anthony again went through the ordination process or why he was not forthcoming with the information of his own priesthood in the first place, we can be quite sure that Anthony had not given the slightest indication of his education and his ecclesiastical function (including priesthood) to his brothers, with the exception of Brother Graziano. This applies not only to the Pentecost Chapter of 1221, but also to his entire time at Montepaolo.

Anthony's humility had no end and despite his priesthood, he still occupied himself with the most menial of tasks such as washing, cleaning and cooking. It is part of the Franciscan way of life: whether one is educated or illiterate, priest or layman, no one is exempt from the menial tasks of daily life.

Anthony's time in Montepaolo did not last even one and a half years. But it would be a crucial period in two ways: he would now finally be able to grow into Franciscan spirituality, and he would revise his original motive for becoming a Franciscan—from martyrdom to servitude. While martyrdom was certainly an impressive motive, it was not decisive for the Franciscan way of life, or the life Anthony sought, which was based on Francis' teaching. Instead, Anthony sought to do what was instructed of him as a Franciscan. This meant: following the words of Mark in Chapter 10 by giving

up everything and living in poverty with the poor; acting as an itinerate preacher as directed in Matthew 10; spreading the Good News as a poor man to the poor; practicing brotherly love in a simple, clear framework by being a brother to others; listening to others and being sensitive to their needs; embracing the whole world and realizing that everything that exists, exists as a brother and sister; and making the choice for God as Jesus showed us by receiving, listening, reading, celebrating and witnessing.

It was in Montepaolo that Anthony embraced these teachings. He lived in silence, in contemplation and in radical openness to the mystery of God. Besides all of the daily tasks to be performed, which also served to nurture a simple heart and brotherliness, Anthony knew only one thing: God was present.

This life of silence ended abruptly in September 1222, and once more God called on Anthony, the passive recipient, to begin his oration at the ordination of priests in Forli.