

CHAPTER THREE

Saint Anthony: Spiritual Brother of Saint Francis

By Carol Ann Morrow

Similarities abound in the lives and legends of Saint Francis, the founder of the Franciscans, and Saint Anthony, his famous follower.

One day, as I heard a friar recount the story of Francis, which I thought I knew well, I heard afresh. What I heard called me to acknowledge how faithfully Anthony listened to the guidance of Francis.

While the logic, even the transparency, of such an observation may be obvious to you, it inspired me all the same. I wanted to draw out the similarities to see where they led me and what they might teach me. I invite you on that journey.

No Twins, These Two

The man we call Saint Francis of Assisi was also known as the *Poverello*, or “little poor man.” Anthony’s first biographer, an anonymous Franciscan friar, writes of Anthony that he “was afflicted by a certain natural bulkiness.”

When we look back, the authentic words of Francis are none too many, although more than many other saints left behind. In addition to the famed “Canticle of the Creatures,” we have fewer than a dozen formal letters, a small collection of rules and directives for friars and other followers, plus other prayers. Most of these writings are derived from Scripture.

The humble Francis always called himself unlettered and his writings were dictated to—and likely edited by—other friars. As Franciscan Father Placid Hermann writes in his “Introduction to the Writings,” Francis was “not a philosopher given to abstract reasoning. He was a poet and an apostle.” Education appears to have made Francis nervous.

Anthony might have experienced inner conflicts about education himself, but then he had a lot more learning to be nervous about! While he never lied about his extensive studies as an Augustinian in Portugal, it was at least a year before any of the friars in Italy knew they had a scholar, preacher and teacher who had “seemed more skillful in washing kitchen utensils than in expounding the mysteries of Scripture,” as that early friar-biographer later muses.

Once the cat was out of the bag, Anthony was asked to teach Scripture to the young friars. Francis knew that his friars would need to preach correctly and well, if only to counter the teachers and preachers who were spreading the Bad News that creation was evil, sex was worse and sacraments were of dubious value. Anthony became the champion of the Good News—to the friars, to the fallen-away, to the faithful. Francis was the poet, Anthony the prose master.

I could contrast Deacon Francis with Father Anthony, priest and confessor. I could contrast the body of the founder, almost wasted before he breathed his last, with that of Anthony, whose bones showed signs of penance and austerity, but whose vocal cords remain incorrupt to this day. We see Francis with the birds and Anthony with the lily. We see Francis with the cross but Anthony with the infant. Between the two, it seems we’ve seen it all.

Celebrating Circumstances

Francis and Anthony have a lot more in common than *of* as a middle name, to be sure. Both had well-to-do parents—of which each had to let go in more dramatic fashion than has been asked of most of us.

Francis shed his father, along with his clothes, before the bishop of Assisi when he was only a teenager. Anthony may have said more tender good-byes, but he never saw his parents again after he sailed for Morocco in his late twenties. For both men, “Our Father, who art in heaven” was a gospel prayer that rang true to their experience and in their hearts. Knights, crusades and well-connected parents formed the early sensibilities and imaginations of each man. Francis’ father, Pietro, was a merchant who appreciated beauty and value and traveled abroad to import both from France. Anthony’s father, according to the *Blue Book* of Portugal, was descended from the Frenchman Godfrey of Bouillon, leader of the First Crusade. (Others doubt this lineage.) Some sources say Anthony’s parents served in the royal residence, the Castelo de São Jorge. They certainly lived in its shadow.

To me, both saints, despite their talk about being unworthy lowlifes, reveal a sense of great personal dignity. They bowed before God, but they walked tall. Both were popular as youths.

The Middle Ages found both men in the midst of territorial battles. Francis went to fight in the battles to preserve the city autonomy, a political movement gaining strength in medieval Italy—and ended up a prisoner of war. Anthony saw much evidence of border disputes and transfers of power as the Muslim influence waxed and waned in Portugal. Later, both were intent on preaching the gospel to the Muslims and Saracens. The two idealists became spiritual knights under a banner of freedom for the soul.

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) was a pivotal event in Church history for these two medieval saints. In its first session, the Council Fathers treated two major issues: the Holy Land and the era’s “protestants,” known as the Cathars (“pure”) or Albigensians (after Albi, France, a major stronghold). These themes shape every follower of Francis, who so loved the land where Jesus was born and wanted everyone to know and live the gospel.

Great Loves of Great Saints

As is true of many other saints, both Francis and Anthony took a while to discern their basic path in life. (This may console many college students in search of a major.) Francis thought he was supposed to repair church buildings. Instead he was to restore the Catholic church, which was in disrepair from bad example and misguided teachers. Anthony thought he was to be an Augustinian, but that was only a first step toward becoming a Franciscan. Both stumbled, doubted and rebounded.

Both men wanted to be martyrs; both were denied a martyr's death. Both experienced stormy seas as they attempted to evangelize the Muslims. Francis was insulted, beaten and threatened by the sultan of Egypt, but he was not killed. In fact, he eventually gained the Egyptian leader's respect.

The heroic martyrdom of the Franciscans in Morocco drew Anthony to become a friar. While he followed their trail, inheriting their mission to Morocco, he fell ill with a fever either on the sea journey or soon after his arrival. Sick for months, he nearly died, but not at the hands of Muslims. Eventually, he arrived in Sicily and made his way north.

Both men loved the hermit life; neither had much chance to savor it. Thomas Celano, early biographer of Francis, writes: "Francis was often suspended in such sweetness of contemplation that, caught up out of himself, he could not reveal what he had experienced because it went beyond all human comprehension." He was often taxed, however, by the demands of leading his fledgling religious order—and observing canonical requirements such as writing a rule.

Anthony had about one year as a hermit at Monte Paolo near Forli, Italy, before his public gifts were discovered. Near his death, he tried again for the quiet life, but even from his refuge in a walnut tree, people sought him out for counsel and confession.

Though each saint treasured solitude, each balanced the inward life with love and solicitude for other people, even involving themselves in civic concerns. In Francis' "Canticle of the Creatures," verses ten and

eleven (about pardon and peace) were added some time after the earlier verses to effect and celebrate reconciliation between the bishop of Assisi and the *podesta*, or mayor. Francis actually directed this peacemaking project from his bed of illness.

Anthony, too, “called back to brotherly peace those who disagreed with each other and gave freedom to those who were imprisoned. He required that whatever was taken in usury or through violence be restituted,” writes his earliest biographer. Other chroniclers describe Anthony’s personal efforts to free a Paduan politician, who was being held prisoner by the head of the opposition. Anthony walked from Padua to Verona to beg mercy for the prisoner. He was not able to count this among his successes, however.

The two saints also shared a warm affection for Sister Mother Earth. While Francis is the official patron of the environment, Anthony evidenced a strong affection for the earth as well.

While Francis preached to the birds, Anthony held the attention of the fish. Air and sea were covered by this pair; they also connected with the creatures on dry land! Saint Bonaventure (in the *Major Life*) describes Francis’ pet sheep, which knelt during the friars’ prayers and bowed profoundly during the Consecration of the Mass.

Saint Anthony’s biographers include the story of a donkey which, hungry though it was, knelt before the Eucharist, rather than head straight for the hay it was offered. Both stories give a vivid sense of faith in the Eucharist, in contrast to the Cathars’ mistrust of sacramentality.

Both saints had a strong sense of place. Francis felt especially drawn to Mount La Verna; Anthony requested a refuge in a tree at Camposampiero. Yet, when Sister Death was approaching, both men longed to be “home.”

Saint Bonaventure writes that Francis “asked to be brought to St. Mary of the Portiuncula, so that he might yield up his spirit where he had first received the spirit of grace.” Francis even asked to be stripped of his clothes so that he could lie directly on the earth!

Anthony, when he knew that he was dying, asked the friars to carry him back to his beloved Padua. He actually died nearby at Arcella, since the journey by cart proved too painful and difficult. Traditional paintings show him blessing Padua's horizon from his traveling bed of pain, just as Francis blessed Assisi before his death.

Perfect Joy Among the Brothers

While I could link still more stories of two men born in different nations with different gifts and temperaments, you've got the idea by now, I suspect.

So what to make of it all? Is Anthony simply a copycat saint? Is Francis so powerful a leader that his imprint is visible in everyone inspired by him?

I think it's far more profound and beautiful than that. I sense that the work of becoming holy, my task and yours, shapes distinct individuals. Just as Pentecost celebrates the Spirit's expression in many languages (see Acts 2:5–11), we express grace in myriad ways today. We are formed by environment and grace, by politics and prayer, by church and conscience. All God's creatures conspire to teach us as well. We stumble. We stutter. We rise. We are lifted.

To read each of these saint's written words is to reread the Bible, particularly the Gospels. To follow each man's footsteps—and the message of each man's actions—is to be on the path of Christ. Francis and Anthony are alike because they were shaped by the words and actions of Jesus.

This isn't some biographical nicety. This is what I should have expected! This is what I should expect of myself! Francis and Anthony are brothers to one another because they are such close kin to their Creator.

Sometimes we are asked why the patron of our magazine and press is Saint Anthony rather than Saint Francis, the latter having founded the Order that began the St. Anthony Messenger Press. What can we say?

Anthony was the man of many words; we publish words. Anthony was the educator; that is our mission.

I see it as one more delightful instance of “perfect joy” in the life of Francis of Assisi. Just what is that?

In a charming—if apocryphal—story found in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, the saint is teaching his beloved Brother Leo how to find perfect joy. It’s not in giving good example, not in being a healer or miracle worker, not in knowledge and prophecy, insists Francis. As he walks, he keeps describing wonderful spiritual gifts, but denies that they are the source of perfect joy. Finally, an exasperated Brother Leo asks Francis, “Father, I beg you to tell me where perfect joy is.”

Brother Leo receives a long, long answer in which Francis describes exposure to rain, cold, mud and hunger, and then knocking at the door of their headquarters only to hear: “Who are you?”

The porter doesn’t recognize Francis and his companions then and leaves them out in the cold—not once, but three times—each time with more force and even violence. “[I]f we endure all those evils and insults and blows with joy and patience, reflecting that we must accept and bear the sufferings of the Blessed Christ patiently for love of him,” Francis concludes, “Oh, Brother Leo, write: ‘That is perfect joy!’”

In the light of that Franciscan parable, Francis surely takes a lot of pleasure in granting Anthony the prominence he has in many circles. And Anthony surely feels humbled in return!

For both saints, perfect joy is not defined by the number of their devotees nor how many churches or magazines are named for them, but in seeing that Jesus becomes visible in every age. I’m reminded of Paul writing to the Corinthians about the role of God’s ministers: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6). Just so, Francis planted, Anthony watered, but God gives the increase.

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