

A Flight from Mediocracy Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

A majestic magnolia tree rises from the lawn of the Chapter Cloister at the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua. Taken up in its beauty, I was a bit startled when an older friar quietly approached me from behind and tapped me on the shoulder. He wanted to know if this was my first time in Padua. When I informed him that it was, he immediately took me by the arm and whisked me to the tomb of Saint Anthony. Along the way, he explained the tradition of pilgrims leaning into the tomb, firmly pressing their hands on the cool marble as they speak to The Saint. Sure enough, when we arrived there were two pilgrims, each with hands pressed firmly on the side of the tomb, in a manner of intense prayer. With a nudge from my friar guide, we both leaned in, and I closed my eyes to pray. After a short while I sensed the friar pulling away from the tomb as he whispered, *“We stumble. We stutter. We rise. We are lifted.”*



The friar explained to me how his mantra is part of a quote from Saint Anthony that helps him to better understand and engage this tradition of visiting the tomb of The Saint. Pilgrims arrive with many burdens and seem to stumble toward the tomb as they lean in close. Their prayers sound like a stutter, often accompanied by tears and heartfelt emotion. Then, comforted by The Saint they rise, and are lifted by God’s grace.

What is it that draws so many people to Anthony of Padua? While some may claim it is his ability to find lost objects, I believe it is because he embodies the freshness of the Franciscan Order that can best be described as a flight from mediocrity. There was a newness about the Friars Minor, and everyone could smell it in the air. In the 13th century, the friars had become the medieval version of “new car smell”.

This attraction of being a part of something genuinely new is what really stirred Anthony’s heart into action as he left the Canons Regular and cast his lot with the Friars Minor. The liturgical texts composed by Friar Julian of Speyer, for the feast day of Saint Francis, captures the spirit of Anthony and the early friars:

*A new Order, a new Life arise...
one of which the world had not heard up till the time of Francis!¹*

¹ Divine Office Liturgical Text for the Feast of Saint Francis. Friar Julian of Speyer, 1232.

What was at the heart of this newness? It was the friars living the Gospel of Jesus Christ without compromise! It was a flight from mediocrity by embracing the way of the Cross.

Only 70 years after his death, Anthony earned himself a place in the freshly painted frescos of the life cycle of Saint Francis in Assisi. The image tells the story of Anthony speaking to a group of friars in Arles, France, when Saint Francis suddenly appears with arms opened wide. It is said that only Anthony and one other friar could see the vision of Francis, which occurred in the middle of Anthony's teaching the friars about the Cross.



Francis' open armed gesture is cruciform, serving as a reminder to Anthony that the habit of the fledgling community is cut into the form of a cross. When a friar puts on the habit, he is picking up his cross and following in the footsteps of Jesus. Who stumbled and fell three times. Who stuttered through the emotion of meeting his mother and the women of Jerusalem. Who would rise on the third day. Who was lifted into heaven. In Anthony's following the way of the poor Christ, through His

passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, The Saint remained forever mindful of the words of Saint Paul:

*When you were dead in your sins, God made you alive with Christ.
He forgave us all our sins, having canceled our debts,
which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to a cross.²*

Later in my visit to Padua, I discovered the rest of Anthony's quote, which in my own imagination I associate with Anthony's teaching the friars gathered in the Assisi painting of the Friars' Chapter in Arles. There is a freshness in Anthony's words that challenge us today, to flee from mediocrity and embrace a new and more wholistic understanding of a life lived in Christ. Anthony says:

*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.*

In his preaching and teaching, Anthony pushed people outside of their comfort zones, into the graced world of possibility where all things could be made new and alive with Christ. When we are formed by environment and grace, we can transform the world around us. When we are

² Colossians 2:13-14

formed by politics and prayer, we can transform public policy. When we are formed by church and conscience, we can transform hearts and minds. In the same Franciscan spirit of pushing people outside of their comfort zones, Pope Francis reminds us that “it is not easy; politics has become too tainted...Why has it become tainted? Because Christians have not participated in politics with an evangelical spirit? ...To work for the common good is a Christian duty, and many times, the way in which to work towards it is through politics.”³

Anthony had that touch of being able to seamlessly weave together the Gospel and the social teaching of the Church, which helps to form consciences by providing principles for just policies. His words were not only convincing, but they were also compelling. For example, in 1231 Anthony put his preaching skills to use when he transformed the hearts and minds of the Council Members in Padua to pass a city law in favor of debtors, who could not manage to pay off their debts. It allowed for a medieval version of bankruptcy that would safeguard families from destitution. A museum in Padua still displays this law today, as testimony of our need to be formed by politics and prayer, to then transform public policy.⁴

From within the Chapter Cloister in Padua, the magnificent magnolia tree seems to have also “conspired to teach us as well”, to use the words of Anthony. For like the tree, The Conventual Chapters of the Franciscan Order grew into an abiding example of beauty within the Church. Like the Chapter in Arles, whenever the friars gather in Chapter, everyone has a voice and a vote, to further the common good by way of just policies. Franciscans are considered the most democratic of all the Orders in the Church, where in Chapter the will of the Lord is discerned by hearing the voices of all, who have been formed and taught by *all of God's creatures*. So, the friars understand well the thought of Pope Benedict XVI, when he referred to democracy as “the most valid historical instrument” to protect human rights and advance development, thereby “guaranteeing the future in a way worthy of humanity.”⁵

Almost 800 years ago, the poor, those in great debt, were stumbling and stuttering. Anthony and the friars caught them and helped them to rise. They then stood beside them, watching as their debts were nailed to the Cross. The poor were there after lifted into the hope of a future worthy of humanity. In the same way, countless people today make pilgrimage to the tomb of Anthony. They stumble and the cool marble of the tomb catches them. They stutter and The Saint listens. He then gently pushes back, so that the person might rise to be lifted out of mediocrity, into God's transformative grace of possibility.



³ Pope Francis. Address to Students of the Jesuit Schools of Italy and Albania, 7 June 2013.

⁴ St. Anthony of Padua. <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01556a.htm> (accessed on 17 October 2022).

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI. Address to Members of the ‘Centesimus Annus’ Foundation, 19 May 2006.