



*Apparition of St. Francis at a Chapter in Arles*

**A FLIGHT FROM MEDIOCRACY**  
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**“Let your *mercy* come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight.”**  
**(Psalm 119:77)**

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. 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 later 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 and encouraged by The Saint, they rise and are lifted by God's grace.

What is it that draws so many people to Anthony of Padua? I believe it is because he embodies the freshness of the Franciscan Order that can best be described as a flight from mediocrity, whereby the friars embrace the way of the cross by living the Gospel of Jesus Christ without compromise!

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.

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 *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, speaking to students in Italian Jesuit schools in 2013, 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.”

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.

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 forming just policies.

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. Thereafter, the poor were lifted into the hope of a just and compassionate future. 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.