

Homily061409

SAINT ANTHONY AND THE EUCHARIST

(The feast of Corpus Christi falls on our patron saint's feast day,
June 13th, Saint Anthony of Padua)

Because today is the feast of Saint Anthony I have a rare opportunity to preach on him to the wider parish. Anthony wasn't his given name. His given name was Fernando. And he wasn't born in Padua, Italy; he died just outside its gates. He was born of a comfortable family in Lisbon, Portugal somewhere between 1188 (or 1190) and 1195. He died on June 13th, 1231. He was in his mid to late thirties when he died. As a young teen he asked permission to enter the Clerks regular of Saint Augustine. (We would know them as the Augustinians, the same order that operates Villanova University.) He underwent a thorough and intense course of studies in theology and he was quite gifted intellectually. It is unclear whether he was ordained a priest as a member of the Augustinians or as a member of the Franciscans but he was ordained a priest. He had some problems with the political situation within the Augustinians and the control the King of Spain exercised there. He also struggled with the way some of the members did not really live the vows they professed. He asked to be transferred to another Augustinian House of Studies and that was granted.

It was at that monastery that he first encountered some members of the new Order of Francis of Assisi, commonly known as the Franciscans. Five brothers stopped for some provisions and Fernando was on the gate. He was impressed with their zeal, their simplicity, their humility and their willingness to go to the Moslems and seek to win them to the message of Christ. These five went to Spain part of which was under the control of the Moors at that time (Believers of Islam in Spain) and they were thrown out of there only to travel to Morocco where they clashed with members of Islam and eventually they were tortured and killed. Their bodies were sent back to the same house where Fernando lived in order to be buried. He was so moved that he asked his superiors to be released to join the Franciscans. It took well over a year but his request was eventually granted. Fernando joined the Franciscans and as a sign of the change in his identity he chose the name of Anthony (after Anthony of Egypt, a desert father and the patron of the little chapel where the Franciscans stayed in Portugal).

Anthony was a man of deep contemplation, strong faith, great love for and knowledge of the Scriptures, intense devotion to the truth, a man of humility, fearless but not judgmental, a wonderful appealing preacher of the word. He had this uncanny ability to connect with people. His message was always compelling and authoritative. Anthony immediately asked for permission to go to Morocco to preach to the Moslems the message of Christ. He was given permission but upon his arrival there he became very ill and the illness lasted several months. Eventually he was told to return to Portugal to get better and allow his body to heal. Anthony always struggled with his health. He had asthma and suffered from edema, the retention of fluids which may have been the result of diabetes or congestive heart failure or both. The ship returning him to Portugal got blown way off course and eventually landed in Sicily where Anthony made his way up the boot of Italy and came to Assisi for the general Chapter. He was unknown to anybody there and his extensive theological training was unknown to anyone. He was not proficient in the language of Italy.

Anthony lived during a time of great spiritual revival in Europe. There were new Religious Orders like the Dominicans and the Franciscans and great fervor among the laity. There were even lay organizations that desired to go around preaching the gospel message. At the same time the established church sometimes had a clergy that had become a little too settled in and sometimes was co-opted by the powers-that-be. There was a growing reaction against that on the part of the ordinary believers. Politically and commercially this was the era of the rise of the monetary system and there were great advancements and great abuses that accompanied it. This was especially hard on the ordinary folk, the little guy and the poor.

Some brief vignettes:

- 1) Anthony thought that he was being called by God to convert the Moslems. As it turns out that never happened. He spends almost all his time deepening and shoring up the faith of those who already believed in Christ or who were going forth to help others come to faith.
- 2) Because Anthony was new to the Franciscans and was recovering from his illness no one at Assisi knew him and he had no assigned place to go. He was assigned to Romagna which was the entire northern area of Italy. He was put on kitchen duty and that is what he did until one day when there

- was an ordination and there were some from the Dominicans who were ordained among the Franciscans. At the reception afterwards there were suggestions for someone among the newly ordained to preach a sermon for everyone. No one volunteered. Eventually Anthony was asked if he would preach. There was no pressure on him because if he declined it was just the kitchen help refusing. But Anthony didn't refuse. By now he knew the language. By now some had realized that he had an extraordinary theological grasp of things. Those who heard him preach that day were so enthralled that from that day on he was put right on the mission band that would go around the countryside preaching the Good News.
- 3) There was a group of people called the Cathari who were rigorists and purists, living very frugally and with devotion. The difficulty was that they believed that the material world was evil and that anything to do with it was evil, including the world of sexuality. They reasoned that God's Son could not have taken on our flesh because that would have united him to evil. As a result they did not believe in the Incarnation nor that Jesus really suffered and died on the cross. All of that was just an appearance but not real. Therefore Eucharist had no place in their religion. They had grown more popular with the simple people because the clergy often were preaching the truth but not living what they were preaching. Anthony and the Franciscans came along at just this time to teach truly the Good News of Christ while at the same time living a very simple life-style. This proved the most attractive to the most people.
 - 4) Bonillo, a Cathari, was an influential man but no match for Anthony in a verbal joust so he set up another test to undercut Anthony's effectiveness. If the Eucharist was truly the Real Presence of the Son of God, Bonillo reasoned, then all creation, not simply human beings should recognize the True Presence. He wondered aloud if an ordinary mule was confronted with his normal feed or with the Eucharist which he would go to. Unbeknownst to Anthony Bonillo ordered that the mule not be fed for several days beforehand and then placed a large mound of feed before the animal just as Anthony arrived with the Monstrance and the Blessed Sacrament. The animal lowered its head before Anthony and the Eucharist Lord and even bent its front legs in an act of worship, leaving its own feed alone. Bonillo and the others were converted back to Christianity on the spot.
 - 5) Anthony trained the young Franciscans so that when they went out they would be ready to give a good accounting of the faith that was in their hearts. While in the process of these classes one of the postulants decided to leave the community. He took with him Anthony's small book of the Psalms. When he realized it was missing, he went into the chapel to pray and stayed there praying. Miles away the young man came to his senses and finally returned to the monastery with the book. That which had been lost had been found. From that moment Anthony became the one to approach when there was something that was lost. Even to this day. And not simply car keys. Even if you lose your faith, or your good name, or your sobriety or your sense of God's presence, go to Anthony for help.
 - 6) Shortly before he died, Anthony was in his cell late one night when there was an intense light that shone beneath the saint's door. Count Tozo on whose estate the small hermitage was located went to Anthony's room, saw the light and opened the door. Inside was the child Jesus holding Anthony and the entire room was bathed in the brightest, warmest light and Anthony was transfixed in ecstasy. When the apparition was over and Anthony saw Count Tozo he asked the Count not to reveal what he had seen to anyone. When Anthony died the Count felt released from the vow of silence and spoke of what he had seen.

Over in the Mary Chapel is a picture of this apparition and it is just a lovely rendition. You can spend much time just looking at it and it will be a blessing to you. Anthony is our parish patron. All that we do is blessed by some of the grace that God bestowed upon him. Whoever has lost their way can find their way back to the Lord by coming here. We who are parishioners and present-day disciples of the Lord must come to realize this truth and embrace it in such a way that we live in the spirit of Saint Anthony what we know of his story and his relationship with Christ.