

LIFE OF ST. ANTHONY «ASSIDUA»

By a Contemporary Franciscan

Introduced by
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INTRODUCTION

There are two reliable documents which refer to St. Anthony and were written during his lifetime: the short letter he received from St. Francis in 1224, commissioning him to teach theology to the friars, and the account, produced by Thomas of Celano in 1228, describing Francis' miraculous apparitions to friars in Arles while Anthony was preaching to them. Just as reliable, however, are the hagiographies or lives of the saint which were also written in the thirteenth century. They vary in length and importance, but each, in its own way, faithfully describes his life, personality, apostolic activity, and the extraordinary veneration he received from people immediately after his death in 1231.¹

Chronologically and for its historical value, the *Vita prima* or *Assidua*, as it is often called because of the first word of its prologue, is of primary importance. It was written in Latin, the language of medieval culture, by a Franciscan friar who was St. Anthony's contemporary. Although we don't know his name, he wrote the life by mandate of his Paduan superior and at the request of his confreres, completing it in the very year of the saint's canonization, 1232.

¹ For more adequate bibliographic information and for the critical edition of the *Assidua*, consult Vergilio Gamboso, *Vita prima di S. Antonio or «Assidua»* (c. 1232), Edizioni Messaggero, Padua 1981.

Between 1233 and 1234, Julian of Speyer, a German Franciscan composed the liturgical office for the feast of St. Anthony. Its responsory, *Si quaeris miracula* (If miracles you seek), immediately became a favourite prayer. At the same time, Julian also wrote a beautiful summary of the *Assidua*. Although he didn't add any new information, his summary placed a special accent on Anthony's Franciscan ideals.

Toward 1246, an anonymous friar again summarized and reworked the *Assidua*, this time for an anthology of famous Franciscans. The title of his work is the *Dialogus de gestis sanctorum fratrum Minorum* (Dialogue Concerning the Deeds of Saintly Friars Minor).

At the end of the general chapter of Franciscan superiors, gathered in Padua in 1276, Jerome of Ascoli, the minister general who was to become Pope Nicholas IV, commissioned John Peckham, the former minister provincial of England, theologian at the papal court, and later Archbishop of Canterbury, to write a new life of St. Anthony. To guide him in his work, Peckham was given written testimonies which came from Portugal, southern France and, above all, from the area of Padua and Venice. His new life is known as the *Benignitas*. The outstanding trait of his work is its focus on the miraculous powers which St. Anthony already possessed during his lifetime.

A legend – from the Latin word for a text to be read (*legenda*) in liturgical assemblies and community gatherings – appeared some time towards the end of the century. Commonly called the *Raymundina*, it is important because it gathers the recollections of Anthony's companions and describes the social milieu of Padua during the last months of his life. The work is therefore a witness to the saint's spirituality and to the growing veneration of his countless devotees.

Finally, the *Rigaldina*, written by a Franciscan from Li-

moges, Johannes Rigaldi or Jean de Rigaud (Rigault), gathers traditions about St. Anthony that were handed down by the older friars of Limoges and southern France.

As we mentioned, the *Assidua* appeared on the occasion of Anthony's canonization in 1232, a year after his death. Although we don't know the name of the author, we can deduce from this life that he was a Franciscan friar. He himself tells us in the prologue that he wrote the work in response to the assiduous requests of his confreres and in obedience to his superiors. Not only his cultural formation, piety and sincere attachment to the Franciscan Order but also his respect for the clergy and particular deference for the bishop of Padua lead us to believe that he originally belonged to the clergy of the diocese and only at a mature age joined the religious community founded by St. Francis. If he was not a Paduan by birth, he became one by adoption. If this is true, then he resembled St. Anthony who was Portuguese. He was obviously a learned man, a well-read person capable of composing artful prose. Furthermore, he was not only an expert in the religious culture of his day but also knew his Bible well.

The *Assidua* was primarily destined for liturgical reading by religious and diocesan clergy, but it was also available to anyone who desired to know the life and miracles of St. Anthony. The writer's sincere devotion led him to write a life which might inspire others to righteous living and bring them to venerate the saint. These reasons explain why he did not digress in superfluous accounts but narrated only what was indispensable for the piety of readers. In humble fulfillment of his task, he remained silent about himself and also clothed Anthony in a mantle of secrecy out of respect for his modesty and interior life with God.

The writer tells us that he was not an eyewitness to some of the events he describes, but that he relied on in-

formation supplied, either orally or in writing, by the bishop of Lisbon and other people worthy of trust. He reminds us that, in similar circumstances, other writers followed the same procedure. He cites the examples of the evangelists Mark and Luke, and of Pope St. Gregory the Great. We presume that he had asked for and received information from John Parenti, the minister general from 1227 to 1232, who was the former provincial of the Iberian peninsula and may have personally welcomed the Augustinian canon who became St. Anthony into the Franciscan Order.

Knowing that God must be praised and the saint should be venerated, the author chose the death of Anthony as the event around which to organize his literary work. It is at this critical moment that the saint definitively professed his faith in God, and the miracles which immediately followed his death were signs of God's pleasure with his whole life. Thus, all praise belongs to God and the saint was revealed to be worthy of veneration. The *Assidua* is therefore divided into two parts, each subdivided into short chapters with summary headings. The first part recalls the more important events in his life; the second describes his death, the circumstances of his burial and canonization, and lists the miracles. The outline, with the accompanying numbered chapters, is the following:

1. General prologue (1);
2. First Part: life and deeds (2-15);
3. Second Part: prologue (16); death, burial, canonization (17-29); prologue to the miracles (30); the 53 miracles presented at the canonization (31-46); epilogue (47, 1-3);
4. General epilogue (47, 4-6).

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

As far as I am aware, this is the first translation of the *Assidua* from Latin into English. Not only its interest for St. Anthony's clients but also its value for students of early Franciscanism warranted the undertaking.

Every translator exposes himself to criticism whenever he «interprets» the original to produce a readable text. In the case of a medieval work, he runs the risk whenever he must translate nouns as subordinate clauses; and, he must do this more often than is usually required by the ablative absolute of classical Latin.

I found Vergilio Gamboso's Italian translation of great help in avoiding many pitfalls, but I couldn't always accept his «interpretation» because English syntax permitted a more literal reading.

BERNARD PRZEWOZNY, O.F.M. Conv.

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THE BEGINNING
OF THE FIRST PART

1. HERE BEGINS THE PROLOGUE
TO THE LIFE OF BLESSED ANTHONY

1. Guided by the insistent demand of friars and inspired by the merit of sanctifying obedience, for the praise and glory of almighty God, and to satisfy the love and devotion of the faithful, I am led to write about the life and deeds of the most blessed father and our confrere Anthony. 2. In a «life» of saints, everything is transmitted in writing to a future generation of believers so that, having heard of the miraculous signs which God works in them, the Lord may always and in all things be praised, and to the faithful there may be offered a norm of right living with an incentive to devotion.

3. Although I know that I am quite incompetent for such a task, I nonetheless do not restrain my lips, trusting that he who sees the intention of my heart will bring my undertaking to completion. 4. Thus, I speak succinctly to the followers of Christ, guided only by truth, that is, by simple terms, lest the eloquent loquaciousness of words only serve itching ears and, consequently, men be satisfied with the mere turning of pages.

5. Many of the things I write about I did not see with my own eyes, but I came to know them from my

Lord Sugerius,¹ bishop of Lisbon, and from other Catholic men who told me about them. 6. In the same way, Mark and Luke wrote their gospels. Thus, also, Gregory wrote his *Dialogues* (in which Peter is a questioner): he himself tells us that he learned what he wrote only from the account of men who were trustworthy.

7. So that the faithful who read this life may more easily find what they are looking for, I have divided this work into two parts and have added a summary subtitle to each one of the chapters. 8. In the first part, I have described some of the better known events of his life, choosing them, for the sake of brevity, from among the many which occurred after his first acceptance of the religious habit. 9. In the second part, then, relying on the testimonies of our friars and other trustworthy faithful, I have gathered the marvels that God worked through him.

10. I, who wrote this life, exhort the reader that he not accuse me of lying or of falsehood but mercifully recognize my ignorance or forgetfulness when he reads and finds that in some place I said too little, or that in another I exceeded the limits of truth because of my incautious choice of words.

HERE ENDS THE PROLOGUE AND BEGINS
THE LIFE OF BLESSED ANTHONY

¹ Sugerius II Viegas, bishop of Lisbon from 1210 to 1232, travelled to Rome in 1231 when the canonical procedures for Anthony's canonization were already initiated.

2. CONCERNING THE CITY OF BLESSED ANTHONY

1. I have been told that there is a certain city in the kingdom of Portugal, situated in its western regions at the extreme limits of the world. It is called Ulixbone² by its inhabitants because it is commonly thought to have been founded by Ulysses. 2. Within its walls, there stands a church³ of admirable size built to the honour of the glorious Virgin Mary. In this church rests the precious body of the blessed martyr Vincent,⁴ guarded with all honour and worthy of every veneration.

3. The fortunate parents of Anthony⁵ owned at the west side of this district a house worthy of their social condition, its entrance being close to the threshold of the church. 4. They were in the first flower of their youth when they begot this fortunate child and gave him the name Ferdinand at the holy font of baptism.

5. Indeed, they entrusted him to this church, dedicated to the holy Mother of God, so that he learn the sacred writings⁶ there, and, as if led by a presentiment, they confided the future herald of Christ to the education of Christ's ministers.

² Lisbon.

³ The reference is to the Cathedral of Lisbon which still exists today. It has preserved the font where Ferdinand was baptized.

⁴ The deacon Vincent of Saragossa was martyred during the persecution of Emperor Diocletian (a. 304).

⁵ Martin Alphonse de' Buglioni and Mary.

⁶ The Bible and basic Christian doctrine.

3. HOW HE ENTERED THE ORDER OF ST. AUGUSTINE

1. Having, therefore, serenely spent his childhood years at home, he happily completed his fifteenth birthday. 2. At puberty, although disordinate passions of the flesh increased and he felt himself tormented beyond normal, he never relaxed his watchfulness over adolescence and sensual pleasures. Instead, mastering the weak human condition, he tightened the reins over the impulses of carnal concupiscence. 3. In everyday affairs, the world seemed foolish to him and he withdrew his foot from its threshold before he had fully stepped onto it, fearing that in some way the dust of earthly joys might adhere to him and create an obstacle for one who, in spirit, was already running quickly along the Lord's way.

4. Not too far from the walls of the above-mentioned city, there stands a monastery of the Order of St. Augustine⁷ in which live men who are known for their religious observance, dedicated to the Lord in the habit of the Canons Regular. 5. To this place, then, once he set aside the delights of the world, came the man of God and, with humble devotion, took the habit of the Canons Regular.

6. He lived there for almost two years, putting up with the frequent visits of friends which so disturb pious souls. To remove every such occasion of disturbance, he decided to leave his native region – something that can annoy even manly souls to no small degree – so that he might serve the Lord more peacefully, sheltered by the ramparts of an unknown shore. 7. And, after many requests, as soon as he obtained

⁷ The Canonica di São Vicente and its church were rebuilt after the earthquake of 1775.

the superior's permission, he changed not the order but his residence, moving with lively fervour to the monastery of the Holy Cross in Coimbra.

4. HOW HE PROGRESSED IN VIRTUE AND LEARNING IN COIMBRA

1. Inspired, therefore, by love for a more severe form of discipline and more fruitful tranquillity, the servant of God moved to the monastery of the Cross. His growing fervour showed that he had changed not so much his place as his habitual conduct. 2. And, since a text says, «it is not having been to Jerusalem but having lived there well that is praiseworthy,» so he showed himself in possession of such virtues that it was clearly apparent to all that he had searched for a more appropriate place where he might reach the height of perfection.

3. He always cultivated his innate talents with special eagerness and exercised his mind with meditation. Day and night, whenever the occasion arose, he would not neglect to read the Scriptures. 4. In reading the Bible with attention to its historical truth, he also strengthened his faith with allegorical comparisons; and, in applying the words of the Scriptures to himself, he edified his affections with virtues.

5. In examining, out of healthy curiosity, the deep sense of God's words, he protected his intellect with scriptural testimonies against the pitfalls of error. For this reason, he often returned to the words of the saints with diligent inquiry. 6. And, indeed, he entrusted to his tenacious memory whatever he read, so that in a short time he was able to acquire a knowledge of the Scriptures that no one else hoped to possess.

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