

St. Anthony

Friend of Jesus and Mary

“O blessed tongue! That never ceased to praise God, and taught others to bless him, it is now manifest how precious thou art in his sight!”

These are the words of St. Bonaventure upon seeing the uncorrupt tongue of the great St. Anthony when his coffin was opened in 1263. Most of the remains of the saint had crumbled to dust, except for the skeleton, in the 32 years since his death in 1231.

The skeleton of St. Anthony also revealed that the saint's lower jaw (consisting of teeth, flesh and bone) was intact. Both the jawbone and the tongue were placed in reliquaries in the great Basilica of St. Anthony which was completed in 1263 in Padua, Italy.

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– St. Bonaventure

St. Anthony's remains have been exhumed twice – once in 1263 when they were transferred to the Basilica, and again in 1981, the 750th anniversary of his death. This was when the saint's vocal chords were discovered totally intact. They too have been placed in a third reliquary in the Basilica. Although the flesh was there since St. Anthony's death, it took modern medical science to reveal that the remains now found intact in 1981 were what we know as the vocal chords.

Just who was this towering saint who spoke so well for God that He preserved all elements relating to the Saint's voice?

He was the son of the Governor of Lisbon, Portugal, born on August 15 (Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady) in the year 1195. Saint Anthony's given name was Ferdinand and he was placed by his mother at baptism on an altar where he was dedicated to the Blessed Mother. St. Anthony had a life-long devotion to Our Lady. We know that at least on one occasion, she actually appeared to him!

The Friars had planned to read the lesson from the Martyrology in general use in France, which in referring to the next day's beautiful feast for Mary, said: *“As yet the Church has given no decision upon the bodily assumption of the Blessed Virgin, exercising a prudent reserve as to trivial or apocraphal legends.”*

To treat a truth so certain in St. Anthony's mind, wounded the heart of the faithful servant of Mary. When the bell rang for Prime, St. Anthony did not want to disobey and break the rule by not attending; at the same time, he didn't want to attend, which he felt gave tacit approval to what was being said.

Then, miraculously, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to St. Anthony in all the splendour of her beauty, surrounded by a dazzling light.

She said to St. Anthony: *"Be assured, my son, that this body of mine, which has been the living Ark of the Word Incarnate, has been preserved from the corruption of the grave. Be equally assured that, three days after my death, it was carried upon the wings of angels to the right hand of the Son of God, where I reign as Queen."*

St. Anthony understood that this apparition was not a mere personal favour. He spoke out boldly, becoming a champion and the apostle of the glorious mystery of Mary's Assumption.

St. Anthony, when we see his statue in churches, is always holding the Infant Jesus, who is standing on the Bible, arms outstretched to the saint.

This is another great apparition, witnessed by a person who was drawn to great light coming from St. Anthony's room. He peeked in and saw St. Anthony embracing the child Jesus, standing on a huge volume on a wooden table. The peeping visitor then saw Jesus whisper something to the saint. Knowing he'd been discovered, the man left and later revealed what he had seen to the saint himself. The man told others what he saw in the saint's room after St. Anthony's death.

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St. Anthony was known as a great preacher, a man who traveled for the Lord all over Europe.

St. Anthony's vocal chords, tongue and jaw were preserved from the corruption of the grave by God to prove emphatically that when this Saint spoke, he spoke God's holy truth and did so eloquently inspired by the Holy Spirit.

On one dramatic occasion, Pope Gregory IX commissioned St. Anthony to speak to the people shortly after the saint's arrival in Rome. It was Holy Week, in fact the last three days of Lent. St. Anthony's desire had been to remain unknown in the city and to replenish his soul at the tombs of martyrs. The Pope, however, had invited him to speak on the real meaning of the great Gospel story the church was observing.

Amazingly, the Holy Spirit gave St. Anthony the gift of tongues, for even though men and women from every corner of Europe were present, each heard the saint speak in his or her native language. Pope Gregory IX in the presence of all, pronounced the young friar to be the *living ark of the testament* and pressed him to be in the Pontifical Court, but the saint pleaded to return to the silence of the Italian hills.

Years before this speech, St. Anthony had been ordered by the great St. Francis to preach, and teach fellow Franciscans.

St. Anthony today is known primarily as the finder of lost items, which suits him quite well. While he's finding lost items, he leads many a soul to Jesus and his Church.

In his lifetime, he caused many to repent. When he arrived in a town and spoke, the confessionals were filled.

[The citizens of] the town of Rimini ... were a stubborn people who didn't want to turn from their ways. When no one would pay any attention to [St. Anthony] in Rimini, he went to the banks of the river and proceeded to give his sermon to the fish. ... God, who controls all of nature, had hundreds and then thousands of fish line up, bobbing on the surface of the water, seemingly intent and nodding to St. Anthony as he spoke. The cautious townspeople came and watched the fish, and then listened to St. Anthony and repented.

But, in the town of Rimini he ran into trouble on two occasions. They were a stubborn people who didn't want to turn from their ways. When no one would pay any attention to him in Rimini, he went to the banks of the river and proceeded to give his sermon to the fish.

We know from the Gospel that Jesus told Peter and the others with him to cast their net over the side of the boat, after a useless night of fishing. They did so and hauled in a great catch.

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On another occasion in the same town of Rimini, a heretic refused to believe that Jesus was truly present in the consecrated Host. He challenged St. Anthony in front of others.

He said that if his donkey was starved for three days and then brought out to the street to choose between adoring Jesus and food to eat, he'd believe if the donkey chose to adore Jesus in the consecrated Host. St. Anthony had only one condition: if he failed, it was only because of the saint's sins and, no other reason. Then St. Anthony prayed and fasted for three days.

The donkey, after starving for three days, was taken out to the street and shown both food and Jesus in the monstrance. He headed straight to the saint holding the consecrated Host and knelt down on its two front legs. Not to be outdone, the heretic threw himself before Jesus in the Host, too.

The number of miracles worked by St. Anthony is amazing, both during his lifetime and after his death, to this very day! There were so many documented miracles after his death that he was proclaimed a Saint by Pope Gregory IX in less than one year, which is incredible when it usually takes 100 or so years to proclaim even a great saint officially a saint of the church.

St. Anthony is also one of thirty-two Doctors of the Church, because of what he said and wrote.

Miracles are exciting to read about. They are such confirmations of faith.

We all know the story from the Gospel telling how Jesus took the severed ear, cut off by Peter's sword, and reattached it to the soldier among those arresting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

St. Anthony also miraculously reattached a severed man's foot. The man had gone to St. Anthony for confession, telling him that in the heat of anger he kicked his own mother. St. Anthony made the comment, not to be taken literally, that the foot which kicks a mother should be cut off! The young man went home, took an axe and hacked off his offending foot! Shortly afterward, the man's mother came running for St. Anthony and bade him come to her son's aid. Upon arriving, St. Anthony picked up the foot and pressed it against the man's leg. Making the sign of the cross, St. Anthony once again showed his full faith in the power of God. The foot was instantly attached to the leg and the young man was able to get up and stand on it, totally healed.

On another occasion, St. Anthony was asked to preach at the funeral of a miser, a man who made his living by usury and many were cast into jail for failing to pay their debts. It was St. Anthony who succeeded in pushing to have the law changed so that if a man gave all he had, he couldn't be put in jail.

Standing before the body of the miserly man, St. Anthony said it should be cast out and buried where dogs are buried. His soul is already in hell, exclaimed St. Anthony, and his heart is no longer in his body, but where his treasure is, there is his heart! The old man's chest was cut open. There was no heart. His treasure chest was opened. There was his heart.

A mother's young child drowned at the age of two. The parents lived near the Basilica in Padua, Italy, built after the saint's death. The woman promised St. Anthony at his tomb that if the child was restored to life, she would give a measure of grain to the poor. Toward midnight, the child rose up as if from sleep. This miracle gave rise to the devotion today known as St. Anthony's Bread, helping to feed the poor.

Another woman, unable to reach her husband by mail for months as he was in a foreign country, with full faith placed a letter in the hand of a statue of St. Anthony in a church. The next day there was a reply from her husband, saying her letter had been delivered by a Franciscan priest. Enclosed were some gold coins as well.

I too prayed, and still do pray to St. Anthony, for financial help and assistance. On one dire occasion, I needed \$10,000 before the end of August to send two sons off to college. After weeks of praying, there was still no money. As my business was seasonal, I couldn't expect funds until the Fall. In the last week of August the money came in very unexpectedly, as a loan to me. The money I had asked St. Anthony for, in the end, came just in time. Imagine my surprise when I learned the \$10,000 was coming to me as a loan from the St. Anthony Alumni Association.

Inside the Padua Basilica erected for the tomb of St. Anthony are almost sixty various representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary, painted or sculptured, scattered throughout the huge Basilica. This would please him beyond any doubt for he was so devoted on this earth to his heavenly mother.

Near his tomb are nine marble panels in bas-relief. From the left, they are: St. Anthony receiving the Franciscans habit; the Saint healing an innocent woman stabbed by her jealous husband; St. Anthony raising to life a young man so that he can reveal the true assassin; the saint restoring life to a child who drowned; the saint bringing to life a little boy; the miser's heart found in a treasure chest; the saint reattaching the foot of the penitent youth; the miracle of the unbroken drinking glass, and the saint making a newborn speak to proclaim his father.

St. Anthony was tall for his day, five foot, seven inches. He wasn't exceptionally healthy. He had a very large head and it's been determined that he had as much grey matter in his brain as Leonardo DaVinci, who is known to have had more grey matter than any human on earth, including Albert Einstein. We know he was very smart, for he turned to prayer often. His enlarged knees point to the many hours spent on his knees in penance and prayer. At night, he used a rock for a pillow. The rock is on view in the Padua Basilica.

On the day St. Anthony died, June 13, 1231, he had been staying by day in a cell in the woods for meditation and prayer. The son of the Governor of Lisbon was content. But at the age of thirty-six, God called him home.

He died before reaching St. Mary's Church where he had asked to be taken. After confessing and receiving absolution, he then began to sing his favourite hymn to the Blessed Virgin, *O Gloriosa Domina*.

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The holy oil of unction was brought and administered. As the sun was sloping toward earth, the words of the penitential psalms were the last that St. Anthony uttered.

In less than one year, with forty-seven duly authorized miracles, Pope Gregory IX proclaimed him a saint.

And he's still working as a saint, working great miracles and small ones like finding lost articles. In the process, he still brings many souls to Our Lord and His Blessed Mother.