

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
St. Anthony of Padua, Effingham, Illinois
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The Eleventh Sunday of the Year

This past Friday Holy Mother Church celebrated the life of one of her illustrious sons and our heavenly patron: Saint Anthony of Padua. Born in Lisbon, Portugal and given the name Ferdinand at his baptism, this son of Martin Alphonse de' Buglioni and his wife, Mary, heard the call of the Lord to enter his harvest as a laborer and a shepherd (cf. Matthew 9:38, 35).

At the age of fifteen, Ferdinand sought to withdraw from the world and entered the Order of Saint Augustine as a member of the Canons Regular of St. Vincent Monastery near his home. But as he endeavored to grow in prayer and deepen his already vast learning, the man of God was continually interrupted by constant visitors and friends. Desiring a more peaceful life, he received permission to transfer to the monastery of the Holy Cross in Coimbra.

While in Coimbra, Ferdinand found the life for which he longed. In his new home,

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.¹

¹ *Life of Saint Anthony*, ed. Vergilio Gamboso and trans. Bernard Przewozny (Padua, Italy: Messagero di Sant' Antonio), 4.3.

It was there that his life would change forever.

It happened that five brothers of the Order of Friars Minor, the new Order founded by Saint Francis of Assisi, received the grace of martyrdom in Morocco on 16 January 1220. Ferdinand was profoundly moved when the bodies of these first Franciscan martyrs were brought to his monastery.

Overcome with a great desire for martyrdom, he prayed,

If only the Most High would deign to make me share in the crown of his holy martyrs! If only the executioner's sword would strike me as I, on bended knee, offer him my neck for the name of Jesus! Will I see this come about? Will I reach that moment of great joy?^{2[2]}

In the end, he did not receive the martyr's death, but he most certainly did reach "that moment of great joy," and it all begin here, in his willingness to give himself entirely to the Lord.

Being so moved by the witness of these sons of Saint Francis, Ferdinand requested permission to join the Order of Friars Minor. When he received the Franciscan habit, Ferdinand took the name, Anthony, which means "high sounding." The friars who welcomed him into the Order said to him, "Go, go, because now you will be a saint!"³ Truer words were never spoken.

On 13 June 1231, after singing the hymn *O Glorious Virgin*, Saint Anthony lay on his deathbed with his eyes transfixed on a

² *Ibid.*, 5.2.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.9.

certain spot in the air. When asked what he saw, he said, "I see my Lord."⁴ He died shortly thereafter.

When words spread of his death, the people, who greatly loved Saint Anthony, cried aloud:

Where are you going, father, to return no more? ... Where are you going without your children, O venerable father? Who else will be found like you, a true herald of God's word to us, your orphans? Through the Gospel, you begot us in Christ Jesus.⁵

Yes, who indeed will be a true herald of the Gospel for us as Saint Anthony?

Today these words of Jesus ring ever more true: "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Matthew 9:37). The harvest indeed is abundant, but where are the harvesters?

Very often today - too often perhaps - we hear talk of a so-called "vocations shortage." From my ministry across the Diocese and from young men who visit my web sites, I am confident that there is not so much a vocations shortage as there is a shortage of young men who are responding to the call of the Lord.

The Lord Jesus has not ceased calling men to himself; he has not stopped calling men to follow him; Christ has not

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.6

stopped associating men with his own mission. It is not the Lord who has stopped calling men to labor in his fields; it is rather men who have stopped listening to his voice and who are lacking in generous response. For this reason, the Lord says to us simply, "so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."

Many young men today - even some among us now - hear the call of the Lord resounding in their hearts. Why then do not respond more openly and readily? The reason is all too often the same and is a very sad answer. Very often no one has encouraged them to consider serving the Lord as a priest; no one has told them they would make a good priest.

When the Lord call the question why he would call them. They think themselves unworthy of his service and, indeed, they are unworthy of it; but that is the marvel of the call of the Lord.

Looking at the Twelve Apostles, we see that the Lord chose fishermen, a tax collector, an instigator of violence and rebellion, one who would betray him, and even one who would doubt his Resurrection to carry on his ministry in his name. The Lord did not choose the Apostles because they were holy; he chose them to make them holy. The Lord chooses sinful men to go labor in his harvest and through them he manifests his love and his glory.

As I discerned the Lord's call for my life, I, too, often wondered why the Lord chose me. There is nothing extraordinary about me, nothing so unique. I am a man who prefers the quiet of a library to the bustle of large groups of people. Being an introvert I seem a strange choice for such an extroverted ministry. Yet the Lord chose me.

My life differs from that of others only in that it has been marked with much suffering. Yet even in this I am not alone. Who of us does not suffer in some way? A suffering that is bearable for one is completely unbearable for another. There is nothing too different about me; I am a man like all others. Why should the Lord choose me?

I was discussing this one day with a friend who responded with a question of three simple words: Why not you? I had no answer and knew that this was the Lord's will for me life.

Let us return to St. Anthony. We see in his life that the gift he wanted to give to the Lord was not the gift that the Lord asked of him. The Lord did not want the use of Anthony's blood, but of his tongue. Through this powerful words Anthony moved the hearts of men and women throughout Europe to return to the Lord.

It is the same with many of us: the gift we first want to give to the Lord is not the gift he asks of us. We, like St.

Anthony, must beg the Lord to reveal to us that gift that he asks.

We also see that the Lord did not call St. Anthony to a mission that he was incapable of fulfilling or achieving. Rather, the Lord called St. Anthony because of the gifts and talents he already possessed. In the monastery he was able to develop and hone his innate abilities and so become the man he was born to be.

It is the same with each of us: the Lord does not call us to something of which we are incapable. Rather, he calls us to that way of life for which we were each made, so that we, like St. Anthony, might develop fully the gifts we have been given. Only in this way will we achieve our potential - the tasks for which we were born - and so come to find true and lasting joy and peace.

When he was among us a few weeks, the Holy Father said to the Bishops:

Let us be quite frank: the ability to cultivate vocations to the priesthood and the religious life is a sure sign of the health of a local Church. There is no room for complacency in this regard. God continues to call young people; it is up to all of us to encourage a generous and free response to that call. On the other hand, none of us can take this grace for granted.⁶

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Responses to Questions posed by the American Bishops, 16 April 2008.

Each of us must do all that we can to help young men heed the call of the Lord and answer it with generous hearts.

Yes, O blessed Anthony, who indeed will be found like you? Who will be found a true herald of God's word for us?

Let each of us implore our heavenly patron and ask him to show those whom the Lord is calling that we might pose the question to them, "Why not you?"

Yes, Lord, send forth laborers into your harvest! Amen!