

SYMBOLS OF SAINT ANTHONY

Through the centuries, Saint Anthony has been portrayed by artists and sculptors in various ways. He is depicted with the Holy Scriptures in his hands, with a lily or with a loaf of bread. He has been depicted in wall frescos preaching to fish, holding a monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament in front of a mule, preaching in a public square or from a walnut tree. Each presents us with an aspect of the life of our beloved Saint. Let us reflect on several of these rich symbols.

Our first symbol is Saint Anthony holding the Child Jesus.

Since the seventeenth century, artists most often represent the Saint holding the child Jesus in his arms or with the child standing or seated on a book which the Saint is holding. This representation is rooted in the story about Saint Anthony's visit to the home of a friend. Anthony was praying in his room far into the night when suddenly the room was filled with light more brilliant than the sun. Jesus appeared to Saint Anthony in the form of a little child. His friend, awakened and attracted by the brilliant light that filled the house, was drawn with wonder to Anthony's room where he witnessed the vision.

This story reflects the sense of wonder and awe Saint Anthony had for the mystery of the Lord's birth, the Word of God made flesh. In his sermons, he spoke eloquently of the humility and vulnerability of the Lord who emptied himself to become one like us in all things except sin. For Anthony, living a simple lifestyle was a way to imitate Jesus who was born in a stable and who had no place to lay his head. The call to a simple Christian lifestyle is a call we all share.

Our second symbol is Saint Anthony holding a lily.

Pictures and statues of Saint Anthony often portray him holding a lily. This beautiful flower has long been regarded in Christian art as a symbol of integrity of life. In many parts of the world, lilies are in bloom in the middle of June when the feast of St. Anthony is observed. The custom of associating the lily with Saint Anthony is related to two incidents.

The first unusual event took place on the Saint's feast in 1680. On that day, a cut lily had been placed in one of the hands of his statue in a church in Austria and for the whole year, the flower retained its freshness and fragrance. The following year, the stalk bore two more lilies, and the church was filled with their fragrance.

The second unusual event took place on the island of Corsica at the time of the French Revolution. The Franciscans had been forced to leave the island, but the people continued to honor Saint Anthony and to invoke his aid as the friars had taught them. On his feast day, the people set up a shrine for the Saint and then

decorated the Shrine with bouquets of lilies in a deserted church. Many months later, the lilies placed before Anthony's statue were found fresh and white. Each of us shares the call to make our earthly journey with integrity.

Our third symbol is Saint Anthony holding the Holy Scripture in his hands.

Saint Anthony is celebrated as a teacher and as a preacher. He was the first teacher in the Franciscan Order, given the special approval and blessing of Saint Francis of Assisi to instruct brother Franciscans. He was an eloquent and effective preacher, calling people back to the faith. In his sermons, he called upon his listeners to live in justice and in peace with one another. The Church calls upon us to imitate Anthony's love of the Word of God and his prayerful efforts to understand and to apply the Word of God to situations in everyday life. The Church wants us to learn from the Saint the meaning of true wisdom – to know, love, and serve the Lord.

Our fourth symbol is Saint Anthony as Wonder-Worker and as Finder of Lost Things.

The reason for invoking Saint Anthony's help in finding lost or stolen things is traced back to an incident in the Saint's own life. Anthony had a book of Psalms that was very important to him. Besides the value of any book before the invention of printing, his prayer book had the notes and comments he had made to use in teaching his students. A novice who had grown tired of living the Franciscan way of life decided to depart from the community. He took with him Anthony's prayer book. Upon realizing that his prayer book was missing, Anthony prayed that it would be found or returned to him. In response to Anthony's prayer, the novice was moved to return the prayer book to the Saint and to return to the Order which accepted him back. Shortly after his death, people began praying through Anthony to recover lost or stolen articles.

Our fifth symbol is St. Anthony holding a loaf of bread in his hands.

Saint Anthony is today, as he was in his lifetime, the faithful friend of all in trouble, especially the poor and the needy. "Saint Anthony's Bread" recalls the custom of giving a gift, or "bread," to the poor, or some charitable cause, as a show of gratitude for favors received as a result of prayers to Saint Anthony. This custom goes back to the year eighteen-eighty-eight (1888). At that time, there lived in Toulon, France, a devout young woman named Louise Bouffier who managed a small bakery store. One morning, Louise could not open the door to the store with her key. Neither could a locksmith, who told her he would have to break the door open. While he went to get his tools, Louise promised to Saint Anthony that she would give some bread to the poor if the door could be opened without force. When the locksmith returned, she begged him to try just once more. The door

opened. Louise kept her promise and the poor received bread. This answer to Louise's prayers became known to her friends, and they imitated her example. From Toulon, this practice spread to all parts of the world. Today, the promise to give alms in honor of Saint Anthony if a favor is granted is called "Saint Anthony's Bread."