

The City of San Antonio and Its Holy Protector

By Tarcisio Beal

It is well known that San Antonio, before becoming the first major center of an expanding western America in the 1830s, was a mission of the Mexican Franciscan friars who followed St. Francis of Assisi's example of caring for the poor and needy. They named their mission after St. Anthony, whose 13th century popularity surpassed even that of St. Francis of Assisi. Antonio (1195-1231), a native of the Portuguese capital of Lisbon and a member of the Augustinian friars, moved to the Italian city of Padua and soon joined the friars of the saint of Assisi.

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was the first Catholic saint who devoted his entire life to the poor and those abandoned by society, especially the *lepers* (victims of leprosy) who survived in the streets of the Italian towns that were falling economically and politically apart. He also drew into his mission the women (the St. Claire Nuns) and the lay men and women (Third Order of St. Francis). It was probably his caring of the victims of leprosy that resulted in what tradition has seen as a carrier of the wounds of Christ in later life. Francis was also a believer in dialoguing with all peoples, including the Muslims. On his return to a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he stopped in North Africa to have a friendly dialogue with the Sultan of Egypt. Furthermore, Francis also propagated respect and preservation of the earth's resources. The town of Assisi's beautiful trees and gardens to this day exemplify the saint's love of nature. The widespread impact of the example and the popularity of Francis led the Pope to declare him a saint of the Church less than two years after his death.

Now, in the history of Catholicism, there was never a more popular saint and preacher than Antonio, first in Italy and Portugal, then in Latin America. The widespread veneration and his popularity was so overwhelming that he was canonized just one year after his death and he and the *Poverello of Assisi*, began to be venerated as saints and protectors of the people. Antonio's preaching in Padua and across Italy filled the churches with thousands of the faithful who often slept inside the temples so as not to miss his sermons. We should remember that in the days of St. Francis and St. Anthony, the public had no access to books and the Bible stories, and lessons were propagated by the educated, especially by monks and priests. Friar Antonio's approach was to narrate the stories and draw the lessons for the people's daily life. He also composed the book "*Moral Application of the Bible*" to emphasize the meaning of the biblical stories and to highlight the example of Jesus, especially of Jesus' caring for the poor and the rejected of society.

Furthermore, since the Renaissance, the availability of printing facilitated the spread of all kinds of information: stories,



The statue of San Antonio de Padua at San Fernando Cathedral for whom the City of n Antonio was named.

the paintings, the drawings of Jesus, the apostles, and of a variety of saints and martyrs that were propagated throughout the Catholic world and resulted in ever-increasing popular devotions that have since been highlighted by their inclusion in the Church's calendar of the feasts. In 1967, while in Rome doing research for my doctoral dissertation in the Secret Archives of the Vatican, I had the opportunity to visit the Sistine Chapel which was decorated by Michelangelo. As I looked up at the gorgeously-painted ceiling and contemplated the scene of the **Last Judgment**, I paid special attention to a specific face in the panel because I had read how one papal courtier had ended up in Michelangelo's hell. The genial artist was not an easy person to deal with, for he was always asking for more of everything needed to finalize his artwork. The papal aide was often annoyed by his attitude and had complained about him to Pope Julius II. When the panel of the "Last Judgement" was completed, he discovered that his face was painted

right in the middle of hell, so he went to intercede with the Pontiff to do something about it. This was Julius II's answer: "I'm sorry, my friend. If Michelangelo had placed you in the Purgatory, I could still get you out. But, as you know, no one can ever get out of hell!"

Now, the kind of Catholicism brought to San Antonio with the Franciscan missionaries from Mexico was of "**baroque style**," with characteristics shaped mostly after the Council of Trent (1542-1563) and, in Latin America, during the 18th century. A central trait of baroque Catholicism is **mediation**, which turns it into a rather familial religion that sees Baby Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints as members of the household, ever ready to attend to the spiritual and material needs of the faithful because they have direct contact with God. St. Anthony has been and still is venerated as the finder of lost things, the matchmaker of young men and women, the one saint who can get you every conceivable grace or favor from God. He is expected to never disappoint his devotees. When one of my sisters lost the silver-plated earrings with which she had been crowned "queen" of our town's carnival, she prayed to St. Anthony to help her find them: She lit a candle inside her bedroom and prayed before the saint's picture during a whole novena; by the 10th day, the saint had not yet delivered. She put out the candle, turned the saint's face against the wall, and declared she would not look at his face until he had heard her prayers. That afternoon she found her earrings in the lawn behind our home and made peace with her favorite saint.

Although the takeover of Texas and San Antonio had a bloody beginning at the Alamo with the execution of Santa Ana's Mexican soldiers who had survived the battle, and the maintenance

O Passeio de Santo Antonio

Saíra Santo Antonio do convento
A dar o seu passeio costumado
E a recitar, num tom rezado e lento
Um cândido sermão sôbre o pecado.

Andando, andando sempre, repetia
O divino sermão pesado e brando,
E nem notou que a tarde esmorecia,
Que vinha a noite plácida baixando.

E andando, andando sempre, viu-se num outeiro
Com árvores e casas espalhadas,
Que ficava distante do mosteiro
Uma légua das fartas, das pesadas.

Surprendido por se ver tão longe,
E fraco por haver andado tanto,
Sentou-se a descansar o bom do monge
Com a resignação de quem é santo.

O luar, um luar claríssimo nasceu.
Num raio dessa linda claridade
O Menino Jesus baixou do céu,
Pôs-se a brincar com o capuz do frade.

Perto, uma bica d'água murmurante
Juntava o seu murmúrio ao dos pinhais,
Os rouxinóis ouviam-se distantes,
O luar, mais alto, iluminava mais.

De braço dado para a fonte vinha
Um par de noivos todo satisfeito:
Ela trazia no ombro a cantarinha,
Ele trazia... o coração no peito.

Sem suspeitarem que alguém os visse,
Trocaram beijos ao luar tranquilo...
O Menino, porém, ouviu e disse:
"Ó, Frei Antonio, o que foi aquilo?"

O Santo, erguendo a manga do burel
Para tapar o noivo e a namorada,
Mentiu numa voz doce como o mel:
"Não sei o que fosse. Eu cá não ouvi nada!..."

Uma risada límpida, sonora
Vibrou em notas de ouro no caminho:
"Ouviste, frei Antonio, ouviste agora?"
"Ouvi, Senhor, ouvi! É um passarinho!"

"Tu não estás com a cabeça boa!..
Um passarinho a cantar assim?!?"
E o Santo Antonio de Lisboa
Calou-se embaraçado, mas por fim,

Corado como as vestes dos cardeais,
Achou esta saída redentora:
"Se o Menino Jesus pergunta mais,
Queixo-me à sua mãe, Nossa Senhora!"

E voltando-lhe a carinha contra a luz
E contra aquele amor sem casamento,
Pegou-lhe ao colo e acrescentou:
"Jesus, são horas!..." e abalaram pro convento

—Augusto Gil



This bronze statue of St. Anthony on the Riverwalk was donated to the city of San Antonio by the Saint's birth country, Portugal, in celebration of HemisFair '68.

St. Anthony's Walk

St. Anthony had left the convent
To undertake his customary walk
And to recite in a prayerful and slow tone
A naïve sermon about sin.

Walking, always walking, he kept repeating
The divine sermon, pious and soft,
And failed to notice it was getting late,
That a calm night was coming down.

And walking, always walking, he found himself on a hilltop,
With trees and houses spread around,
Located far from the monastery
One full and stretched league.

Surprised to find himself so far out,
And weak after such a long walk,
The good monk sat down to rest
With the resignation of a saint.

The moonlight, a beautiful one, emerged.
Inside a ray of such beautiful brightness
Baby Jesus came down from heaven
And began playing with the friar's hood.

Nearby a whispering water current
Was adding its whispering to that of the pine trees,
The robins could be heard from afar,
A higher moon spread even more light.

Holding hands here came to the fountain
A pair of fiancées, happy all around:
She carried on her shoulder the water jug,
He carried... the heart pumping in his chest.

Unaware that someone might see them,
They exchanged kisses under the moonlight...
Baby Jesus, however, heard it and said:
"Oh, Friar Anthony, what was that?"

The saint, lifting the sleeve of his cassock's hood
So as to block the view of the young lovers,
Lied in a voice as sweet as honey:
"I don't know what it is. I heard nothing!..."

A crystal-clear, sonorous laughter
Vibrated in golden sounds along the road:
"Did you hear it now, friar Anthony?"
"I heard it, Lord: It's a little bird!"

"Your head is not doing well!..
A little bird singing like that?!?"
And the St. Anthony of Lisbon
Stood there silently, all embarrassed, but at last,

Blushing like the cardinals' vestments,
He found this redeeming way out:
"If Baby Jesus asks more questions,
I shall complain to his mother, Our Lady!"

Turning the child's little face towards the light
And towards that young, unmarried love,
He picked him up on his lap and added:
"Jesus, time's up!..." and they rushed back to the convent.

—Augusto Gil



Pope John Paul II visited San Antonio in 1997 and was greeted by thousands, including Mariachis.

dress to San Antonians, he would mention the need to care for the thousands of illegal immigrants who were pouring into the city. The letter was sent to the Bishop of El Paso who passed it on to the Vatican. However, to the dismay of Archbishop Flores, when the Pope came, yes, he spoke to an audience of tens of thousands of the faithful about the need to care for the poor, but made no mention of the plight of the illegal immigrants.

Now San Antonians' honoring of their patron saint and of their hometown stands in sharp contrast with other Texas cities and with the State's top political powers. **Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller** follows in the steps of Don Patricio, encouraging the works of justice and charity. He even went to Uvalde to comfort the families, victims of that city's horrible school tragedy. He also exemplifies the kind of leadership that Pope Francis is stimulating across the Catholic Church.

Finally, St. Anthony's preaching to the masses who crowded the churches to listen to his sermons often dealt with the example of Jesus and of the biblical account of his birth, that is, Christmas. No surprise, then, that in the Portuguese, Italian, and Latin American tradition, thanks to the baroque concept of spiritual mediation, Baby Jesus became an integral part of the household intimacy. Typically baroque is the accompanying poem written by the Portuguese poet Augusto Gil (1873-1929), a poem highly popular in Brazil and printed here as a special salute to the Patron of our beloved city San Antonio—named in 1691 and founded officially on May 1, 1718 -- the date the City celebrates its birthday.

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of slavery, the Franciscan friars' mission stayed alive and active, following the example of its patron saint, a champion of the poor. In fact, in terms of the preferential option for the poor and the caring for people lacking food and housing or living in the streets, including illegal immigrants, San Antonio has been following the directives of Vatican II. The 1962-1963 Council pointed to the need to cut down on the traditional clericalism that dominated the Church since the Council of Trent and began to fully insert the Church into the realities of God's people. In fact, San Antonio's **Archbishop Patrick Flores** was even more committed to follow the guidelines of Vatican II than Pope John Paul II. As a member of the Justice and Peace Committee, I was instructed to write a letter to Pope John Paul II so that, in his forthcoming 1997 visit and ad-

Spinning San Antonio Fiesta, 2011



From 2009-12, San Antonio artist, Rolando Briseño, presented an annual performance in front of the Alamo on June 13, which is *San Antonio's Feast Day* commemorating the arrival of Domingo Terán de los Rios at the Yanaguana River, later renamed the San Antonio River in

honor of the saint. Entitled *Spinning San Antonio Fiesta*, the performance involved a group procession by Briseño and participants, leading to a ceremony in which performers would spin a sculpture of Saint Anthony upside-down with the Alamo attached to the figure's feet. The revolving movement referred to the "spinning" of the official Alamo narrative, which for years had excluded the role of Tejanos from its history. In 2013, when the *Daughters of the Republic of Texas* lost jurisdiction over the narrative and a new land commissioner exhibited letters from Tejano heroes who helped win Texas' independence, Briseño felt that things were improving, so he ceased presenting the performance. His advocacy for historical corrections continues along with many others who continue to recover the "lost or hidden" history of San Antonio and Texas—continuing the resistance to cultural erasure in the heart of San Antonio.



Spinning San Antonio Fiesta 2011, a performance at the Alamo, included a procession with the statue of St. Anthony carried upside down in order to bring attention to the lost history of the Alamo and San Antonio.