

A Christian Sadhu: A Pilgrimage to Saint Anthony of Padua

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.

There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

— 1 Corinthians 12:4–6

About twenty years ago, I found myself standing at the entrance to a vast storage facility. I had packed away my entire life before setting off on a trip around the world — but I desperately needed one small, important object. I knew it was in one of the many boxes stacked before me, but I had no idea which one.

As I stood there, bewildered and slightly panicked, preparing to spend the next twenty-four hours searching through them all, my friend Rob said, “Ask Saint Anthony! He’ll help you find it.”

I looked at him doubtfully. The idea that a saint might help me find a lost object seemed rather far-fetched. But what did I have to lose? I followed his advice and silently asked Anthony for help. Within minutes, I had the sudden intuition to open a particular box — and there it was, the object I had been searching for.

I was so impressed that I began calling on Saint Anthony whenever I misplaced something. And ever since, the response has always come swiftly — and almost always correctly. Is it truly the work of the saint, or simply sharpened intuition? Perhaps both. Either way, it works.

For years I think of travelling to Padua, the city where Anthony lived. But almost two decades pass before it finally happens — in early 2025, inspired by the death of my Sicilian father in November 2024. My journey becomes a pilgrimage through Italy: to the places my father loved, and to reunite with my large Sicilian family. Padua is one of those places — and there I will at last thank Anthony for all the help he has given me.

Before I leave, my mother reminds me with a twinkle: “You should ask Anthony for a husband too! Many single Catholics go to Padua by bus just for that — to find their future spouse with the saint’s help. Some even fall in love on the bus!”

The idea amuses me. It seems strange that a celibate monk should be responsible for romantic matters. So I travel alone — and not on a Christian singles’ bus — and find a small guesthouse run by a yoga

teacher. Her home feels like an Indian temple: altars to Hindu deities everywhere, and even her pets have Sanskrit names. By divine coincidence, as I later learn, the house is only a short walk from Arcella, the *mahasamadhi* place of Saint Anthony — the site where, in 1231, he takes his last earthly breath.

The morning after my arrival, I walk eagerly toward the city centre and the *Basilica di Sant'Antonio*, the great cathedral that holds his relics. I'm not sure what to expect, only that I'm curious about this saint — his path, his passion for Jesus, his love for God.

It's a grey Saturday morning, and the streets are quiet. Then, rising before me, appear domes and minaret-like towers shimmering against the sky. The basilica calls me in.

With anticipation, I cross the vast piazza. Beneath an archway stands a large white statue of Saint Anthony, holding the Christ Child in one arm and a lily in the other. You see this image everywhere in Padua. It is said that Anthony once had a vision of the infant Jesus and shared a special bond with him ever after.

Reverently, I step into the basilica — and find myself immediately before Anthony's tomb. A broad marble staircase leads up to the ornate sarcophagus, carved from white and green stone, surrounded by black marble angels, flickering candles, and fresh flowers. A long line of pilgrims waits patiently to honour the saint and offer their prayers. I join them, moving step by step toward the sacred place. Some kneel in silence; others scribble petitions on slips of paper and drop them into boxes nearby.

At the tomb itself, pilgrims place their hands — or their foreheads — on the cool marble, praying. Some kiss it. I do the same, touching the stone and feeling an energy radiate outward, astonished that a humble friar who lived nearly a thousand years ago can still inspire and draw people from all over the world.

Who was this man from Portugal, who preached love and changed the hearts of those he met?

I sit down on a pew, pray, and meditate. What strikes me most is the energy of this church — dense yet delicate, woven from centuries of prayer, love, and devotion. Beneath the murmur of tourists lies a profound silence. My heart fills with gratitude for Anthony, who can awaken such peace.

After a while, I walk on. The basilica is full of chapels and altars. Near a statue of the Black Madonna — who, paradoxically, is painted white — a long-haired Indian man sits deep in meditation. A few metres away, a bald man in an AC/DC jacket prays with equal fervour. People of all colours, all shapes, all faiths, gather here to receive the saint's blessing.

Then I come to the Chapel of Relics. Behind glass are Anthony's dried tongue, jawbone, vocal cords, fragments of his habit, and the coffin that once held his body. He is known for his inspired preaching, so these relics carry special meaning. It's astonishing to see all this and realise: he truly existed.

In another chapel, priests offer blessings and listen to confessions. The basilica itself is overwhelming — magnificent paintings and frescoes, statues, gold, candles, flowers. Everything arranged with tender devotion.

In the adjoining museum, devotional art and votive offerings tell stories of miracles: children saved from falls, people rescued from burning houses, survivors of car crashes, lightning strikes, or assaults. Many are inscribed with the letters P.G.R. — *Per Grazia Ricevuta*, for grace received. Each one a thank-you for a miracle. And here too, as in India, I see long locks of hair offered in gratitude for healing.

Camposampiero

A few days later, I travel to Camposampiero, a small town just outside Padua. It's here that Anthony experienced his vision of Jesus.

The yellow church, the *Santuario della Visione*, is a graceful blend of Renaissance and Baroque. On its façade, a vast mosaic depicts the saint surrounded by golden light. Inside, the energy is strong yet serene — like the hum of prayer held in stone.

Above the main altar, to the right, I notice a small lofted chamber: the *Cella della Visione*. Instinctively, I feel drawn there. I climb the narrow stairs and enter the place where Anthony spent the last weeks of his short life in meditation, contemplation, and prayer. It's here, according to witnesses, that he received the grace of holding the Christ Child in his arms, kissing the divine infant as light flooded the room.

The chapel is tiny, illuminated only by a soft, golden glow. Behind a low wrought-iron gate stands a large painted image of Anthony on the original wooden planks where he once rested. To the left is a small altar with electric candles; to the right, a simple wooden bench. I sit down and

almost immediately sink into deep meditation. There is nothing here but stillness — a holiness beyond words. It feels like the sacred sites of India, where great masters have meditated for centuries.

And then it becomes clear: Anthony too was a *tapasvin*, a *sadhu*, a *bhakta* — a lover of God, immersed in divine depth, intoxicated with the wine of love, consumed by devotion. I could sit here forever, breathing in this silence, this tenderness. It feels like a communion with the spirit — the essence of Anthony — and a place where I truly meet him for the first time.

I understand once again that everything is connected, that all religions and spiritual paths are but veils over the one truth. The mystic core is the same everywhere.

Even after eight hundred years, what Anthony cultivated here can still be felt. His faith must have been immense to leave such a vibration behind. I am deeply moved. I discover Italy and Catholicism anew — this land has its own form of *bhakti yoga*, its devotion to Jesus and Mary and the countless saints who are worshipped with such passion.

Outside the church stretches a meditative park, filled with magnificent bronze sculptures depicting scenes from Anthony's life — each crafted with great care and accompanied by a fitting quote that invites contemplation.

At the end of this quiet path lies the *Chiesa della Noce* — the Walnut Church — built on the site where Anthony once sat in a walnut tree to pray, meditate, and later preach. They say he felt closest to God there.

The altar stands where the tree once grew, and behind glass one can still see a fragment of the original trunk. Here, in the resonance of the saint, I let the intensity of the afternoon settle into my heart.

Arcella

That same evening, a concert takes place in the Church of Arcella — the place where Anthony left his body. Sensing that his death is near, he asked to be taken there on an ox cart, as was the custom in his time. Even today, pilgrims walk the twenty-five kilometres from Camposampiero to Arcella in his honour. I, however, take the bus — content to let my heart, not my feet, trace the pilgrimage route — and look forward to what feels like the perfect ending to this inspired day.

The concert is held in a small, enclosed chamber behind the *Cella del Transito*, the place where Anthony, on June 13th, 1231, lifted his eyes to

heaven and whispered, *Vedo il mio Signore* — “I see my Lord” — before releasing his final breath.

Only a handful of people are gathered there, seated in candlelight. I join them, my gaze resting on the *altar of death*, where a life-sized statue of Anthony lies adorned with flowers. As I wait for the music to begin, my phone vibrates with an email from my editor, Nina — commissioning this very article. The synchronicity makes me smile. All day, I have been thinking that I want to write about these blessings, these gifts of Anthony. And now, here it is: the sign, arriving at the place where he transcends the world.

The concert begins. The atmosphere is intimate, sacred. A small ensemble — two sopranos, a violin, and an organ — plays and sings baroque sacred music in Latin, interwoven with the soft prayers of a priest. The stillness vibrates with Anthony’s presence: humble, radiant, utterly alive.

Only one day remains in Padua before I continue on to Assisi. The next morning, I return to the basilica one last time, to say goodbye. Later, I sit again in the Arcella church to meditate. The same deep, silent energy that I feel in Camposampiero is here too — dense and luminous. Bliss dances in my heart. Twenty minutes pass like seconds.

How wonderful that such holy places exist — whether churches, mosques, temples, or the open sanctuaries of nature. They have different names and forms, yet the same love pulses through them all.

The Life of Saint Anthony of Padua

Saint Anthony of Padua (1195–1231) was a Franciscan monk born in Portugal, who later lived in Morocco before settling in Padua, Italy. He was known for his passionate sermons — sermons so inspired, legend says, that even the fish rose from the sea to listen — and for his profound knowledge of the Scriptures, as well as his compassion for the poor and the sick. Many miracles are attributed to him.

For most Catholics, however, Saint Anthony is best known as the patron saint of lost things — and of finding what has been misplaced, whether objects or people. This devotion stems from a story in which a young novice once stole a valuable psalter belonging to Anthony. Deeply grieved, Anthony prayed fervently for its return. The novice, overcome with remorse, soon brought the book back to him.

Since then, countless believers have turned to Saint Anthony for help in finding what they have lost — not only possessions, but also hope, faith, or direction. As a gesture of gratitude for his aid, devotees offer what is called *the Bread of Saint Anthony* — gifts of food, time, or money for those in need. In this way, the saint's compassion continues to work in the world, reminding us that grace received is grace to be shared.