

Approaches to philosophical thought and reflections on divine nature in Anthony of Padua.

Acercamientos al pensamiento filosófico y reflexiones de la naturaleza divina en Antonio de Padua.

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Abstract.

This article consists of a rational and hermeneutic analysis of the sermons, life, and teachings attributed to Anthony of Padua in order to identify and recover the essential features of his thinking as a scholastic in philosophical matters and as an experiential theologian in religious matters. It expands on reflections on his education, the scholastic intellectual context of his time, his relationship with the thinking of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, and studies in detail his conception of divine nature, knowledge and natural symbolism.

Keywords: Augustine of Hippo, Anthony of Padua, scholasticism, natural symbolism, medieval theology.

Resumen:

El presente artículo consiste en un análisis de énfasis racional y hermenéutico de los sermones, vida y enseñanzas atribuidas a la autoría de Antonio de Padua para identificar y rescatar los rasgos esenciales de su pensamiento como escolástico en materia filosófica y como teólogo vivencial en materia religiosa. Se expande la reflexión sobre su formación, el contexto intelectual escolástico de su tiempo, su relación con el pensamiento de Agustín de Hipona y Tomás de Aquino, y se estudia detalladamente su concepción de la naturaleza divina, del conocimiento y del simbolismo natural.

Palabras clave: Agustín de Hipona, Antonio de Padua, escolástica, simbolismo natural, teología medieval.

Introduction

The figure of Anthony of Padua is part of the medieval scholastic tradition, being one of the most notable exponents of early Franciscan thought. His theological output, although not systematised in major treatises, finds in his sermons a conceptual richness worthy of study. Anthony was an exceptional preacher, but also a rigorous thinker whose work reflects the intertwining of spirituality, natural symbolism, and systematic theology.

Although the figure of Anthony of Padua has been the subject of numerous hagiographic and devotional studies, rigorous analysis of his philosophical-theological thought, especially in the Spanish-speaking context, still presents areas for exploration. Many previous studies have tended to focus on his biography or on isolated aspects of his preaching. This article seeks to contribute to this field by offering a hermeneutical analysis of his sermons contained in his Selected Writings, the most accessible version, which highlights the profound integration of philosophical, biblical, and theological knowledge in his pastoral pedagogy.

The main objective of this research is to offer an approach to the philosophical and theological thought of Anthony of Padua based on the study of his sermons. Specifically, it proposes to examine the interrelationship between spirituality, natural symbolism, and systematic theology, emphasising his use of scholastic tools, his pedagogical method, and the way in which he integrates philosophical, biblical, and theological knowledge into a unifying vision of knowledge. In doing so, it seeks to highlight his intellectual contribution and originality within the context of early Franciscan scholasticism.

The article starts from the following research question: How does Anthony of Padua integrate scholastic tools, patristic influences, and natural symbolism in his sermons to construct a theological pedagogy that serves as a bridge between spiritual contemplation and intellectual rigour? The thesis is that Anthony of Padua is not only a devotional preacher, but also an original thinker who uses a hermeneutical and symbolic method, based on the Augustinian tradition but open to scholastic rigour, to articulate a unifying vision of knowledge where nature and Scripture are mutually interpreted as paths to God.

Anthony of Padua is historically situated in a period of intellectual effervescence. The first half of the 13th century was marked by the consolidation of universities (such as Paris, Bologna, and Oxford), the massive reception of Aristotelian texts through Arabic and Latin translations, and the revitalisation of theology as a systematic discipline. In this environment, scholasticism was consolidated, seeking a methodical articulation between faith (*fides*) and reason (*ratio*), and the elaboration of doctrinal syntheses (*Summae*) that integrated Greco-Latin philosophy with Christian revelation. Anthony participated fully in this spirit, although his contribution was expressed differently from that of other great contemporary doctors such as Thomas Aquinas. This was also the time when thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria were rediscovered, promoting the idea of philosophy as a "preparation for the Gospel" (*praeparatio evangelica*), a notion that Anthony would embody in his effort to convey eternal truths with clarity and simplicity.

Unlike Aquinas, whose magnum opus, the *Summa Theologiae*, is a systematic treatise that methodically responds to objections through scholastic syllogisms, Anthony opted for a more pastoral, exegetical and symbolic style. However, his thought structure also follows the scholastic method: he presents theses (often biblical), considers objections (implicit in the exegesis), offers solutions (through allegorical and moral interpretation) and concludes with pastoral applications. As Thomas Aquinas argues: "Sacred theology is based on divine authority and uses reason not to prove, but to make explicit what faith contains" (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1, a. 8). Anthony, although less systematic, is fully in line with this tradition of "faith seeking understanding".

This article is organised into several sections. First, the methodological framework is addressed. Second, Anthony's formative and intellectual context is analysed, marking his key transition from Augustinianism to Franciscanism. Third, the foundations of his thought are examined in dialogue with his patristic and scholastic influences. Fourth, it delves into his pedagogical method, centred on symbolism and logical structure. Fifth, it explores his theology of creation. Finally, it offers a contemporary assessment of his legacy.

Methodological framework

A hermeneutical and analytical approach will be used to study Anthony's thought. Given its hermeneutical nature, the research focuses on the textual analysis of the main source work.

The edition of the sermons

As required by a hermeneutical approach, it is essential to specify the edition used. For this work, the edition "Escritos Selectos" by Antonio de Padua (2007), published by Editorial Apostolado Mariano (Seville), in the translation by Fray Contardo Miglioranza, O.F.M.C., was used. This edition is a selection of sermons translated into Spanish, rather than a bilingual edition, which places the hermeneutic analysis in the reception and interpretation of his thought in the Spanish language. All textual quotations from Antonio de Padua in this article refer to this edition.

Hermeneutical and comparative approach

A hermeneutical perspective is used to approach the philosophical and theological thought of Anthony of Padua, recognising that any understanding of historical and doctrinal texts involves a dialogue between the interpreter and tradition. Anthony's thought is not an abstract philosophical system, but a pastoral theology embodied in preaching. Therefore, a merely positivist analysis of his doctrines would be insufficient. As Hans-Georg Gadamer proposes, a 'game of questions and answers' (Gadamer, 2004, p. 301) is required, in which the modern interpreter engages in dialogue with the tradition that the text represents.

The analysis starts from the awareness that Antonian thought is immersed in a specific cultural and religious context—13th-century Franciscan scholasticism—which shapes both the author's and the researcher's horizon of expectations. Gadamer emphasises that "we cannot access the past without our own historical horizon influencing our understanding, and only through the fusion of horizons is a true dialogue with tradition possible" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 303). For this reason, the methodology applied favours contextualised interpretation.

This hermeneutic approach is complemented by a comparative analysis. Anthony of Padua is placed in dialogue with other key thinkers of the Christian tradition. Augustine of Hippo was chosen as the pillar of the patristic tradition and of his initial training; Thomas Aquinas as the main exponent of contemporary scholasticism (representing a distinct Aristotelian synthesis); and Boethius and Clement of Alexandria as influences that denote his erudition and the breadth of his scholastic

sources, which went beyond Aristotle and included a strong Neoplatonic and Greek patristic vein. This comparative method allows us to situate Anthony within the scholastic current, while highlighting his uniqueness as a preacher and experiential theologian.

Context and Intellectual Formation of Anthony of Padua

Augustinian training and entry into Franciscanism

Born in Lisbon in 1195, Anthony was initially trained as a canon regular of St. Augustine at the monastery in Coimbra. This stage was crucial. There, he not only came into contact with the liberal arts (trivium and quadrivium), but also received a solid theological and patristic education based on reading the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, and on *lectio divina*. This monastic environment, centred on liturgy and study, provided him with a deep knowledge of Scripture and a spirituality of interiority, more contemplative and detached from the world.

However, his subsequent entry into the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans) represents a decisive turning point. He left the stability and scholarship of the monastery for the evangelical radicalism, poverty, and itinerant preaching of the new mendicant order. This move was not just a change of habit, but an intellectual and pastoral reorientation: he moved from a contemplative theology to an "outgoing" theology, aimed at the people in the new squares and cities of Europe. His challenge was, therefore, how to integrate his profound Augustinian scholarship with the evangelical simplicity and pastoral urgencies of Franciscanism, which required preachers capable of combating heresies with solid arguments, but without losing their closeness to the people.

The context of early scholasticism

Anthony's transfer to Italy and his subsequent assignment to teach the friars (with St Francis' famous letter asking him not to "extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion") placed him at the heart of early scholasticism. The Franciscan school, in which figures such as Alexander of Hales and (later) St. Bonaventure stood out, provided Anthony with a context of intense theological activity. This current, unlike the Dominican one that would more fully embrace Aristotle, sought to integrate Augustinian thought (with its emphasis on illumination, love, and will) with new logical and metaphysical developments. Anthony became the order's first 'Lector' (teacher) of theology, embodying the model of the new friar: learned but humble, logical but mystical. Although predating Bonaventure, Anthony

anticipated many of his themes: the centrality of Christ, symbol as mediation, wisdom as a spiritual gift, and the world as an 'itinerary of the mind towards God'.

Foundations of Antonian Thought: Influences and Dialogues

The Legacy of St Augustine

The most profound and structural influence on Anthony came from the Augustinian tradition. His early education as a canon regular imbued his vision with grace, the interiority of the soul (*memoria Dei*), and the centrality of God as truth and supreme good. Augustine of Hippo maintains that "you have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (*Confessions*, I, 1), an idea that Anthony not only quotes but also translates pastorally by emphasising the need for interior conversion.

Anthony takes from Augustine the emphasis on interiority, natural symbolism (the world as a sign) and the need for grace for true understanding (the doctrine of illumination). Following the line of Augustine of Hippo (2003), who affirmed that self-knowledge is the beginning of the path to God, this idea is reflected in Anthony's insistence on conversion of the heart. In his sermons, Anthony adopts a mystical line that privileges introspection. This approach does not rule out the use of reason, but subordinates it to faith and love, complementing it with spiritual experience.

Both Augustine and Anthony understand theology as *sapientia* (wisdom that shapes and transforms) and not as mere *scientia* (scholarship). The Augustinian doctrine of the interior magister—the interior teacher—appears in Anthony (2007) as an illumination of understanding by the Holy Spirit, who, according to his preaching, speaks to the soul in the silence of prayer. Augustine proposes that the soul seeks God in a double movement of memory and desire; Anthony (2007) takes up this structure and applies it to the pastoral method, orienting each preaching towards a conversion of the heart. Scholasticism, far from being an empty technique, is in both a tool for the purification of the intellect.

Dialogue with tradition: Aquinas, Boethius, and Clement

Although his roots are Augustinian, Anthony is no stranger to the method of his time. His thinking reflects the logical structure of Aristotelian argumentation, as can be seen in the systematic

organisation of his sermons: exposition of the text (*expositio*), division into parts (*divisio*), explanation (*explicatio*) and moral application (*applicatio*).

On the other hand, although a contemporary of Thomas Aquinas, Anthony also shares with him the effort to integrate reason and faith. Both recognise the value of philosophy, but subject its principles to the light of revelation. As Thomas Aquinas (2011) points out in his *Summa Theologiae*, grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it. This idea is also present in the writings of Anthony, who considers nature to be a mirror of the divine. However, their methods differ: while Thomas uses Aristotle to construct a monumental metaphysical system in the *Summa*, Anthony uses him in a more practical and exegetical way. Anthony employs a symbolic form, but with the same underlying logical structure. Both share the idea that theological knowledge is ordered towards good and salvation, but while Thomas discusses each question on the basis of objections and solutions (*quaestio*), Anthony adopts this form more intuitively in his preaching.

Boecius' influence is also noticeable, especially in his conception of knowledge and divine providence. Boecius, in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, presents a vision of an orderly and hierarchical universe. This notion is taken up by Anthony, who sees in the created world an image of spiritual order. Boethius (1999) influences Anthony, who recognises the difference between theoretical knowledge and spiritual knowledge. In his sermons, Anthony (2007) distinguishes between the wise of the world—who are capable of speaking about God without knowing him—and the humble, to whom he considers God to reveal himself through love. This Boethiusian distinction between levels of knowledge (*opinio*, *fides*, *scientia*, *sapientia*) is reflected in Anthony as a pedagogical itinerary towards Christian wisdom.

Likewise, Clement of Alexandria left a significant mark. For Clement, true Christian gnosis unites faith with reason. Anthony reflects this synthesis by stating that "science without charity puffs up, but science with humility edifies" (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 29), emphasising that true knowledge is born of love for God and neighbour. Clement (1996) maintained that "the true Gnostic is one who knows through love and loves through knowledge," a thesis that Anthony fully integrates into his method.

The use of patristic and biblical authority

Antonio does not construct his thought from an originalist perspective, but from tradition. He frequently draws on the authority of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great. His theology is an act of memory and actualisation: to quote is not to repeat, but to revive revealed truth in the present.

Furthermore, the Bible occupies a central place as a source and interpretative horizon. Anthony is a master of medieval exegesis. Scripture is not imposed literally, but is transformed through theological and symbolic analysis into a channel for the formation of the soul. Anthony affirms: "Sacred Scripture is like a mirror in which the soul contemplates its spiritual face" (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 33). This symbolist exegesis, which he masters and applies in each sermon, is in line with the medieval tradition of the four senses of Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical).

The Antonian Method: Symbolism and Scholastic Pedagogy

Natural Philosophy and the Language of Symbolism

Natural philosophy in Anthony of Padua is deeply intertwined with his theological view of the world. Through his sermons, a symbolic understanding of the universe is revealed, in which every creature, every phenomenon and every element of nature reflects an aspect of the divine. For Anthony, creation is not simply a collection of physical objects, but a language through which God speaks to the human soul.

In his commentary on creation, Anthony states: "God wrote three books: that of nature, that of Holy Scripture, and that of the human soul" (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 41). This statement resonates with Augustine's conception, who argued that "the world is like a book written by the finger of God" (De Genesi ad litteram).

One of the most characteristic elements of Anthony's thought is his use of natural analogies to illustrate spiritual truths. In a sermon on the lily of the field, Anthony writes: "Just as the lily opens itself to the light and closes itself in darkness, so the righteous soul turns towards God in the clarity of grace, and withers in the shadow of sin" (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 42). This allegorical style is a form of exegesis of the world. Anthony not only preaches on Scripture, but "reads" creation as if it were a sacred text. In his preaching, he uses powerful images, such as the idea that the soul without grace is like a fish out of water that "drowns in the mud of sin" (Antonio de Padua, 2007, paraphrasing

ideas from his sermons), or that the Eucharistic bread is "food for faith, medicine for the soul and seed of resurrection" (Antonio de Padua, 2007), showing a triple scholastic meaning: literal, mystical and doctrinal.

The scholastic structure in preaching

Anthony of Padua's thinking is structured through a rigorous use of the scholastic method, in which there is a clear division between proposition, objection, solution and pastoral application. This logic is evident both in his argumentative structure and in his pedagogical treatment of theology. His preaching resolves the Franciscan tension between wisdom and simplicity: he uses the most rigorous logic not for abstract speculation, but to organise his preaching in a way that is clear and memorable for his popular audience.

In his sermons, the typical outline includes an initial biblical quotation (thema), followed by a literal explanation, a moral interpretation, and a spiritual or anagogical interpretation (divisio textus). This arrangement recalls the method of Clement of Alexandria, who argued that true Christian gnosis is not contrary to reason, but rather its perfection in faith. Anthony integrates this principle by synthesising philosophical and spiritual concepts, making the symbol a didactic tool.

While Thomas organises theological knowledge into a systematic rational synthesis, Anthony employs an exegetical and symbolic form, but with the same logical structure. The Thomistic affirmation that 'grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it' (ST I, q.1, a.8) is echoed in Anthony's preaching, where he maintains that 'created nature is pregnant with divine signs that cry out for redemption' (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 36).

Analysis of sermons: theology and pastoral care

Anthony's method is clearly evident in his sermons. One of the most emblematic is the one delivered for the feast of Pentecost, which shows a clear scholastic structure. In it, Anthony uses the metaphor of fire to describe the action of the Holy Spirit in the human soul: "Just as fire consumes, illuminates and warms, so the Holy Spirit burns away sin, illuminates the understanding and warms the heart with divine love" (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 35).

This sermon illustrates Anthony's ability to unite image, doctrine and morality in a single pedagogical movement. Following the model of the *divisio textus*, Anthony divides the Gospel

passage into three parts, which he interprets respectively in a literal, moral and mystical way. It is not a simple homily; it is a structured theology lesson, delivered with pastoral fervour.

In another sermon, corresponding to the second Sunday after Easter, Anthony focuses on the Good Shepherd, using the figure of the shepherd to speak of the role of the priest: "He who preaches with words and with his life is the true shepherd who leads the sheep to the pasture of eternity" (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 35). This passage highlights his pastoral vision integrated with theology: doctrine (word) is inseparable from ethics (life).

Theology of Creation

The Doctrine of Participation

Anthony adopts the Neoplatonic principle of participation to explain the relationship between God and the world. According to this principle, creatures do not have existence in themselves, but participate in the divine being as in a source. This vision, also shared by Boethius and taken up by Thomas Aquinas, holds that the goodness of created things is a reflection of divine goodness.

In this sense, Anthony affirms that 'everything good in the creature is a ray of eternal light' (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 43). The creature is a sign (*signum*), a vestige (*vestigium*) and a figure (*figura*). It is not worshipped, but it is contemplated as a natural sacrament of the Creator. This vision allows Anthony to offer a theology of nature that is both symbolic and deeply orthodox. The world is not a mere stage, but an active participant in revelation.

Divine nature and the created world

While Thomas Aquinas systematised the relationship between God and the world mainly through his Aristotelian doctrine of causes (exemplary, efficient, formal and final causes), Anthony remains in the Augustinian tradition. Although he does not reject causality, his emphasis is on creation as exemplum or signum. Anthony, although without formulating them in technical terms, uses these notions in his images. For example, when he speaks of the tree of faith, he describes its roots (humility), trunk (doctrine), branches (virtues) and fruits (works), which reflects a finalist and structured vision of being, but always oriented towards moral pedagogy.

Augustine, for his part, had declared that "all things are good insofar as they exist" (Confessions, VII), which Anthony confirms in his statement that "the creature should not be

despised, but understood as a path to its Creator" (Anthony of Padua, 2007, p. 44). This harmonious relationship between natural philosophy and theology characterises scholastic thought, and Anthony embodies it from an eminently pastoral and mystical perspective. His contemplation of the world is oriented towards conversion, worship and knowledge.

Conclusions and current assessment of Anthony's thought

The thought of Anthony of Padua represents an original synthesis between the rigour of scholasticism, the depth of the patristic tradition and the spiritual sensitivity of Franciscan preaching. Although his work was not structured as a systematic treatise in the style of Thomas Aquinas, nor as an intellectual autobiography like that of Augustine, Anthony's sermons have a philosophical-theological value that remains relevant today.

First, his method reflects an intelligence that articulates symbol with argument, allegory with doctrine, and contemplation with logic. His rich imagery does not obscure his conceptual precision; on the contrary, it enhances his pedagogical effectiveness. His teaching style combines elements of Clement of Alexandria's expository method with the theological order of Thomistic scholasticism and the mystical interiority of Augustine. He demonstrates that intellectual rigour is not the enemy of pastoral piety, but its foundation.

Furthermore, Anthony shows how the philosophy of nature can become a spiritual path. For him, every creature is a sign, a reflection of the Creator, and the world is an open book to the intelligence enlightened by faith. This vision is not merely contemplative, but deeply practical and moral: the observation of nature should lead man to repentance, to the love of God and to the service of others.

His ability to incorporate Aristotelian elements, such as logical order and causality, without losing symbolic depth and pastoral orientation, makes him a unique figure in early scholasticism. Like Boethius, he knew how to mediate between different intellectual worlds; like him, he knew how to elevate reason to wisdom; and like Thomas, he knew how to harmonise theology with the created world, albeit in a different way.

Today, Anthony's thought can serve as inspiration for a theology that is not limited to abstraction but speaks to the heart of contemporary man. In a time of ecological crisis, his insistence on reading the "book of nature" resonates with profound relevance, inviting an eco-spirituality that

sees in creation a reflection of the Creator. His work continues to be relevant as a model of integration between reason, faith and spiritual experience. Anthony of Padua is not only a preacher of the past, but also a contemporary interlocutor for those seeking a connection with a religious philosophy, an incarnate theology and an intellectual spirituality that embraces both creation and the Creator.

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