

# Altarpiece St Anthony the Great

This altarpiece presents three saints who left a comfortable life for poverty, destitution and solitude. Respectively in the 3rd, 7th and 12th centuries.

Three saints who healed terrifying epidemic diseases, three places of pilgrimage for mountain people since the early Middle Ages.

## St Anthony the Great,

(or without Anthony of the desert, or Saint Anthony the hermit, or Saint Anthony of Egypt) born in the year 251 and died at 105, after a life spent going deeper and deeper into the desert, is the founder, almost in spite of himself, of Christian monasticism. A solitary (anchorite), he has been the source of monastic communities for 1700 years.

Saint Anthony is usually depicted with his pig, the animal that would have accompanied him during his life in the desert. In this altarpiece, he is on a small cloud, dressed as a hospitable monk.

At the very top of the altarpiece is the very specific cross of St Anthony the Great : the tau, which is shaped like the Greek letter "T" (the first letter of Theos, God), a cross with a complex symbolism, which ended up merging with the heraldic emblem of the crutch for the infirm and **lepers** that the monastic order of the Antonines looked after.

As St Anthony also resisted the fire of diabolical temptations, **he was invoked against gangrenous ergotism (St Anthony's fire)**, a disease caused by a rye fungus that terrorised people throughout the Middle Ages.

In Savoy, St Anthony is invoked for mercy and **protection of beasts of burden**: mules and horses, which were blessed on his feast day, 17 January.

*The relics of St Anthony the Great have been kept since 1070 in the mother abbey of the Antonine order in Isère, only 200 km south of here!*

## St Claude,

was born 4 centuries later. His life is less documented than that of St Anthony the Great. St Claude leaves the city, administers an abbey in the forests of the Jura for half a century and assumes the episcopal dignity for 7 years (he wears a bishop's crozier and mitre)

St Claude is "forgotten" for 500 years, then his incredibly well preserved remains are discovered. The abbey becomes a very important place of pilgrimage and the setting for resounding miracles: St Claude is a healing saint. He is **invoked against "St Claude's disease" (meningitis), depression and headaches**. He is also the patron saint of woodworkers. He is celebrated on 6 June. His relics are in the abbey of St Claude, 250 km north of here!

## St. Francis of Assisi

The tau cross is also a symbol of the Franciscans, an order of Friars Minor founded by St Francis of Assisi

Before St. John Paul II made him the patron saint of ecology in 1979, St. Francis, born in 1182 (750 km from here to the south-east), was a lover of divine creation, imbued with mercy, and a friend of animals (he is depicted preaching to the birds), the brother of all living beings. The "husband of Lady Poverty" Francis worked in a **leper colony**, became a beggar, a friend of a wandering wolf, a missionary as far as Egypt, and dedicated himself to the Christian prisoners of the Mohammedan pirates who were martyring all around the Mediterranean. He is also said to be the originator of the beautiful custom of Christmas cots.

He can be recognised here by the habit of his order (bonnet and rope with three knots) and the stigmata (thorn mark on the forehead and pierced hands: expressions of love for the crucified) with which he was blessed on 17 September 1224. He is celebrated on October 4th.

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This altarpiece replaced a chapel dedicated to St Loup.

Wink : these three saints are closely related!

It was customary for the artist-sculptor, who stayed with a family in the village, to make faces based on those of his hosts as a thank you! This is why we have "families of saints" built like mountain people...