

St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, Doctor of the Church

(1033-1109)

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Saint Anselm was a man of singular charm and spiritual genius. Considered "the father of scholasticism", Anselm was an independent thinker and the greatest theologian of his age. In his time, he surpassed all Christian philosophers since Augustine for his metaphysical proofs on the nature and existence of God, and for his writings on the art of reasoning, the contemplation of God's attributes, and the meaning of truth and free will. In addition to his intellectual gifts, Anselm was a sincere man who extended his personal good will to all people regardless of status. This combination of originality and compassion marks Anselm as an individual of character, a holy man of faith, and a great churchman. So revered is his legacy that his feast day is commemorated by the Roman Calendar, the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in the USA, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Last but not least, the poet Dante placed him among the spirits of light and power and in the sphere of the sun.

Born in a small village town of Aosta, close to the Italian Alps, Anselm left home at an early age to become a monk. His call led him to France and the abbey of Notre Dame of Bec in Normandy, where he became pupil, disciple, and close friend of the brilliant scholar, Lanfranc. Anselm became a monk at 27, was chosen as prior three years later, and was elected abbot of Bec in 1078, at the age of 45. Throughout the years, up to and including Lanfranc's subsequent appointment as archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm continued to visit his beloved mentor. Following Lanfranc's death, Anselm was appointed his successor as primate of Britain by King William Rufus of England.

During his lifetime, Saint Anselm was embroiled in many conflicts and power struggles between church and state. In 1097, he and King William had several differences over matters of investiture and papal jurisdiction which resulted in Anselm's exile until 1100. He returned briefly under the new king, Henry I, but was sent away again, apparently for the same issues. Finally, in 1106, Anselm was allowed to return to England, where he remained until his death three years later.

The 11th century was a fascinating era to be a monk, an abbot, and a theologian. Primarily, it was a time when geographical boundaries were not as rigidly defined as we know them now. Unless one was a Muslim or a Jew, Christianity was the prime context in which most Europeans lived out their daily experience. Political intrigues notwithstanding, Christendom transcended most barriers of language, ethnicity, and even regional identity. In the spiritual realm, however, the "Great Schism" between the eastern and western branches of the church occurred in 1054. As a result of this split and the Gregorian Reform which sought to strengthen the independence of the church and the moral and spiritual dedication of the clergy, the power of the Roman papacy was greatly enhanced. The century ended with the First Crusade and the founding of the reformed order of Benedictines known as Cistercians.

Monasteries in Anselm's day were guardians of culture and learning, havens of hospitality, and houses of prayer. The greatest abbeys published books, nurtured creative expression, and fostered the pursuit of knowledge. Although theological studies were always grounded in Scripture and

church teachings, new ways of talking about faith and of experiencing God were appearing. Reason and logic became tools that Anselm developed and then used in his own innovative way, both to reflect on and express the depth and mystery of his encounter with the Divine. True to his monastic ideal, Anselm placed his mind in the service of his heart, a heart fixed on the impenetrable mystery of God's goodness, power, and everlasting love.

By the time he became abbot, Anselm had written many of his most important scholarly writings. He penned his first book *De Grammatico* in the attempt to teach his students how to think and write clearly and purposefully, so as to identify illusion and discover meaning in what is real. In later efforts, such as the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, he turned away from traditional analysis of scriptural texts and moved in a new direction, applying the gift of logical reasoning to illuminate his faith. Later, while in exile, he wrote his immensely influential work on the Incarnation, *Cur Deus Homo?* In all his writings, this devout and brilliant monk was motivated by his desire to apply logic to its ultimate end, and to reach beyond words and appearances in order to probe the ineffable heartbeat of God. For Anselm, it was a rationalist's journey into the sphere of unspoken love.

In the *Monologion*, Anselm demonstrated the existence of God by a series of arguments on the goodness of tangible reality. He outlined how the goodness of things can be traced to their source through an inner vision to reach the One Consummate Goodness which exists by virtue of itself and which permeates all creation. In Chapter 1 he wrote:

Since all desire to enjoy only those things which they suppose to be good,
it is natural that they should at some time turn the eye of the mind
to an investigation of that being, by which these things are good
Who can doubt that being, through which all good things are good,
must itself be a great good?
This is to say that this 'great good' is good through itself,
whereas all else that is good is good through this "great good."

Anselm the theologian distinguished between two styles of faith. One, pure and simple faith, which is a gift of grace, reached by casting off doubt, has no need for reason, and in time brings one joy, serenity, and a deep understanding of God. This is faith born of experience. The other is the work of a believing mind reflecting back on itself, which thereby becomes simultaneously a process of worship as well as an experience of enlightenment. This is faith understood through reason. As William Shannon explains in *Anselm: The Joy of Faith*, while both levels inspire harmony with the divine, to state the truth clearly accomplishes something wonderful for the believer: "Faith begets joy because it is the surest way to reach God.⁸⁵ Anselm would tell us that reason seeking to deepen faith's understanding can bring an added measure of joy."

In the *Proslogion*, considered by scholars to be Anselm's greatest work, the saint outlined his premise that God is "that than which no greater can be thought". However, rather than consider this accomplishment the utmost conclusion, Anselm proceeded to show how this is the very least one can say about the divine nature. In Chapter 2, he asks:

Therefore Lord, you who give me an understanding of faith,
give me, insofar as you deem it good for me,
that I may understand that you do exist as we believe you to exist,
and that you are what we believe you to be.
And indeed we believe that you are
that than which no greater can be thought.
And in Chapter 14, he continues:

O my soul, have you found what you were seeking?
It was God for whom you were seeking:
God whom you found to be highest of all,
that than which no better can be thought;
that which is life itself, light, wisdom, goodness,
eternal blessedness and blessed eternity,
that which exists everywhere and always. ...
How great is that light from which shines every truth
that enlightens the rational mind!
How great the truth in which is everything that is true!
And outside of which is nothingness and falsehood!
How immense the truth that by a single glance sees all
creation
and by which and through which and how all was made
from nothing.
What great purity, simplicity, certitude, and splendor are there!
Surely it is more than a creature can understand."
Surely, this paradox which Anselm so exquisitely described is one to which we all can relate. God
is Mystery. That takes one's breath away.

Saint Anselm illumined a path for all who seek to know God through the finite, human experience
of unknowing, for one way or another, it seems we all find ourselves lacking for even the simplest
or most certain of words with which to praise and honor the Divine. The art of describing the
unexpressible has always been fertile ground for mystics, artists, poets, and madmen. In this
realm, Anselm was truly a man for all seasons.

Sources:

McBrien, Richard P. *Lives of the Saints*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001.

Shannon, William. *Anselm: the Joy of Faith*. New York: Crossroad, 1999.