
Anselm: "I Believe in Order to Understand"

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral***

I write this article on April 21, the day on which The Episcopal Church remembers Saint Anselm of Canterbury. I love Anselm! I salute Anselm of Canterbury today! Here's to St. Anselm and "faith seeking understanding," which is the phrase he used to describe his pursuit of faithful wisdom. In Latin, it is "Fides Quarens Intellectum."

Like many an archbishop in the 11th Century, Anselm of Canterbury did not always enjoy an easy relationship with whomever was the King of England. Those were the relationships (and lack thereof!) which came to define the Anglican tradition of Christianity. We are in the state, but not of the state! Anselm was exiled first by King William II, in 1097, as they disputed the king's right to be involved in church matters (a recurring event in the Church in England!). Exiled for three years! Then, after William died, Anselm was exiled again, by King Henry I, from 1103-1106, for the same sorts of reasons.

But it is Anselm's creative scholarship that I admire (except for his atonement theory, substitutionary atonement, which I completely deny). Anselm sought wisdom! Anselm tried to reconcile faith and reason in the Christian life. He used the phrase "Fides Quarens Intellectum" to describe that theological work: "Faith Seeking Understanding." The intellect was important to him, but it was important because faith inspired it.

He is known for composing a distinctive and fascinating, if curious, argument for the existence of God, an argument that depends upon thought and intellect alone. By defining God as "that than which nothing greater can be thought," Anselm reasons that God must exist. It is called "the ontological argument" for the existence of God. Here is, generally, how it goes:

First: The definition of God, in the mind, is: "that than which nothing greater can be conceived". (That makes sense to me! God is greater than anything we can think of!)

Second: A being that exists both in the mind and in reality is greater than one that exists only in the mind.

Third: If the greatest conceivable being existed only in the mind, one could conceive of a greater being (one that exists in reality), resulting in a contradiction.

Fourth: Therefore, the greatest conceivable being (God) must exist in reality.

The argument has logical fallacies, but I don't care. I love it! Its genius, for me, actually lies in its definition of God. God is greater than anything we can think of. Whatever we can imagine, God is greater. The argument does not exactly *prove* the existence of God, but the argument does *describe* the existence of God!

Anyway, Anselm also gave us an ongoing principle for how faith and reason go together. He said, "I am not attempting, O Lord, to penetrate your loftiness, for I cannot begin to match my understanding with it, but I desire in some measure to understand your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand." Faith seeking understanding.

Finally, Saint Anselm was a man of prayer. He was not merely obsessed with the role of reason in faith. Thus, note his prayer, "A Song of Anselm," which is quite striking in its use of feminine imagery for Jesus, even back then!

A SONG OF ANSELM

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you:

you are gentle with us as a mother with her children;
Often you weep over our sins and our pride:
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds:
in sickness you nurse us,
and with pure milk you feed us.
Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life:
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness:
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.
Your warmth gives life to the dead:
your touch makes sinners righteous.
Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us:
in your love and tenderness remake us.
In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness:
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

Thank you, Saint Anselm!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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