

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 43

St. Anselm of Canterbury

How do we know God exists? Why did God become man? Why did Christ die on the cross, rather than God just decide to forgive man's sins another way? What is it that makes sin so bad?

These are questions that many of us ask at some point in our lives. St. Anselm of Canterbury also approached these same questions.¹ Anselm was born in Aosta (very north western Italy) around 1033-4 and died (probably in Canterbury, England) on April 21, 1109. Anselm's mother, Ermenberga, taught Anselm a love and respect for God at an early age. While young, Anselm had a dream one night that he ascended into heaven before the presence of God. While there, God had bread brought for young Anselm and then discussed in a kind and forthright manner Anselm's life.² Anselm's mother died while Anselm was still young, and Anselm went into France to study. At age 15, Anselm wanted to enter a monastery, but he was refused entrance because the abbot feared angering

¹ Anselm gets the whole name "St. Anselm of Canterbury" to distinguish him from other "Anselms" in Church History. There was also St. Anselm of Lucca (1036-1086), St. Anselm of Nonantola (d. 803), along with several other Anselms who do not carry the title "Saint."

There is a difference in the Catholic usage of the term "Saint" and the Protestant usage. Catholic usage refers to those individuals who, through an extraordinary life of piety and virtue have been recognized by the Church ("canonized") as ascending to heaven (rather than spending time in Purgatory, and living in a close relationship before and with God. For Catholics, these saints are not to be worshipped in the sense that God alone is worshipped, but they are honored in a special way and sought as intercessors before God. Catholics also celebrate "All Saints Feast Day" on November 1 for the seemingly countless non-canonized saints that people know and love.

Protestants use the term "saint" in its Biblical sense of those set apart for God, meaning all of the saved people. Passages like Philippians 1:1 where Paul writes "to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with [or "including" – New American Standard] the overseers and deacons:" indicates the usage of the term "saints" as a reference to all Christians (see also, Acts 9:13 referencing all the harm Saul/Paul had done "to your saints in Jerusalem;" Acts 9:32 "As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda;" Rom. 1:7 "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints;" Rom. 8:27 "the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will;" *etc.*) Some Protestants still recognize that certain people seem to exhibit extraordinary holiness, and might use the word "saint" to describe the person. But, that is not the usage in the formal Catholic sense. Protestant historians will often use the title as given by the Catholic church to certain historical figures both out of recognition of the title and as consistent with the Protestant approach which recognizes all Christians as saints.

² Anselm's biographer, Eadmer, records this and the other accounts of Anselm's life in *The Life of St. Anselm*.

Anselm's father, Gundulf. By all accounts, Gundulf was a harsh man with a violent temper.

When Anselm was 27, his father's temperament became so unbearable that Anselm left home, crossed the Alps, wandered about the countryside for a bit, and finally came to the newly formed Benedictine monastery at Bec (in Normandy, France).³

After living at the abbey for 3 years, Anselm was appointed Prior. Then in 1078, Anselm was elected abbot of the monastery. Under Anselm's guiding hand, the monastery at Bec became, in some ways, the closest thing to a university that would be found in Europe for some time to come. Anselm was part of the process that propelled Bec into a scholastic seat of learning.

Understandably, the community at Bec had great respect for Anselm and his teachings. They urged Anselm to put his thoughts into writing, and Anselm ultimately authored a number of books in both theology and philosophy.⁴

In March 1093, Anselm left Bec and took the position as archbishop of Canterbury in England. After a fight with the King of England (William II, son of William the Conqueror), Anselm left Canterbury and returned to continental Europe in 1097.⁵ During this time, Anselm wrote his book on the atonement of Christ (*Cur Deus homo* or "Why Did God become Man?").

While in France, Anselm got word that William II died in a hunting accident. The next king (Henry I) recalled Anselm to Canterbury. That lasted another two years before Anselm was exiled for refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the king. Finally in 1106, Anselm returned to his See at Canterbury where he remained the last three years of his life.

³ This abbey was formed only 29 years earlier. It was supported, in part, by William the Conqueror who became King of England during the Norman (as in "Normandy") invasion in 1066 winning the famous battle of Hastings. The abbey drew its name, Bec, from the Danish word "bæk, meaning "brook." The abbey was originally founded on the banks of the Bec. It was soon moved further up the valley. Since the French revolution, the abbey is in ruins.

⁴ Here, Anselm wrote his *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, *The Dialogues on Truth*, *Free Will*, and *Fall of the Devil*.

⁵ The church put Anselm forward at a council seeking to reconcile the Greek and Roman churches that had split in 1054 (see the crusade lesson). Anselm used logic to assert that the Holy Spirit did in fact proceed from the Son as well as the Father. This was one of the two major issues over which the church had split.

We study Anselm in Church History Literacy for several reasons. First, Anselm is rightly considered the first scholarly philosopher of Christian Theology. If Boethius (see lesson 35) was the last theological scholar before the dark ages, we see in Anselm, a reawakening beginning as the Renaissance starts to slowly unfold.⁶ We also study Anselm for what he had to say in two of his hallmark works, *Proslogion* (in English, the *Discourse on the Existence of God*) and *Cur Dues Homo* (which we will refer to in its English sense of “Why God Became Man?”). These two works were seminal in the follow up studies of such brilliant churchmen as Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther. As we look at these works of Anselm, we, like Aquinas and Luther, find a number of admirable things, along with a measure of things that seem less admirable!

Because Anselm wrote the *Discourse* first, we will look at it and then consider *Why God Became Man?* Before we look at either, however, it is useful to note a certain approach Anselm used. Anselm was a student of the Bible, but many accord him the title of a scholastic father⁷ because he approached many of his studies on the basis of reason rather than scripture.⁸ For Anselm, scripture held the truths of God, but because they were *truths*, Anselm believed they could be discussed and discerned by reason as well as by appeal to scripture. In other words, because the truths of scripture were rationale, they could be understood and discussed apart from scripture in a rationale and reasoned manner.

Some scholars seem a bit overly critical of Anselm for his usage of reasoning apart from scriptural citations. Anselm never set his reasoning above scripture. In fact,

⁶ Most scholars date the age of the renaissance from 1300-1500's. Of course, there is no real clear event that sets out one day as the starting time. We see in Anselm, the first scholastic thinking that asks questions and gives answers that certainly foretell a coming renaissance in thinking that was around the corner. While Anselm is not himself considered a “renaissance scholar,” we can fairly say that he is one of the parents of the renaissance!

⁷ Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr. wrote of Anselm and Luther in his doctoral dissertation at Marquette University (Ph.D. in Historical Theology). His dissertation was published in book form as *Anselm and Luther on the Atonement – Was it Necessary?* (Mellen Research University Press 1992). Eckardt termed Anselm the “forerunner of the entire scholastic era.” His book is a wonderful resource for not only understanding the differences and commonalities of Anselm and Luther but also as a good analysis of Anselm's writings on *Why God Became Man*.

⁸ Anselm is famed for his approach that was *sola ratione*. By that Latin phrase, we understand Anselm to use reason alone to prove his conclusions. This is in contrast to most Christian writers who use scripture to establish their positions and ultimate truths. If we were to look for a similar Christian writer in the last century that used reason in writing to prove conclusions, then one might consider C.S. Lewis and *Mere Christianity*.

he clearly pointed out, “For if I say something that unquestionably contradicts Sacred Scripture, I am certain that it is false.”⁹

DISCOURSE ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

A stunning question asked in the later 1070’s was “how do we know God exists?” The time period was not one of great intellectual curiosity. Philosophy was not a hotbed of every day discussions. Professors were not seeking to publish works for the printing presses (which needed a few more centuries and a fellow named Gutenberg to start working). Why did a Benedictine monk write such a book?

Most recognize that Anselm was not writing his discourse to sway the unbeliever. There was little to no reason to think the unbeliever would ever read this handwritten book. We understand from the original title of the work, *Faith Seeking Understanding* that Anselm was writing with the Christian believer in mind. Anselm was seeking to put into writing his thoughts on how believers might be more confident in their faith.

In producing this book, Anselm recorded what historians consider the first “ontological argument”¹⁰ for the existence of God. Absent a decent amount of Latin and philosophical study, the argument Anselm uses is a bit difficult to grasp. Actually, even with a decent amount of Latin and philosophical study, the argument is still a bit difficult! But that is why we study! So, let’s consider what Anselm offers!

The key to understanding Anselm’s argument is his definition of God. Anselm defines God as the greatest thing of whom one can think. In Anselm-speak, God is “something than which nothing greater can be imagined.” Or put another way, God is something we can think of that is greater than anything else we can imagine. With that definition of God, Anselm puts together an argument that at its root “proves” that God must exist for logic’s sake.

⁹ *Cur Deus Homo* I, 18. We are using the translation of Anselm by Hopkins and Richardson, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury* (Arthur J. Banning Press 2000). This quotation is found at p. 333.

¹⁰ “Ontological argument” means, for these purposes, that one can prove God’s existence by reason and intuitive understanding alone.

Anselm begins with the Psalmist's proclamation: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"¹¹ From here, Anselm first posits that God (remember here, God is the greatest thing we can imagine) certainly exists in the mind or understanding. We are able to think about God. Even the fool that says in his heart, "There is no God" is able to understand what we mean when we speak of a God who "is greater" than anything else that can be imagined.

Anselm likens this to a painter who thinks of his painting and imagines it in his mind before he paints it. Even though the painter may not fully understand or experience the painting until it is finished, he at least has an imagined perception of it. Similarly, a fool may not understand or experience God while an unbeliever, yet a fool can at least conceive of what God is. A fool can acknowledge the idea that there is a God, something greater than anything else imaginable. Even if he cannot "paint the picture," he can at least envision the painting!

Anselm next argues that some people believe that God (the greatest thing imaginable) also actually exists. Anselm says that *if* there is no God, then those who actually believe that God exists are thinking of a being greater than the being the atheist considers. For a being that truly exists must be greater than one merely imagined. Yet, the fool/atheist was charged with contemplating the greatest imaginable being. In fact, a greater being is imaginable, namely one who truly exists. Therefore, and here is Anselm's conclusion, there is a logical consistency that a fool can never overcome.

Confusing and difficult to grasp? Yes. So, let us try a second way to explain it. Consider breaking it down into several points:

1. Start by defining God as the greatest being imaginable.
2. Everyone can imagine God.
3. Some people believe that such an imaginable God truly exists.
4. Those who do not agree that there is such an existing God can also understand that others do believe he exists, even though they do not share that view.
5. For those unbelievers, they are (at the point in step 4) thinking about something greater than their God contemplated in step 1 at that point, but whose existence they will not acknowledge.
6. Step 5 indicates that there is a greater being than considered in Step 1, yet Step 1 was supposed to be the greatest thing imaginable.

¹¹ Psalm 14:1; 53:1. These are the two Psalms Paul uses in Romans 3 when he writes that, "there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God." Paul omits the opening words of the Psalm; Anselm uses those words.

7. So, logic dictates that the unbeliever has made some mistake along the way. The only place that such a mistake could happen is the unbeliever's failure to accept step 3. If you accept step 3, then all is logical. Without step 3, then there is a logical inconsistency to thought itself.

Still confusing? Eat some lunch and re-read it! Or, try your hand at Anselm's original argument. Buy a copy of the *Proslogion* off Amazon.com or from some other bookstore!

Another way to consider this thought process is by reading those who disagree with the approach of Anselm, and there are certainly plenty. Another late medieval thinker who was a vociferous theological writer that we will study next in Church History Literacy is St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1275-1274). Aquinas joined ranks of those who found the ontological argument of Anselm in error.

Serious philosophy students still study Anselm today as the first to offer the ontological proof for God. They would also study Aquinas, Hume, Kant and others who disagreed with Anselm. Then, the study would include others who followed in Anselm's footsteps and offered their own derivations of his ontological argument (like Descartes, and more recently, Leibniz, Hartshorne, Gödel *et al.*)

WHY DID GOD BECOME MAN?

Before we leave Anselm, we should consider a second work where he uses his reasoning to consider Biblical truth without merely citing scripture for his belief. That is his book *Cur Deus Homo*. In this book, Anselm challenged a very popular belief at the time: that Jesus died in order to pay Satan's price for sin. For centuries, many in the church taught and believed that Satan had a claim on fallen man, and in essence, required Jesus' blood as the price for redemption. Anselm disagreed. Anselm believed and taught that God's own justice required the death of Christ on man's behalf, whether Satan existed or not.

Anselm introduces his work by giving two different reasons for writing it. First, Anselm wants to offer believers the delight of contemplating and more clearly understanding the doctrines of God already believed. Second, Anselm echoes 1 Peter 3:15 wanting believers to be ready "to give a satisfactory answer to everyone who asks of them a reason for the hope that is in us."¹²

¹² *Cur Deus Homo*, I:1; Hopkins and Richardson at 300.

The problem Anselm addresses is the question: “For what reason and on the basis of what necessity did God become a man and by His death restore life to the world (as we believe and confess), seeing that He could have accomplished this restoration either by means of some other person (whether angelic or human) or else by merely willing it?”

When Eckardt analyzed Anselm’s writing by comparing it to Luther’s, he broke Anselm’s thought into its three premises: (1) sin, (2), God’s justice, and (3) vicarious satisfaction (Christ’ satisfying God’s requirements on man’s behalf). This is a useful approach we will model here.

(1) Sin

For Anselm, sin was a lack of righteousness (“privation”), a failure to “render to God what is due.”¹³ In other words, we sin when we give God something less than his glory demands. So, sin becomes an infinite offense against God.

(2) God’s Justice

As Anselm explores God’s justice, he does so without using the word “consistency,” yet that word is at the root of Anselm’s thought. For Anselm, God’s justice is the consistent character nature of God that requires everything be “fit” or proper. God is not able to accept sin and forgive it merely by his mercy without a just penalty because it would not be fit or consistent with whom God is.

For Anselm, it is “fitting that as death had entered into the human race by the disobedience of man, so life would be restored by the obedience of man.”¹⁴ And as the sin which was the cause of our condemnation had its beginning from a woman, so the Author of our justification and salvation would be born from a woman. And the Devil, who had conquered man by persuading him to taste of the tree, would be conquered by man through the suffering-on-the-tree.”¹⁵

What is more, God’s justice, for Anselm, is infinite, or unending. Therefore, the sin of mankind is, as noted above, an infinite sin or affront to God’s infinite honor. The requirement or penalty of the infinite justice from the infinite sin is found in the vicarious satisfaction.

¹³ *Cur Deus Homo*, I:11; Hopkins and Richardson at 318.

¹⁴ See Romans 5:19.

¹⁵ Hopkins and Richardson at 303.

(3) Vicarious Satisfaction

There can be no salvation – no satisfaction of God’s justice – without infinite payment. That is the work of Christ as God and man. Christ’s atonement is one by an infinite God, and is thus, infinite in its own right. It is the infinite payment; therefore, that satisfies the infinite justice. Yet to be reckoned as fitting for the sin of man, the atonement must be man’s atonement. Therefore, while only infinite God can pay the infinite price, God must do so as man. Therefore, God becomes man in Jesus Christ and offers a sinless life in voluntary sacrifice. This is an infinite meritorious deed that satisfies infinite justice and redeems sinners.

Time and further thought modified Anselm’s approach. St. Bonaventure saw sin in much the same way as Anselm. Bonaventure used the analogy of a mirror. In the analogy, the mirror is like the human soul in reflecting the image and likeness of God. Sin is like dirt that gets on the mirror. The dirt stops the visual representation of God, but underneath the dirt the image is still there waiting to fulfill its potential once the dirt is removed. This is contrasted to Luther and others. Luther believed that Anselm’s definition of sin was “too weak.”¹⁶ For Luther (and Augustine if we go back in time, or Calvin and other Reformers if we go forward in time), sin was not only affronting deeds to God, but a condition of the heart and mind as well. To use Bonaventure’s analogy, the mirror itself is cracked and distorted. The fallen nature of man is the core of sin. In the same passage where Luther claims Anselm was “too weak” in his definition of sin, Luther says it is “not so much the absence of righteousness as the inbred evil.” For Luther, even the best of human deeds was tainted with a bit of selfishness and is thus repugnant before a holy God.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the differences on sin and its perception, Luther and orthodoxy does still stand squarely behind Anselm’s conclusion on the necessity of the atonement in that it is not a price paid to satisfy Satan. Theologians differ on whether Anselm captured the entire picture with his explanation of the atonement on justice grounds, for there are solid points that

¹⁶ *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 34, p. 185 (Muhlenberg Press: Philadelphia 1970). “The definition of Anselm is too weak, when he says that it is the lack of original righteousness, which should be in us. For it is not only the lack of righteousness, but also innate evil making us guilty of eternal death.”

¹⁷ This distortion of man’s very essence is why Luther and others would naturally distrust a solely rationale approach to understanding God, like that used by Anselm. The human mind is not working well rationally!

can be made about ethical requirements for Jesus' actions, in addition to the legal footing Anselm offered.

In the next generation, a scholar named Peter Abelard (student of another Anselm, Anselm of Laon) in his commentary on Romans approached the atonement as Christ's attempt to win man's heart by his example of reconciling love rather than suffering and dying in man's place (Things did not fare well for Abelard when he was summoned before a church council on this... But that is another story).

POINTS FOR HOME

Where do we land on these issues? What do we take home from this lesson on Anselm?

1. Our faith is reasonable.

While Anselm sought to provide a basis for faith with reason alone, he may not have accomplished his goal in the mind of many. Indeed, if we understand the fall of man and sin's condition more expansively than Anselm, then we understand that the reasoning process itself is "defective" in fallen man. As Paul writes in Romans, God is about renewing our minds as much as our hearts. We understand "the mind of sinful man is death" (Rom. 8:7). As such, we do not even "know what we ought to pray for" (Rom. 8:26). So, we have Paul's admonition, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then, you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2).

So, it makes some sense that if our reasoning abilities are defective as part of our fallen state, then we may not arrive at a clear logical proof of the existence of God. While Anselm begins his proof quoting the Psalm for the fool who says in his heart, "There is no God," Anselm misses the import of the rest of the Psalm Paul used in Romans. Paul shows that the next verses "There is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God, All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is not one who does good, not even one" (Ps. 14:1-3).

Then, having noted that as fallen people, our logic is skewed and our thinking is affected. We see that on our own recourse, we do not even seek God, much less find him. However, that does not mean that our faith is

illogical! Far from it. Our faith is in fact a reasonable faith that makes logical sense, but we are in need of divine intervention to understand it. God is a revealing God who has gone to great lengths to evidence himself to us, both in nature and in our hearts. “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). God has further provided his Spirit to convict people of Christ and his work (Jn 14-16).

2. Jesus is our atonement.

God is a just God whose “righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom. 2:5). In this righteous judgment, “God will give to each person according to what he has done” (Rom. 2:6 quoting Ps. 62:12). This judgment “will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil” (Rom. 2:9). Yet, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Is. 64:6).

So, how can one stand before such a righteous and Holy God when one’s best deeds are polluted? We stand by a “righteousness from God” that “comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Rom. 3:22). This is a righteousness that “demonstrates” God’s “justice” (Rom. 3:26). In this way, Christ “Himself is the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 2:2). By “propitiation,” we mean that God’s justice (wrath at sin) is satisfied.

This satisfaction is full and infinite in Anselm’s legal sense. Yet, it is also full and satisfactory as an ethical call to love, much like Abelard would later write. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10).