

Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1109

April 21, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Romans 5:1–11; Psalm 139:1–9; Matthew 5:16; Matthew 11:25–30

Today we commemorate Anselm, a Benedictine monk who became archbishop of Canterbury on the fourth of December in 1093. He served until his death on April 21 in 1109. I first crossed paths with Anselm as an undergraduate major in philosophy. I do not remember the name of the course in which we studied the philosophical arguments for the existence of God, but I remember well our teacher, Cora Diamond. She is now a retired professor emerita at the University of Virginia.

Though for a century or more, I think it is correct to say that most philosophers have not been people of faith. We were studying Anselm in the Department of Philosophy because Anselm is credited with conceiving the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God—from the Greek “*onta*”—things which exist. It begins with the proposition of God as “something than which nothing greater”—“or better”—“can be conceived.”¹

A not entirely dissimilar argument dates from Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, the Cosmological Argument. It begins with the fact that there is a creation. Therefore, there must be a Creator.² If I recall correctly, both arguments are not considered logically satisfactory. I no longer remember the details of these arguments, but insight from Anselm has remained with me. He wrote, “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order that I may understand. For this, too, I believe, that unless I

¹ Hick, John, “Ontological Argument for the Existence of God,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan Publishing & the Free Press, 1967), 538–39.

² Hepburn, Ronald W., “Cosmological Argument for the Existence of God,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan Publishing & the Free Press, 1967), 232–37.

first believe, I shall not understand.”³ I confess I do begin to think about God, first and foremost, as a believer. The constructs of logic do not for me overcome my experience of faith.

Anselm’s abbey was Bec in Normandy. It was lost to religious life during the French Revolution but reestablished after the Second World War in 1948.⁴ It is not surprising that there has been an important ecumenical bridge, as it were, a warm relationship between Bec Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral since its reopening.

It is worth noting that William the Conqueror, who was William the First and Duke of Normandy, was crowned king of England on Christmas Day in the year 1066 after defeating the last Saxon king, Harold, at the Battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066. William’s son, William the Second, became king in 1087. He nominated Anselm, then abbot of Bec, to be archbishop of Canterbury. *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* tells us, “His episcopate was stormy, in continual conflict with the crown over the rights and freedoms of the Church.”⁵

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church tells us, “It seems unlikely that he was ever formally canonized, despite several attempts . . . but his cult became firmly established in the later Middle Ages, and in 1720 he was declared by Clement XI a 'Doctor of the [Roman Catholic] Church.’” He is still commemorated in the calendar of that ecclesial community and in the Anglican Communion. I hope I will be able to revisit Canterbury in the not-too-distant future.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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³ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (LFF) (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 240.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bec_Abbey, (accessed 21 April 2021).

⁵ LFF, 240.