



St. Anselm of Canterbury, April 21st Bishop and Doctor, 1033-1109

Born in Aosta (now Valle D'Aosta in northwest Italy), Anselm developed a love of God and a love of learning from his mother. When he was fifteen, Anselm sought to enter a monastery. Fearing the displeasure of his father, the monks turned Anselm away. Nevertheless, Anselm determined to someday become a monk. A few years later, after his mother died, Anselm felt free to pursue his goal. With a companion, he set out on a journey which eventually led him to the Abbey at Bec in Normandy. This abbey had become renowned for the teaching of the prior, Lanfranc. Anselm became a student and protégé of Lanfranc. Anselm advanced quickly and, soon, he was helping Lanfranc with teaching.

Sometime later, Anselm felt torn between a monastic life, becoming a hermit, or, since his father had died and left him some money, remaining a layman and using his wealth to support those in need. Seeking advice from Lanfranc, that monk referred this question to the Archbishop of Rouen. The prelate believed that Anselm was best suited for the monastic life and the young man became a monk at Bec in 1060. About three years later, Lanfranc was appointed Abbot of a monastery at Caen and Anselm was elected to succeed him as Prior at Bec. A few of the older monks resented this action feeling that someone with more experience should fill that position. Anselm's wisdom soon won over the doubters.

Anselm longed for a quiet, contemplative life and sought relief from his duties from the Archbishop of Rouen. This prelate advised him, not only to retain his position, but to prepare for greater responsibilities. This counsel proved to be prophetic. After fifteen years as Prior, Anselm, despite his objections, was chosen as Abbot of Bec in 1078. During his terms as Prior and Abbot, Anselm composed most of his theological and philosophical writings, most notably, "Monologium" and "Proslogium." In the latter document, he put forth an argument for the existence of God. Beginning with the idea that God is "that than which nothing greater can be thought," he suggested that what exists in actuality is greater than anything that is only in the mind; therefore, since "God is that which nothing greater can be thought," he must exist in reality.

As Abbot of Bec, Anselm was called upon to visit England where the abbey held several properties. Upon his arrival in Canterbury, Anselm was greeted by his old friend and mentor, Lanfranc, who was now the Archbishop of Canterbury. After a break of several years, the two had the opportunity to resume their discussions as equals. Anselm's reputation as a scholar and a holy man had spread through most of Europe and he was often called upon by kings and princes for his advice. William the Conqueror, for example, sought his consolation while on his death bed.

When, sometime later, Lanfranc died, the English people wished to have Anselm named as his successor as Archbishop of Canterbury. In that age, rulers had a much larger hand in the naming of bishops. The king, William II, the son of William the Conqueror, refused to name a bishop for Canterbury, but instead, seized Church revenues and generally allowed the Church to sink into a state of anarchy. Some years later in 1093, the king fell ill and was somehow moved to remorse. At the urging of nobles and prelates, he agreed to fill the vacancy and, giving in to the obvious desire of the people, named Anselm as Archbishop of Canterbury. As he had when elected prior and abbot, Anselm tried to decline this appointment, but he was literally dragged to the king's bedside where the pastoral staff was thrust into his hand. While King William and his successor, King Henry I, later resumed harassment of the Church hierarchy and tried to get him deposed as archbishop, Anselm served in that capacity for the remaining sixteen years of his life.

Anselm's knowledge, passed on in his writings, has been favorably compared to that of Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and he was considered the foremost theologian of his time. He was canonized in 1494 by Pope Alexander VI. He is honored by an optional memorial on the anniversary of his death, April 21.

Anselm's message today: Thrust into positions which he did not seek and tried to decline, Anselm nevertheless served well and earned the respect of all but a few of his flock.

- *How do you approach those unwelcome assignments into which you have been thrust? Do you put your best effort into them? Ask St. Anselm to help you.*