

Homily on the feast of Saint Anselm, 21 April 2021

Anselmo: What this saint saw and lived, endured and suffered, thought and written - almost a thousand years ago - holds a message for our condition. His feast makes us and all those linked to Sant'Anselmo on the Aventine participants in the events of his life and his thoughts. We are involved and, at this moment, also concelebrants with him in this liturgy. Getting to know our patron better and better also has an effect on our prayer, meditation and reflection in the tradition of St. Anselm.

Born and raised in Aosta, in a fascinating region in the mountains, but also not far from the sea, at the crossroads between Italian and French culture. Through the study of his biography, similar to that of other saints, we can hypothesize the break with his father: not approving the path of the children is not only a recent phenomenon, especially when they decide to devote themselves to the religious life. Away from home, Anselm finds a new homeland in Normandy at Bec, where one of the most famous intellectuals of the time, Lanfranco, had become a monk. He began his studies at the famous school of Bec and, under the guidance of Lanfranco, he converted to monastic life, so when Lanfranco was appointed abbot in Caën, he became his successor as superior of the monastery and teacher of the university.

Thirteen "years of silence" follow, as his best biographer Sir Richard Southern wrote.¹ During these years at the head of the monastery, but also under the banner of study and teaching in the monastic context, some notable prayers were born and the academic style of Saint Anselm came to be defined. Later, he is exposed to the storms of his time, but through this new awareness he manages to remain calm, to resume his studies and to remain turned towards people who have relied on him.

He published his first work, "Monologion" at only 43 years old. Those who intend to pursue a university career at this age must already have a rich publication behind them. The notoriety derived from it was also important at the time of Anselm and his academy. In fact, there was competition among the nascent cathedral schools and the ability to attract young intellectuals willing to travel far for a good education was not irrelevant, even if only economically.

What is the hallmark of Anselm's style, which he slowly but steadily developed? Studying and teaching in the cloister or next to it, spirituality and speculation are not opposites, on the contrary, they presuppose each other. Meditation and hours of liturgy in church do not prevent scientific work, on the contrary, they can provide a fruitful foundation and a permanent reference to the One beyond whom nothing greater can be conceived.

Lanfranco, his predecessor in Bec, eventually became archbishop of Canterbury. After his death, this venue remained vacant for nearly five years. In 1093, at the age of 60, Anselm became his successor in Canterbury, an appointment which he obviously did not want. Maybe he had understood from the start that this assignment was not tailor-made for him. Indeed, it is never possible to choose what time to live in and what to live in, just as it happens to us in these months. Anselm's time a thousand years ago was also marked by historical upheavals: the Normans in England from 1066, the tensions between the rulers of

the different peoples and, in all this, the Archbishop of Canterbury was subdued by them, but also acted as a *global player*, holding a power that he probably didn't always use well. Then, unwittingly, he was involved in constant quarrels between the king and the pope, hardly understandable to him. Twice exiled, he spent six of the sixteen years as archbishop between Rome, Bari and Lyon.

Saint Anselm - monk, philosopher, theologian, abbot, bishop. Famous, but also disputed. The stranger who has found himself fighting so many challenges, with the ability to remain the sober thinker, the faithful monk and a man with a big heart, close to many people, as shown by the 400 letters that have come down to us. Anselm was able to overcome the needs of his time because he was rooted in an interiority that came from a religious practice and a dynamic of the mind that emerges above all in the works written in the form of dialogue.

Finally, I would like to jump to today's Archbishop of Canterbury.² In his residence in London, Archbishop Justin Welby founded the Community of St. Anselm in 2015. It is an ecumenical community for young adults between 20 and 35 years of age, male and female. Each year young people in search of a deeper meaning for their life spend ten months in prayer, study and support for the poor. They live right at the Lambeth Palace using the Archbishop's library, who often joins in with their prayers and activities. Says one commentator: "The archbishop's residence has been transformed: instead of many offices with the bishop's apartment, it has now become a center of prayer and studies with an office at the end."

The current Archbishop of Canterbury explains that such a community life can still renew the Church, as consecrated life has done so many times in history. "St Anselm of Canterbury jumped out as representing something helpful for the project we were embarking upon. He was a Benedictine monk, abbot, archbishop and a great theologian." Justin Welby talks about the *commitment-phobia* of so many young people today and how the pandemic has increased the isolation of individuals. "Religious communities offer an ancient and powerful answer to that. A call to service in one place. The monastic ideal, to draw away from the world and closer to God so that God may be more manifest in the world, is countercultural in the extreme. " Explaining how liberating the promise of young adults to be celibate for the duration of this program he says, "The call is for the few. But the impact of the choices of the few can and does have the capacity to transform the whole Church and world. " Doesn't this also apply to our Anselmian academic community?

The spirit of Saint Anselm is perhaps closer and more lively than we imagine.

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¹ Richard W. Southern, *St. Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (1990), reworked on the basis of the author's previous studies, carried out starting from the 1960s. Reprinted many times by Cambridge University Press and also translated into Italian in various editions such as *Anselmo d'Aosta. Portrait on background*.

² See Anthony Gardner, „A Year for God: The Community of St Anselm” and “Where Renewal Begins”, in: *The Tablet* (20 March 2021) 8-10. The quotes are taken from these articles.