



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 23 September 2009*

[\[Video\]](#)

## ***Saint Anselm***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Benedictine Abbey of Sant'Anselmo [St Anselm] is located on the Aventine Hill in Rome. As the headquarters of an academic institute of higher studies and of the Abbot Primate of the Confederated Benedictines it is a place that unites within it prayer, study and governance, the same three activities that were a feature of the life of the Saint to whom it is dedicated: Anselm of Aosta, the ninth anniversary of whose death occurs this year. The many initiatives promoted for this happy event, especially by the Diocese of Aosta, have highlighted the interest that this medieval thinker continues to rouse. He is also known as Anselm of Bec and Anselm of Canterbury because of the cities with which he was associated. Who is this figure to whom three places, distant from one another and located in three different nations Italy, France, England feel particularly bound? A monk with an intense spiritual life, an excellent teacher of the young, a theologian with an extraordinary capacity for speculation, a wise man of governance and an intransigent defender of *libertas Ecclesiae*, of the Church's freedom, Anselm is one of the eminent figures of the Middle Ages who was able to harmonize all these qualities, thanks to the profound mystical experience that always guided his thought and his action.

St Anselm was born in 1033 (or at the beginning of 1034) in Aosta, the first child of a noble family. His father was a coarse man dedicated to the pleasures of life who squandered his possessions.

On the other hand, Anselm's mother was a profoundly religious woman of high moral standing (cf. Eadmer, *Vita Sancti Anselmi*, PL 159, col. 49). It was she, his mother, who saw to the first human and religious formation of her son whom she subsequently entrusted to the Benedictines at a priory in Aosta. Anselm, who since childhood as his biographer recounts imagined that the good Lord dwelled among the towering, snow-capped peaks of the Alps, dreamed one night that he had been invited to this splendid kingdom by God himself, who had a long and affable conversation with him and then gave him to eat "a very white bread roll" (*ibid.*, col. 51). This dream left him with the conviction that he was called to carry out a lofty mission. At the age of 15, he asked to be admitted to the Benedictine Order but his father brought the full force of his authority to bear against him and did not even give way when his son, seriously ill and feeling close to death, begged for the religious habit as a supreme comfort. After his recovery and the premature death of his mother, Anselm went through a period of moral dissipation. He neglected his studies and, consumed by earthly passions, grew deaf to God's call. He left home and began to wander through France in search of new experiences. Three years later, having arrived in Normandy, he went to the Benedictine Abbey of Bec, attracted by the fame of Lanfranc of Pavia, the Prior. For him this was a providential meeting, crucial to the rest of his life. Under Lanfranc's guidance Anselm energetically resumed his studies and it was not long before he became not only the favourite pupil but also the teacher's confidante. His monastic vocation was rekindled and, after an attentive evaluation, at the age of 27 he entered the monastic order and was ordained a priest. Asceticism and study unfolded new horizons before him, enabling him to rediscover at a far higher level the same familiarity with God which he had had as a child.

When Lanfranc became Abbot of Caen in 1063, Anselm, after barely three years of monastic life, was named Prior of the Monastery of Bec and teacher of the cloister school, showing his gifts as a refined educator. He was not keen on authoritarian methods; he compared young people to small plants that develop better if they are not enclosed in greenhouses and granted them a "healthy" freedom. He was very demanding with himself and with others in monastic observance, but rather than imposing his discipline he strove to have it followed by persuasion. Upon the death of Abbot Herluin, the founder of the Abbey of Bec, Anselm was unanimously elected to succeed him; it was February 1079. In the meantime numerous monks had been summoned to Canterbury to bring to their brethren on the other side of the Channel the renewal that was being brought about on the continent. Their work was so well received that Lanfranc of Pavia, Abbot of Caen, became the new Archbishop of Canterbury. He asked Anselm to spend a certain period with him in order to instruct the monks and to help him in the difficult plight in which his ecclesiastical community had been left after the Norman conquest. Anselm's stay turned out to be very fruitful; he won such popularity and esteem that when Lanfranc died he was chosen to succeed him in the archiepiscopal See of Canterbury. He received his solemn episcopal consecration in December 1093.

Anselm immediately became involved in a strenuous struggle for the Church's freedom, valiantly supporting the independence of the spiritual power from the temporal. Anselm defended the Church from undue interference by political authorities, especially King William Rufus and Henry I,

finding encouragement and support in the Roman Pontiff to whom he always showed courageous and cordial adherence. In 1103, this fidelity even cost him the bitterness of exile from his See of Canterbury. Moreover, it was only in 1106, when King Henry I renounced his right to the conferral of ecclesiastical offices, as well as to the collection of taxes and the confiscation of Church properties, that Anselm could return to England, where he was festively welcomed by the clergy and the people. Thus the long battle he had fought with the weapons of perseverance, pride and goodness ended happily. This holy Archbishop, who roused such deep admiration around him wherever he went, dedicated the last years of his life to the moral formation of the clergy and to intellectual research into theological topics. He died on 21 April 1109, accompanied by the words of the Gospel proclaimed in Holy Mass on that day: "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom..." (Lk 22: 28-30). So it was that the dream of the mysterious banquet he had had as a small boy, at the very beginning of his spiritual journey, found fulfilment. Jesus, who had invited him to sit at his table, welcomed Anselm upon his death into the eternal Kingdom of the Father.

"I pray, O God, to know you, to love you, that I may rejoice in you. And if I cannot attain to full joy in this life may I at least advance from day to day, until that joy shall come to the full" (*Proslogion*, chapter 14). This prayer enables us to understand the mystical soul of this great Saint of the Middle Ages, the founder of scholastic theology, to whom Christian tradition has given the title: "Magnificent Doctor", because he fostered an intense desire to deepen his knowledge of the divine Mysteries but in the full awareness that the quest for God is never ending, at least on this earth. The clarity and logical rigour of his thought always aimed at "raising the mind to contemplation of God" (*ibid.*, *Proemium*). He states clearly that whoever intends to study theology cannot rely on his intelligence alone but must cultivate at the same time a profound experience of faith. The theologian's activity, according to St Anselm, thus develops in three stages: *faith*, a gift God freely offers, to be received with humility; *experience*, which consists in incarnating God's word in one's own daily life; and therefore true *knowledge*, which is never the fruit of ascetic reasoning but rather of contemplative intuition. In this regard his famous words remain more useful than ever, even today, for healthy theological research and for anyone who wishes to deepen his knowledge of the truths of faith: "I do not endeavour, O Lord, to penetrate your sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, that unless I believed, I should not understand" (*ibid.*, 1).

Dear brothers and sisters, may the love of the truth and the constant thirst for God that marked St Anselm's entire existence be an incentive to every Christian to seek tirelessly an ever more intimate union with Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. In addition, may the zeal full of courage that distinguished his pastoral action and occasionally brought him misunderstanding, sorrow and even exile be an encouragement for Pastors, for consecrated people and for all the faithful to love Christ's Church, to pray, to work and to suffer for her, without ever abandoning or betraying her.

May the Virgin Mother of God, for whom St Anselm had a tender, filial devotion, obtain this grace for us. "Mary, it is you whom my heart yearns to love", St Anselm wrote, "it is you whom my tongue ardently desires to praise".

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**To special groups:**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the members of the Australian Girls Choir and the school groups from Norway and Scotland. I ask you to join me in praying that my imminent [Visit to the Czech Republic](#) will bear many spiritual fruits, and upon all of you and your families, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

My thoughts now turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the witness of faith and charity that motivated St Pius of Pietrelcina, whom we are commemorating today, encourage you, dear *young people*, to plan your future as a generous service to God and neighbour. May it help you, dear *sick people*, to experience in your suffering the support and comfort of the Crucified Christ. And may it impel you, dear *newlyweds*, to keep your family constantly attentive to the poor. Lastly, may the example of this Saint who is so popular be for priests in this Year for Priests and for all Christians an invitation to trust in God's goodness always, confidently receiving and celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, of which the Saint of the Gargano who tirelessly dispensed divine mercy was an assiduous and faithful minister.

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