

Solemnity of St. Anselm
April 21, 2012

Acts 6:1-7
John 6:16-21

Unlike so many important figures of the early Middle Ages about whose life we know relatively little, for Anselm we are blessed with the biography that was written by his fellow monk Eadmer, who learned so much from conversations with Anselm himself. Fortunately, Anselm never tried to present himself in an especially positive light, and nowhere is this so clearly seen than in the section where he discusses a dilemma that he faced when still quite young and that has been a challenge to most young people at all times, including today: namely, what to do with one's life.

To understand the dilemma that Anselm faced, we have to look briefly at the state of education at that time, around the middle of the eleventh century. Today, there is a multitude of schools available to students: more than a hundred high schools in our metropolitan area and at least ten colleges or universities. The scene was far different in Anselm's Europe. In what is today France there were then schools of real fame at Orleans, Tours, Angers, and Chartres, along with a newly emerging one at Paris. There was also a lesser-known school at Avranches in the west of Normandy, where a scholar named Lanfranc had taught for a while before leaving there and going to a Benedictine monastery at Bec. Lanfranc's reputation for scholarship was so great that soon there were people coming to Bec from all across Europe simply to study under his tutelage. Anselm (who had come north across the Alps from Italy) was one of these, studying with other lay students in what was called the monastery's "external school," outside the walls of the monastic enclosure. But soon his earlier desire to become a monk revived, leaving him with various choices that he later described to his biographer Eadmer: First, he could become a monk there at Bec, but then (he reflected) he would be overshadowed by his famous teacher. Second, he could apply for admission at the prominent monastery of Cluny, but there the extremely heavy liturgical horarium would leave him little time or energy to shine as a scholar. Third, he could become a hermit, a way of life that at that time was no longer regarded primarily as a lonely struggle against evil spirits but rather as a way of enjoying quiet, refreshing communion with God. Or, finally, he said that he might live on what he had inherited and use some of these funds to help the needy and poor.

In light of today's Gospel, with its teaching about humbling oneself and not wishing to be called "Rabbi" or "teacher," one can see that the young Anselm's ambition to be a famous scholar and his reluctance to live under the shadow of someone like Lanfranc was not very evangelical. In any case, since Anselm could not come to a decision himself, he followed the advice of Archbishop Maurilius of the nearby city of Rouen and did become a monk of Bec. After three years, Lanfranc was called away from that monastery to become abbot at Caen, and Anselm himself succeeded him as the prior at Bec. Of the next decade or so of his life we know relatively little in detail, but it surely involved a thorough dedication to following both the letter and the spirit of St. Benedict's Rule, including its longest chapter, that on humility. In Anselm's writings, especially his prayers and meditations, we find much about humility and no longer sense anything of his earlier ambition for fame. Consider, for example, the following lines from his prayer to St. Benedict:

Oh, blessed Benedict, you whom God has favored with such benedictions,
I prostrate myself before you with all the humility I can muster,
fleeing to you in anguish of soul....
I implore your help with all the desire I am able to rouse,
for my need is huge and unbearable.
I profess to lead a life of ongoing conversion,
as I promised when I took the name and habit of a monk,
but so far removed am I from that that my conscience convicts me
of lying to God, to the angels, and to all peoples.
Holy Father Benedict, be with me ... as I confess to you,
and grant me greater mercy than I have a right to expect.

If anything, there is in this and in his other prayers what may strike us as an excessive dwelling on his own sinfulness, but what we have here is more likely that trait found so often in persons already well advanced in the way of holiness: an acute sense of their own frailty and unworthiness when measured against the purity and goodness of God. And, as we well know, that frailty was more than compensated by the abundant graces that Anselm received both as a monk and later as an archbishop of Canterbury, illustrating so well the truth of what St. Paul said at the end of our second reading: the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. By learning little by little to rely on this all-powerful and all-loving God, Anselm became a great saint and a brilliant teacher whose writings can still instruct and inspire us. We are indeed fortunate to have our monastery placed under his patronage. St. Anselm, pray for us.

Abbot James Wiseman