

## ST. ANSELM, 2014

It may not have been a absolute stroke of genius that St. Anselm was chosen as the patron of our monastery back in the 1920s, but it was unquestionably a very appropriate choice.

Thomas Verner Moore and the four or five other men who started our community way back then certainly wanted to lead holy lives by following the Rule of St. Benedict, but if that had been their only concern, they might have had as their patron any of a number of saintly monks from previous centuries, some of whom had little interest in learning apart from what was available to them in Scripture. But the "founding fathers" of our own community had already been working in education for some years, and they definitely wanted to remain teachers after they had become monks, whether through giving instruction in a classroom or through the many articles and books that they published. Those early monks of our community certainly found in their patron St. Anselm someone who brought together fervent devotion and acute thinking, sanctity and learning, in a truly remarkable way. Sister Benedict Ward, a fine student of Anselm's thought in our own time, once expressed it thus: "[His] combination of theological veracity and personal ardor is what distinguishes Anselm's writings ... and makes him both traditional and revolutionary. It is the ground of all [his] prayers, but especially of [the treatise called] the *Proslogion* ... where speculation is continually breaking out into prayer, [and] dialectic [or systematic argumentation is continually] turning into humility and praise."<sup>1</sup>

I really believe that those few words capture the way in which St. Anselm can be a patron and model for all of us here at St. Anselm's Abbey School. Sister Benedicta said that Anselm was both traditional and revolutionary, which is really another way of saying what Jesus meant in today's Gospel when he said that anyone "instructed in the kingdom of heaven" is like someone who knows how to bring out of his storeroom or treasury "both the new and the old" (Matt 13:52). Being "traditional" means that a person is able to take the best from what is "old" and capitalize on its continuing relevance to make important contributions to the society of his or her

own day. Anselm certainly did this, for he was very familiar with the best of the Judeo-Christian tradition. His many hours of prayerful, meditative reflection on Scripture in that characteristic Benedictine practice that we call *lectio divina* had filled his mind with the entire sweep of salvation history as it is presented in the Bible. In addition to his profound knowledge of Scripture, he was also exceedingly well versed in the thought of St. Augustine of Hippo, who even today remains the most influential of all the Fathers of the Church from the first five or six centuries of our era.

For us, whether as faculty or students, it is likewise incumbent on us to become as familiar as possible with the treasures to be found in all of the knowledge and wisdom of past ages. This obviously requires careful selection. There is far more available to us than there was to Anselm back in the eleventh century, so we have to be especially careful not to waste time on secondary trivia but focus instead on what is best in all that has been handed down to us, whether in literature, art, the natural and social sciences, theology, or any other field of study. Doing so will give us the kind of grounding that enabled Anselm to become one of the most influential thinkers of all time. None of us may ever attain his stature, but the important thing is to use to the best of our ability all that is available to us, whether in books, films, recordings, the Internet, or similar resources.

But in doing that, let's not forget that other side of St. Anselm, which Sister Benedicta called "revolutionary." Here was a man who wasn't content simply to repeat what others had thought in previous decades or centuries. Rather, he was bold enough to strike out on new paths. To illustrate this, let me contrast him with a man named Lanfranc, who was in his own way an important scholar and actually the person who drew Anselm to the monastery of Bec in Normandy, where Lanfranc had already attained a continent-wide reputation as a great thinker

and scholar. People would actually travel from all over Europe to learn from him, and Anselm himself never denied that he had profited a great deal from his older mentor. The two men were, however, of quite different temperaments. Lanfranc was not a particularly original thinker. As R.W. Southern, St. Anselm's best modern biographer, has noted, as Lanfranc grew older, he became "increasingly the great organizer, devoted to the pursuit of order in all things, but more capable of bringing order into practical affairs than into a theoretical system."<sup>2</sup> In his writings, Lanfranc was insistent on accumulating, arranging, and examining sources, so his works abound with references to earlier writers.

There could hardly be a greater contrast between that approach and what Anselm did in one of his first great treatises, the *Monologion*, in which he sought to discover as much as he could about God's existence and nature through the power of thought alone. In this treatise, Anselm does not quote the Bible or Augustine or any other previous writers. Their influence is there, but the reader has to dig for it. As Professor Southern notes, Anselm "would not repeat other men's words or thoughts, unless he had arrived at them in his own way."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Anselm set his face against the method followed by Lanfranc and the other scholars of that era. For someone like Lanfranc, Anselm's method was unheard of and unacceptable, and he expressed his criticism to his former student, but such criticism from his one-time teacher "did not cause Anselm to budge an inch.... Anselm stood firm."<sup>4</sup> He thought for himself, and especially at that period in European history, this was indeed revolutionary.

Here, too, the patron of our monastery and school can and should be a model for all of us, provided only that we, like Anselm, do our creative thinking against a background of learning that we have already made our own. The point is simply that we ought not merely repeat what we have learned from or about others, but having made the best of traditional learning our own,

we ought build on it according to our own best insights, even if that means disagreeing with those who have labored to give us the best education possible.

There is, of course, much more to Anselm's thought, much that I haven't even alluded to, and that includes some things that I and others find unappealing, such as what strikes most modern ears as really excessive self-abasement in some of his prayers. But the traits that continue to attract and challenge even the greatest minds of today are the ones I have dwelt on in this talk: his assimilation of the best that had been handed down to him from the past, especially in the fields of theology and philosophy, and his remarkable ability to use that as a foundation to formulate some of the most creative works that have ever been penned. If the founding members of our monastic community were fortunate to have him as their patron and model, the same can surely be said of us. May each of us do what we can to bring forth from our own mental and spiritual storerooms "both the new and the old."

1" Sister Benedicta Ward, S.L.G, Introduction to *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm with the Prosologion*, trans. idem (London: Penguin, 1973), 76.

2" R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 65.

3" Ibid., 120.

4" Ibid., 121.