

ST. ANSELM

Before I say anything about our patron saint, St. Anselm, in particular, I want to draw your attention to a simple point that is mentioned near the end of our second reading, where St. Paul speaks of a whole range of persons who together help form the Church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. He is there talking about the Church as a whole, but the very same kind of multiple roles is evident right up here around the altar at this Mass: there is a main celebrant and a number of concelebrants and monks in attendance, some servers, a couple readers, and a cantor. Something similar is evident on any sports team. For example, in baseball some players specialize as pitchers, some as catchers, some as infielders or outfielders, and even though a few are able to play a number of positions very well, the range of possibilities is limited. At least in the major leagues, it would be almost unthinkable to have a stocky catcher sometimes serve as a fleet centerfielder.

Now within the Church in particular, although St. Paul lists five functions in the reading we just heard, and in a passage from another of his letters, First Corinthians, he lists eight, I have always found very insightful something written more than a century ago by a man named Friedrich von Hügel. Although his father was Austrian, the family lived in England from the time young Friedrich was fifteen years old, so he wrote primarily in our own English language. Among his greatest works was a two-volume one titled *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in St. Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*. He there argues that any religion has three basic elements: one is what he called the “mystical” or “mystical/experiential,” but he also uses many other adjectives for it. In a nutshell, it’s the whole devotional, affective, volitional, spiritual element, perhaps most clearly expressed in deep prayer and meditation and exemplified in the life of a great mystic like St. Catherine of Genoa. Secondly, there is what von Hügel calls the “historical/institutional” element, marked by forceful authority, clear organization, and decisive action that has at times made the Church a powerful player in the political life of a

region or continent. This element is well exemplified in a pope like Innocent III in the thirteenth century, who with his acute legal mind and boundless energy vigorously supported the Church's reforms through his decretals and his calling of the Fourth Lateran Council. He also used the power of the interdict and other censures to compel kings and princes to obey his decisions. And finally there is the speculative/intellectual element, where the powers of reasoning, argumentation, and abstraction have given us classic philosophies and theologies represented by thinkers like Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages or, more recently, by Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner.

All three of these elements are needed, with problems arising only when in a given time and place one of the three so overshadows the others as to produce a severe imbalance marked, for example, by saccharine sentimentality if the mystical/devotional element gets out of hand, or by rigid, uncompromising legalism when the institutional element becomes top-heavy, or by arid speculation if and when the intellectual element ends up almost totally divorced from the common concerns of most human beings.

Now if all three elements are needed in the Church as a whole, they should also be found to some degree in every member of the Church, although usually one or at most two will predominate in a given individual. Here is where I finally come to the saint we are celebrating today, Anselm of Canterbury. There is no doubt that Anselm was gifted with speculative powers of a high order. His treatises—not only the *Monologion*, the *Proslogion*, and the *Cur Deus Homo* but also his less-well-known works such as *De Grammatico*, *De Veritate*, and *De Libertate Arbitrii*—continue to challenge scholars of our own day, as is evident in the regular academic conferences held about one or another aspect of his thought. But if Anselm excelled in what von Hügel called the speculative or intellectual aspect of religion, the same could be said of

the mystical/experiential aspect, for his prayers and meditations give convincing evidence of his profound love of God and his ardent desire for ever closer union with God, accompanied by a deep sorrow for his own failings and what we traditionally call “a firm purpose of amendment.”

That leaves the third element, the institutional. As I expect most of you know, St. Anselm was for many years the archbishop of Canterbury, the most important ecclesiastical position in England. As such, he had to deal with kings and barons, as well as with popes and bishops, so I suppose it wouldn't surprise you to hear me say that the patron of our school was as outstanding in this third aspect as in the other two. After all, in homilies on a saint's feast day, it is normal to make only laudatory comments about the holy person being honored. In fact, however, Anselm was not temperamentally suited for leadership at this level, and while it would be too much to say that he was a failure as archbishop, he was definitely no great success. His finest modern biographer, Sir R.W. Southern, has noted that Anselm never really understood what was at stake in the conflict over the lay investiture of bishops, that is, the alleged right of a king to name (that is, “invest”) a particular person for an important ecclesiastical office, such as bishop of a diocese or abbot of a monastery, even though the investiture controversy was in fact the most significant conflict between Church and state in medieval Europe. Unlike Lanfranc, his predecessor as archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm would not assume a commanding position in society and in fact tried, unsuccessfully, to resign as archbishop. He was in no sense a policy-maker, for, as Professor Southern writes, “in the area of broad ecclesiastical policy ... he did almost nothing.”¹ “He was not wise in the ways of the world, nor did he wish to be.”² “Indeed, there is a sense in which the clarity of his spiritual and theological doctrines inhibited clarity on political issues by relegating them to a position of relative unimportance.: they led Anselm to believe that the system of joint secular and ecclesiastical responsibility for the functioning of the Church was as

acceptable as any other. He [simply] ... accepted the feudal organization of the Church and baronage as an adequate way of organizing the world.”³ No doubt with considerable exaggeration, Southern once said that as archbishop of Canterbury, St. Thomas à Becket was a thousand times greater than Anselm.

So what should we make of this? Am I unfairly disparaging the patron of our monastery and school? Am I wrong to point out a saint’s weaknesses when celebrating his very feast day? I don’t think so. What I hope we all take away from this is the conviction that none of us can be all things to all people, none of us can excel in every major field of endeavor. The sooner we come to terms with this basic truth, the better off each of us will be, for it enables us to rejoice with the strengths we see in classmates or other faculty members, even as we recognize that each of us has gifts more or less special to ourselves. These are what we should build on, not, of course, to the total dismissal of other interests but in the simple, sane recognition that some degree of specialization is required of all of us. I hope that each of your teachers is to some noticeable degree more advanced than any of you students in his or her particular area of expertise, but I also think we faculty should admit that in other areas some of the students are more knowledgeable than we are. When I was in high school, I was very good in mathematics, but that is not what I went on to study in college, meaning that right now I would absolutely fail even a simple test in algebra without a huge amount of preparation.

What we try to provide for all of our students is a genuine liberal education so that every one of you will have a solid foundation on which to build regardless of what you decide to major in at college and regardless of what you decide to do for an eventual career. The really important thing is to choose something that you are good at and that will allow you really to serve your fellow human beings when you reach adulthood. Pope Francis is absolutely correct in the way in

which he, following in the footsteps of all recent popes but perhaps emphasizing the point more frequently, warns against the accumulation of more and more wealth by some while vast numbers of our fellow human beings are suffering life-threatening poverty. Our whole service program here at the abbey school is meant to help keep this important aspect of life before you. As a committed monk, St. Anselm served those around him to the best of his ability, even though, as I have said, his abilities were more developed in some areas than others. May we serve with a similar commitment and dedication.

1" R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 238.

2" Ibid. 306.

3" Ibid., 304.