



The Holy See

***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO CARDINAL GIACOMO BIFFI
SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE CELEBRATIONS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE NINTH CENTENARY
OF THE DEATH OF ST ANSELM***

*To Cardinal Giacomo Biffi
Special Envoy to the celebrations
for the Ninth Centenary
of the death of St Anselm*

Venerable Brother, in view of the celebrations in which you will be taking part as my Legate, in the illustrious city of Aosta for the ninth centenary of the death of St Anselm in Canterbury, on 21 April 1109, I would like to entrust a special message to you in which I wish to recall the salient features of this great monk, theologian and pastor of souls whose work has profoundly marked the history of the Church. Indeed, the event affords an opportunity that must not be missed to renew the memory of one of the most luminous figures in the tradition of the Church and in the history of Western European thought itself. Anselm's exemplary monastic experience, his original method of rethinking the Christian mystery, his penetrating theological and philosophical doctrine, his teaching on the inviolable value of the conscience and on freedom as responsible adherence to truth and goodness, his enthusiastic work as a pastor of souls, totally dedicated to promoting the "freedom of the Church", have never ceased to inspire in the past the liveliest interest which the commemoration of his death is felicitously rekindling and favouring in different ways and in various places.

In this commemoration of the "Magnificent Doctor" as St Anselm is called the Church of Aosta cannot but play a prominent part because he was born in her and she is rightly glad to consider him her most illustrious son. Even though he was to leave Aosta in his youth, he would continue to remember and to carry in his heart a wealth of memories that would not fail to surface anew in his mind at the most important moments of life. The sweetest image of his mother and the picture of the majestic mountains of his valley with their towering, ever snow-capped peaks in which he saw

the sublimity of God portrayed, as in an evocative and captivating symbol, must certainly have had a special place among these memories. To Anselm "a boy who grew up in the mountains" as his biographer Eadmer describes him (Eadmer, *Vita Sancti Anselmi*, I, 2) it seemed impossible to imagine anything greater than God: gazing since childhood at those inaccessible peaks may have had something to do with this intuition. Indeed, already as a child he considered that to meet God it was necessary "to climb to the top of the mountain" (*ibid.*). Indeed, he was to understand better and better that God is found at an inaccessible height, situated beyond the goals that man can reach since God is beyond the thinkable. For this reason the journey in quest of God, at least on this earth, will be never-ending but will always consist of thought and yearning, a rigorous process of the mind and the imploring plea of the heart.

His intense longing for knowledge and his innate propensity for clarity and logical rigour impelled Anselm towards the *scholae* of his time. He thus arrived at the Monastery of Le Bec, where his inclination for dialectics matured and where, above all, his vocation to the cloister was to be kindled. Reflecting on the years of Anselm's monastic life means meeting a faithful religious, "constantly concerned with God alone and the heavenly disciplines", as his biographer wrote so that he was able to reach such a pinnacle of divine speculation that, on the path opened by God, he was able to penetrate and, having penetrated, to explain the most obscure and previously unresolved questions concerning the divinity of God and our faith, and could prove with clear arguments that what he affirmed was part of the reliable Catholic teaching" (*Vita Sancti Anselmi*, I, 7). With these words his biographer outlined the theological method of St Anselm whose thought was sparked by and illuminated in prayer. It is he himself who confesses, in a famous work, that the intelligence of faith is an approach to the vision for which we all long and hope to enjoy at the end of our earthly pilgrimage: "*Quoniam inter fidem et speciem intellectum quem in hac vita capimus esse medium intelligo: quanto aliquis ad illum proficit, tanto eum propinquare speciei, ad quam omnes anhelamus, existimo*" (*Cur Deus homo, Commendatio*). The Saint aimed to achieve the vision of intrinsic logical connections in the mystery, to perceive the "clarity of the truth", and therefore to grasp the evidence of the "necessary reasons" underpinning the mystery. This was indeed an audacious intention, on whose results Anselm experts are still reflecting today. In fact, his search for the "mind (*intellectus*)" placed between "faith (*fides*)" and "vision (*species*)" springs from faith itself and is sustained by confidence in reason, through which faith, to a certain extent, is illumined. Anselm's intention is clear: "to raise the mind to contemplation of God" (*Proslogion, Proemium*). In any case his words remain programmatic for all theological research: "I do not try, Lord, to penetrate your depths because I cannot even from afar pit my mind against them; but I wish to understand, at least to a certain point, your truth which my heart believes and loves. Indeed, I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand" (*Non quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam*)" (*Proslogion*, 1).

Next we shall mention some traits of Anselm, Prior and Abbot of Le Bec, that further define his personal profile. One is struck in the first place by his charism as an expert teacher of spiritual life who knows and wisely describes the paths of monastic perfection. At the same time, one is

fascinated by his educational talent, which is expressed in that method of discernment he describes it as *via discretionis* (*Ep.* 61) which in some ways reflects the style of his whole life, a style made up of mercy and firmness. Lastly, the ability he showed in initiating his disciples to the experience of authentic prayer is quite distinctive: in particular his *Orationes sive Meditationes*, insistently requested and widely used, helped to make a great many people of his time "prayerful souls", just as his other works have proved an invaluable coefficient for making the Middle Ages a "thinking" and, we might add, a "conscientious" period. It might be said that the most authentic side of Anselm may be found at Le Bec, where he stayed for 33 years, and where he was deeply loved. Thanks to the maturity he attained in that atmosphere of reflection and prayer, he was also able to declare even in the midst of his subsequent troubles as Bishop: "I shall not harbour any bitterness in my heart for anyone" (*Ep.* 321).

His nostalgia for the monastery was to stay with him for the rest of his life. He said so himself when, to his deep sorrow and that of his monks, he was obliged to leave the monastery to take on the episcopal ministry to which he did not feel suited: "It is well known to many", he wrote to Pope Urban II, "what violence has been done to me, and how reluctant and contrary I was to being detained as a Bishop in England, and how I explained the reasons of temperament, age, weakness and ignorance that are incompatible with this office and which shun and detest civil commitments that I can in no way carry out without endangering the salvation of my soul" (*Ep.* 206). To his monks, moreover, he spoke in these terms: "I have lived as a monk for 33 years three years without an office, 15 years as prior and the same number as abbot so that all the good people who knew me loved me, not of course for my own worth but through the grace of God, and those who knew me more intimately and with greater familiarity loved me even more" (*Ep.* 156). And he added: "Many of you came to Le Bec.... Many of you surrounded me with such a tender and sweet affection that each one might have had the impression that I never loved anyone else to the same extent" (*ibid.*).

With his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury his most troubled period began which fully brought to light his "love for the truth" (*Ep.* 327), his rectitude, his strict fidelity to his conscience, his "episcopal freedom" (*Ep.* 206), his "episcopal honesty" (*Ep.* 314), his tireless work to free the Church from temporal conditioning and the bane of calculation that are incompatible with her spiritual nature. In this regard his words to King Henry were exemplary: "I answer that neither in Baptism nor in any other of my Ordinations did I promise to observe the law or the customs of your father or of Archbishop Lanfranco, but the law of God and of all the Orders received" (*Ep.* 319). For Anselm, Primate of the Church of England, the principle: "I am Christian, I am a monk, I am a Bishop; I therefore want to be faithful to all, in accordance with the debt I have to each one" (*Ep.* 314), applied. In this perspective he does not hesitate to affirm: "I prefer to disagree with those who agree among themselves, than disagree with God" (*Ep.* 314). For this very reason he also feels prepared to make the supreme sacrifice: "I am not afraid to shed my blood; I fear no injury to my body nor the loss of possessions" (*Ep.* 311).

It is easily understood that Anselm, for all these reasons, still retains great timeliness and a strong fascination and that it could be really rewarding to revisit and to republish his writings, as well as to meditate anew on his life. I therefore learned with joy that on the occasion of the ninth centenary of the Saint's death Aosta is promoting a series of timely and intelligent initiatives especially with the scrupulous publication of his works with the intention of making known and loved the teachings and example of its famous son. I entrust to you, venerable Brother, the task of bringing to the faithful of the old and beloved city of Aosta, the exhortation to look with admiration and affection at this great fellow citizen of theirs whose light continues to shine throughout the Church, especially wherever love for the truths of faith and an interest in exploring them deeply through reason are cultivated. Indeed, faith and reason *fides et ratio* are found wonderfully united in Anselm. With these sentiments I warmly impart, through you, venerable Brother, to Bishop Giuseppe Anfossi, to the clergy, to the religious and to the faithful of Aosta and to all who are taking part in the celebrations in honour of the "Magnificent Doctor" a special Apostolic Blessing, as a pledge of an abundant outpouring of heavenly favours.

From the Vatican, 15 April 2009

BENEDICT XVI

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