

Love the Church without ever betraying her

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ANSELM: THEOLOGIAN AND DEFENDER OF CHURCH FREEDOM

VATICAN CITY, 23 SEP 2009 VIS -

St. Anselm, one of the most outstanding figures of the Middle Ages, was the subject of the Holy Father's catechesis during his general audience, held this morning in the Paul VI Hall.

St. Anselm of Canterbury, also known as Anselm of Aosta and Anselm of Bec, was born in the Italian town of Aosta in 1033. The eldest child of a noble family, his mother gave him a careful human and Christian education. During his youth he went through a period of moral dissipation and excess during which he abandoned his studies. He then travelled to France in search of new experiences and eventually reached the abbey of Bec, drawn there by the fame of its prior, Lanfranco of Pavia. There, at the age of 27, he embraced the monastic life.

Three years later Lanfranco was appointed as abbot of Caen and Anselm became the prior of Bec. In his new role he "revealed gifts as a sophisticated teacher. He did not care for authoritarian methods and, likening young people to saplings which develop best if not closed in a greenhouse, he granted them a 'healthy' measure of freedom. He was very demanding with himself and others in monastic observance, but rather than imposing discipline he sought to make people follow it by persuasion", the Pope explained.

When Lanfranco of Pavia was appointed as archbishop of Canterbury, England, he asked Anselm to help him in educating the monks and in dealings with the ecclesial community, which was facing difficult circumstances in the wake of the Norman invasions. On Lanfranco's death in 1093, Anselm succeeded him as archbishop immediately entering "into an energetic struggle for the freedom of the Church and courageously supporting the independence of spiritual from temporal power. He defended the Church from undue interference by the political authorities, especially King William Rufus and Henry I". His faithfulness to the Pope caused him to be exiled in 1103.

Anselm died on 21 April 1109 having dedicated the last years of his life "to the moral formation of the clergy and intellectual research into theological questions", whence Christian tradition has bestowed upon him the title of "Doctor Magnificus", said the Holy Father. He went on: "The clarity and logical rigour of Anselm's ideas always sought 'to raise the mind to the contemplation of God'. He made it clear that anyone who intends to study theology must not rely only upon his own intelligence but must also cultivate a profound experience of faith".

"In St. Anselm's view, then, a theologian's work is divided into three stages: faith, God's gratuitous gift to be welcomed with humility; experience, which consists in incarnating the Word of God into daily life; and true knowledge, which is never the fruit of sterile reasoning but of contemplative intuition".

"May the love for truth and the constant thirst for God which characterized St. Anselm's life be a stimulus for all Christians tirelessly to seek an ever more intimate union with Christ", said the Pope, and he concluded: "May the courageous zeal which distinguished his pastoral work and which sometimes brought misunderstandings, bitterness and even exile, be an encouragement for pastors, consecrated people and all the faithful to love the Church of Christ, ... never abandoning or betraying her".