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**St. Anselm on
Faith Seeking Understanding:
Transforming the Belief of Faith into
the Seeing of Understanding**

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Is it ever possible for faith to be understood? Can the belief of faith be made real? The question of one's ability to actualize one's faith is considered thoroughly by St. Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion*, which is a work that ultimately seeks to portray the quest of faith in search of genuine understanding. As Anselm attempted to find God and seek understanding, he applied the facets of his intellect and rationality. However, would reason be enough to guide his faith towards an understanding that would satisfy his passion to know God? If not, what would allow him to make sense of his faith and arrive at genuine understanding? How is the modern Christian able to apply the lessons of Anselm into making faith a genuine reality? I intend to demonstrate that Anselm's faith could only successfully seek and find understanding with the divine illumination derived from the grace of God. By first examining the Augustinian correlation extant in Anselm's work, a developed understanding of faith seeking understanding can be reached. Then, Anselm's ontological argument in its basic form will be examined as an example of the use of reason in seeking understanding. Subsequently, the role of his passion and his ardent desire to see God will be analyzed as a means of demonstrating his intent. Finally, the method by which his faith is enabled to be brought to a genuine understanding will be discussed in light of one's own personal faith. By examining these aspects of Anselm's understanding, one can gain a deeper insight as to how God can be known despite the limitations that seem to prevent the successful attainment of this goal.

I. The Augustinian Influence on Anselm and the Origin of Faith Seeking Understanding

As a point of origin, it is interesting to note that there are many similarities between the style of Anselm's *Proslogion* and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine of Hippo. Both are on a quest to find and know God, and they both invoke prayer and the use of scripture as a means to that end. Like Anselm, Augustine's faith has placed him on a quest in search for understanding. In his *Confessions*, Augustine opens with a prayer that contains the cry of his faith for understanding: "Let me seek Thee, Lord,... and let me utter my prayer believing in Thee... My faith, Lord, cries to Thee, the faith that Thou hast given me."¹ Likewise, Anselm begins with a heartfelt plea to God, voicing his desire to obtain understanding for his faith: "But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves."² Similarly, they both seek to find and know God, although they employ somewhat different methods in their respective searches. Whereas Augustine employs his memory to contemplatively search within his mind for God, Anselm uses his mind to argue rationally about God's existence as well as to attempt understanding God through his mind. Both, however, are centrally concerned with substantiating their faith with a genuine

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, transl. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 1.1.

understanding of God. In fact, Anselm gives a fuller title to the *Proslogion* in the “Preface” that emphasizes the theme of the work: *Faith in Quest of Understanding*.³ This work contains Anselm’s plea to actualize his faith: not that he might come to believe, but that he may come to see God, and in seeing God, come to know God with more certainty and assurance than he ever has before.

II. Anselm’s Quest for Understanding

Certainly, Anselm’s faith seemed to be searching for understanding. How, though, was this search to be articulated? What did faith seeking understanding involve? His understanding began with his view of humanity’s creation. Because humanity was created *imago dei* - in the image of God, individuals possess an image that is designed to facilitate divine meditation and love of God. However, since the image of God in all of humanity has been marred by sin, human beings are unable to properly reflect on that image or to love God rightly.⁴ The only solution lies in the renewing work of God who must remake the individual so that the image of God may be restored. This restoration is necessary in order for one to actualize one’s proper end of knowing and loving God. Ultimately, God must restore the image and renew the intellect within individuals so that a proper understanding of God as intended may be derived. Once the intellect and the image of God have been restored, one can then be enabled to function as intended by meditating on God and seeking God fully. In doing so, one would be able to fulfill the purpose for which one was created – namely, to see, know, and understand God. However, since humanity must deal with the effects of sin, individuals are not able to understand God properly through the sole use of their own intellect. Anselm thus understands his faith to be seeking understanding; that is, with the starting point of his faith and through the gift of God’s grace, he aims to understand the faith and the God of his faith. He puts it as such: “For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.”⁵ He was not seeking reasons why he should believe, but having believed, he was striving to understand and actualize the faith he already believed. In other words, instead of the case being one of “look before you leap” as the cultural aphorism states, it is the case of leaping in faith and then looking to decipher and make sense of the faith which has already been enacted. Thus, the relation between faith and reason is that faith is the point of origin upon which reason rests. Through the use of reason, faith is actualized, enabling one through the grace of God to see and understand God as one’s image is remade and one’s intellect is renewed. However, understanding can only come through

² Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87.

³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*

God's grace. As Anselm sought to bring understanding to his faith, he recognized that it was only by the illumination and grace of God that he would be able to see and understand God.⁶

In the quest of his faith for understanding, Anselm employs reason as a tool by which he attempts to understand and know God. The basis of using reason to attain understanding is founded on the premise that human beings are rational beings. Since human beings are rational creatures, the natural tendency is to use rationality towards the end of understanding something. Thus, the appeal to reason as a method of finding and knowing God made sense, as Anselm had as his end the goal of knowing God. However, the matter of its effectiveness in reaching its end goal would be brought to light as he strived towards understanding.

III. Anselm's Ontological Argument as a Means of Seeking Understanding

In Chapters 2 through 4 of the *Proslogion*, Anselm submits his ontological argument as a rational proof for the existence of God. The argument begins with the assertion that God is "something than which nothing greater can be thought."⁷ By this, Anselm contends that God necessarily exists because the quality of existence, which belongs to God, is greater than the quality of something imagined only in the mind but not existing in reality. Thus, when he claims that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, he is arguing that God logically and necessarily exists. He makes his argument by demonstrating that God's existence is his greatest attribute. As an illustration he gives the example of a painter:

"Thus, when a painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has [the picture] in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he has not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has now made it."⁸

Using the painter and the idea of a painting, he illustrates that something which exists in reality is greater than something which exists solely in the mind as a thought. The reasoning follows that because God is greater than which nothing can be conceived, God must exist in reality, otherwise, God would not fit the formula and something greater could indeed be conceived if God were to exist only as a thought in the mind. Since God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, God exists not only in the mind but in reality as well.

Moreover, he strengthens his argument by portraying the absurdity of one thinking that God might not exist. In chapter 3, he frames his argument as such:

"For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist. Hence, if that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought can be thought not to exist, then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is not the same as that-than-which-a-greater-

⁶ This will be developed later in the paper.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸ Ibid.

cannot-be-thought, which is absurd. Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists so truly then, that it cannot be even thought not to exist.”⁹

In other words, as one considers a certain object, it would be inconceivable for one to think that the object does not exist. Anselm notes that this particular certainty of the object is greater than another object that does not exist. For this reason, it is impossible for something than which nothing greater can be conceived to not exist because by definition existence is greater than non-existence. God could not possibly be that than which nothing greater could be thought if God did not exist. So, according to the argument, God not only exists, but it is impossible for God to not exist, because God is that than which nothing greater can be thought.

Having established his proof, Anselm proceeds to demonstrate that the claims of those who reject God’s existence are untenable. Chapter 4 is aimed at the biblical description of a fool, who is one that claims to understand the reasoning behind God’s necessary existence as demonstrated, but at the same time does not believe that God exists. Based on his argument, Anselm dismisses this position as logically invalid. After all, no one “understanding what God is can think that God does not exist.”¹⁰ If one truly understands the notion of God as that which nothing greater can be thought, it is impossible for one to posit that God could not exist. Thus, it is a self-referentially incoherent claim for one who understands the meaning of God’s existence to claim that God does not exist. Through the use of his rational capacities, Anselm has established a proof for the existence of God. However, it did not seem to be the end of his quest for understanding.

Even after he sets forth his ontological argument, Anselm is not yet satisfied with the knowledge he has of God. His rationality has supported his knowledge of God’s existence, but he has yet to fully find and know God. His passion to find God was still present, but it seemed that God was “beyond comprehension, ... hidden in the inaccessible light”¹¹ which he could not fathom. Even though he had found that than which greater could not be conceived, he questioned why his soul did not experience God. He had not yet found the object of his search. He came to the realization that understanding God was a function of knowledge which surpassed the limits of his own human and finite abilities. However, this realization did not negate his objective of coming to know God or discourage him from achieving his goal. His passionate desire to see God kept the quest of faith for understanding going, although he realized that the knowledge of God transcended his rational abilities. In fact, throughout the work, his desire to see God becomes a clear theme. The compelling language of sight in terms of faith portrays an intimate connotation between an object and its knower, such that seeing an object becomes a convincing method of authenticating and substantiating one’s knowledge about an object. As such, Anselm passionately desires to see

⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰ Ibid., 89.

God in that he desires to make his knowledge of God genuine to himself in a substantial manner. He prays the following:

"Lord my God, ... tell my desiring soul what You are besides what it has *seen* so that it may *see* clearly that which it desires. It strives so that it may *see* more, and it sees nothing beyond what it has *seen* save darkness. Or rather it does not *see* darkness, which is not in You in any way; but it *sees* that it cannot see more because of its own darkness."¹²

His own human limitedness and sinfulness were myopic factors which inhibited his ability to see and know God. However, his inabilities did not prevent him from seeking after God; his passion and hunger to see God was not quickly overcome.

IV. Anselm's Passion to Translate His Faith into Vision

In fact, throughout the whole work, he uses language that underscores his desire to see God and to know God. For instance, in the first chapter of the *Proslogion*, he makes his goal of finding God very clear, and he also displays intense passion and yearning to achieve this goal. He offers this petition and prayer to God: "Come then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You, where and how to find You."¹³ He is eager to seek God, and the passion with which he does so is demonstrated by his intense longing to see and to be filled with the knowledge of God. He describes this hunger and desire as such: "I set out hungry to look for You; I beseech You, Lord, do not let me depart from You fasting. I came to You as one famished; do not let me go without food."¹⁴ Yet, in all of his passionate strivings, he comes to realize an essential truth: God must be the initiator in the revelation. In order for him to see God, God must reveal Godself to Anselm. This is evident in his prayers where he petitions God to allow him to see and to be taught: "Teach me to seek You, and reveal Yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek You if You do not teach me how, nor find You unless You reveal Yourself."¹⁵ Thus, Anselm is determined to find God but also realizes that this will be impossible unless God reveals Godself to him.

V. Anselm on Divine Illumination and Grace

Hence, Anselm realized that it would only be because of God's revelation and work that he would ever come to see. His prayers reflected this realization: "Raise me up from my own self to You. Purify, heal, make sharp, 'illumine' the eye of my soul so that it may see You [Ps. 12:4]."¹⁶ His desire to see God would only be fulfilled by the extension of God's grace in the form of understanding that would enable him to see and know God. His rational abilities proved to be inadequate for seeing God as he so desired; rather, only through God's grace and illumination

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹² *Ibid.*, 96. Emphases mine.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

would he be able to reach his goal. In essence, his entire quest to see God hinged upon the demonstration of God's grace to him, by which he would be able to see as God's grace brought illumination and understanding to his soul and his faith. The grace of God became an essential element for understanding because even though his faith desired to see and understand God, his rational capacities for doing so were limited. There was no way by which the intellect by itself could arrive at an understanding and knowledge of God that would satisfy the deep passions he had for seeing God. His faith could not truly arrive at understanding without the workings of grace because of the effects of sin on the image of God as made evident by his rational limitations. Thus, his model for faith seeking understanding necessarily included the realization that he could not see unless God revealed knowledge to him and illuminated his understanding. Yet, despite the limitations of his mind and abilities, Anselm did not retreat away from his goal of seeing God. Instead, he displayed a determined passion to pursue an understanding of God using all of his abilities, limited as they were. Faith seeking understanding was realized for Anselm at the point where his strivings to know God intersected with the illumination given to him by God's grace.

VI. Applications for the Modern Christian

The effects of the fact-value dichotomy have reached such an extent that the academy and most professionals regard the products of mathematics, science, and other "positive" disciplines in which one arrives at knowledge via sustainable proof, as much more important and relevant than disciplines such as Christian theology which seem only to suggest information which cannot be verified or proven. Enter any major university campus, and you will find the positional hierarchy of theological studies near the bottom of the totem pole – scoffed at by high-browed scientists and other such professional researchers. Are we ever able to know our faith such that we are certain about it? Is it merely belief that has been passed down from generation to generation that we have dogmatically bought in to, but have no evidence or reality to support, other than the occasional charismatic sensation of euphoria, or the coincidental happenstance that some would pass off as miracle? Can one ever see one's faith?

These are all questions that demand legitimate answers in the midst of the modern and postmodern world and its post-Christian criticisms. However difficult it may be to defend one's faith, one can learn much from Anselm and his endeavors to actualize faith. His pursuit of seeing and understanding faith was not a trivial one; it is a concern that every serious student of theology and follower of the Christian faith must wrestle with in the attempt to make sense of the world, most especially in light of modern and postmodern criticism. One must remember that the faith of Christianity is unique from other faiths and makes claims that demand answers. Any long-term follower of

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

the Christian faith will acknowledge that the faith is not without its difficulties – for instance, how is one to make sense of injustice, given a God who is supposedly all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good? However, if we begin to transform the belief of our faith into the seeing of understanding, we can begin to grasp our faith more deeply and remain faithful to it even when difficulties engender questions.

However, like Anselm, we must seek to see our faith – not that we might believe, but that, in believing, we might come to finally arrive at the actualization and the ultimate realization of our faith. We must approach the modern difficulties and questions from the worldview of the Christian faith as the sure foundation from which the nuances of the faith can be precipitated. In believing, we come to understand, and in understanding, we gradually come to see and to grasp the reality of faith for which we long so deeply to attain. And yet, it is none of our own understanding or faculties that permit sight to come to our otherwise blind hearts and eyes, but it is the divine illumination springing from the depths of the grace of God, who longs for each individual to make the reality of faith one's own indisputable reality. Certainly, the Christian committed to the faith and to its understanding is not exempt from difficulty, but when one is armed with the surety of a genuine faith that has been transformed to the seeing of understanding, one can be equipped to handle those difficulties with conviction, commitment, and perseverance.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, Anselm passionately endeavored to find a way by which his faith could arrive at a satisfying understanding and knowledge of God. This quest was founded on faith which became a point of origin by which he ultimately sought to understand his faith and to see God. Although he used reason and his rational capacities as a means by which he sought to arrive at his goal, he found that the limits of reason prevented him from reaching his end by himself. Anselm struggled to make sense of how he was to know God if his intellect was limited and the image of God within him corrupted. Although he could prove God's existence through the use of reason, it was still not enough to satisfy his passionate desire to see God. In his strivings to see God, he hoped to arrive at an understanding of his faith that would make God real to him and actualize his faith into a *seeing* faith. However, only God could illuminate his sight to see; thus, Anselm was dependent on God's grace to bring understanding to his faith. He realized that grace was the essential element by which understanding was possible. Faith could not successfully seek and find understanding without grace. With grace, however, he realized that his understanding would be illuminated so that his faith could see. Not too differently than Anselm, we are all faced with the ineffable mystery of knowing God although our intellectual capacities are far from able to do so. We must allow our faith to seek understanding and hunger for the sight of God as Anselm did. However, since our capacities in the end are not able to bring God into focus successfully, it is ultimately God's grace which illuminates our understanding and

allows us to see what we could not see before. When our faith truly seeks understanding and we begin to reflect on and analyze our faith, just as with Augustine and Anselm, we realize that it is only by God's grace that our faith can be actualized. Faith seeking understanding is a process that involves one's entire being – loving God with one's entire soul, mind, and strength. Although our best efforts still do not give us clear vision of God, our limitations do not remove our obligation to seek God fully. Ultimately, as beings who are seeking to give understanding to faith, the importance of God's grace becomes paramount, since it is only by his grace that we can come to see and understand. Thus, our faith must seek understanding, not that it might believe, but that, in believing, we might come to understand and to see the God of our faith.

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