

# Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

## St. Anselm: A rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God

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**ST ANSELM OF CANTERBURY** is for many best known as the originator of the *ontological argument* for God's existence, and on that basis is sometimes dismissed as sort of a precursor to scholasticism. But this is quite unfair to the legacy of the venerable archbishop, who shines as an example of inspired integration of Faith and Reason. The ontological 'argument' is found in Chapters 2 and 3 of Anselm's *Prosologion*. However Chapter 1 (below) reveals Anselm's true intentions: not to supply a logical proof, but rather to draw up the mind into a mystical contemplation of God's being and nature. Anselm, like Augustine and Plato before him, is a *rational mystic*. He demonstrates for us the religious mental power of inspired dialectic, a form of meditation. Dialectic is an exercise which seeks to focus the mind, opening the 'eye of the intellect' for divine contemplation (*theoria*), and not a dry excursion into rationalism.

In reading this chapter it struck me that it worked better as poetry than prose, and I've so parsed it here. (It turns out that in her translation Benedicta Ward had the same notion, based partly on punctuation in old manuscripts.) The strong influence of St. Augustine (e.g., his *Confessions* and *Soliloquies*) may be seen.



**COME** now, thou poor child of man,  
turn awhile from thy business,  
hide thyself for a little time from restless thoughts,  
cast away thy troublesome cares,  
put aside thy wearisome distractions.

Give thyself a little leisure to converse with God,  
and take thy rest awhile in Him.  
Enter into the secret chamber of thy heart:  
leave everything without but God  
and what may help thee to seek after Him,  
and when thou hast shut the door,  
then do thou seek Him.  
Say now, O my whole heart, say now to God,  
*I seek Thy face; Thy face, Lord, do I seek.*

\*

COME now then, O Lord my God,  
teach Thou my heart when and how I may seek Thee,  
where and how I may find Thee?

O Lord, if Thou art not here, where else shall I seek Thee?  
but if Thou art everywhere, why do I not behold Thee,  
since Thou art here present?

Surely indeed Thou dwellest in the light which no man can approach unto.  
But where is that light unapproachable?  
or how may I approach unto it since it is unapproachable?  
or who shall lead me and bring me into it  
that I may see Thee therein?

Again, by what tokens shall I know Thee,  
in what form shall I look for Thee?  
I have never seen Thee, O Lord my God; I know not Thy form.  
What shall I do then, O Lord most high,  
what shall I do, banished as I am so far from Thee?  
What shall Thy servant do that is sick for love of Thee,  
and yet is cast away from Thy presence?  
He panteth to behold Thee, and yet Thy presence is very far from him.  
He longeth to approach unto Thee, and yet Thy dwelling-place is unapproachable.  
He desireth to find Thee, yet he knoweth not Thy habitation.  
He would fain seek Thee, yet he knoweth not Thy face.

O Lord, Thou art my God, Thou art my Lord; and I have never beheld Thee.  
Thou hast created me and created me anew,  
and all good things that I have, hast Thou bestowed upon me,  
and yet I have never known Thee.  
Nay, I was created to behold Thee, and yet have I never unto this day  
done that for the sake whereof I was created.

\*

O MISERABLE lot of man, to have lost that whereunto he was created!  
O hard and terrible condition!  
Alas, what hath he lost? what hath he found?  
what hath departed from him? what hath continued with him?  
He hath lost the blessedness whereunto he was created,  
and he hath found the misery whereunto he was not created;  
that without which nothing is happy, hath departed from him,  
and that hath continued with him which by itself cannot but be miserable.

Once man did eat angels' food, after which he now hungereth;  
now he eateth the bread of affliction, which then he knew not.  
Alas for the common woe of man, the universal sorrow of the children of Adam!  
Our first father was filled with abundance, we sigh with hunger;  
he was rich, we are beggars.  
He miserably threw away that in the possession whereof he was happy, and in the lack whereof we are  
miserable;  
after which we lamentably long and alas! abide unsatisfied.  
Why did he not keep for us, when he might easily have kept it, that the loss whereof so grievously  
afflicts us?  
Wherefore did he so overcloud our day, and plunge us into darkness?  
Why did he take from us our life, and bring upon us the pains of death?  
Wretches that we are, whence have we been driven out and whither?  
From our native country into banishment,  
from the vision of God into blindness,  
from the joy of immortality into the bitterness and horror of death.  
How sad the change from so great good to so great evil!  
Grievous is the loss, grievous the pain, grievous every thing.

\*

BUT alas for me, one of the miserable children of Eve, cast far away from God!  
What did I begin? and what have I accomplished?  
At what did I aim? and unto what have I attained?  
To what did I aspire? and where am I now sighing?  
I sought good, and behold, trouble.  
I aimed at God, and have stumbled upon myself.

I sought rest in my secret chamber, and I have found tribulation and grief in the inmost parts.  
I desired to laugh for gladness of spirit and am constrained to roar for the disquietness of my heart.  
I hoped for joy and behold increase of sorrow.

\*

HOW long, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord, wilt Thou forget us,  
how long wilt Thou hide Thy face from us?  
When wilt Thou turn and hearken unto us?  
When wilt thou enlighten our eyes and show us Thy face?  
When wilt Thou restore Thy presence to us?

Turn and look upon us, O Lord:  
hearken unto us, enlighten us, show us Thyself.  
Restore to us Thy presence that it may be well with us;  
for without Thee it goeth very ill with us.  
Have pity upon our labours and strivings after Thee, for without Thee we can do nothing.  
Thou callest us; help us to obey the call.  
I beseech Thee, O Lord, that I may not despair in my sighing,  
but may draw full breath again in hope.  
My heart is embittered by its desolation;  
with Thy consolation, I beseech Thee, O Lord, make it sweet again.  
I beseech Thee, O Lord, for in my hunger I have begun to seek Thee,  
suffer me not to depart from Thee fasting.  
I have come to Thee fainting for lack of food;  
let me not go empty away.  
I have come to Thee, as the poor man to the rich, as the miserable to the merciful,  
let me not return unsatisfied and despised:  
and if before I be fed, I sigh,  
grant me that, though after I have sighed, I may be fed.

O Lord, I am bent downwards, I cannot look up:  
raise me up, that I may lift mine eyes to heaven.  
My iniquities are gone over my head, they overwhelm me;  
they are like a sore burden too heavy for me to bear.  
Deliver me, take away my burden,  
lest the pit of my wickedness shut its mouth upon me:  
grant unto me that I may look upon Thy light,  
though from afar off, though out of the deep.

Let me seek Thee in desiring Thee;  
let me desire Thee in seeking Thee;  
let me find Thee in loving Thee;  
let me love Thee in finding Thee.

I confess to Thee, O Lord, and I give thanks unto Thee,  
because Thou hast created in me this Thine image,  
that I may remember Thee, think upon Thee, love Thee:  
but so darkened is Thine image in me by the smoke of my sins  
that it cannot do that whereunto it was created,

unless Thou renew it and create it again.  
I seek not, O Lord, to search out Thy depth,  
but I desire in some measure to understand Thy truth,  
which my heart believeth and loveth.  
Nor do I seek to understand that I may believe,  
but I believe that I may understand.  
For this too I believe, that *unless I first believe, I shall not understand.*

Source: St. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogin* 1 (tr. Webb, pp. 5–11; slightly edited)



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