

Origins of Systematic Theology: the contribution of St. Anselm of Bec

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As a thinker, St. Anselm is not ranked with the likes of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. He is known amongst philosophers for an argument or proof about the truth of God's existence which has never been accepted by the Church's teaching authority. Against St. Anselm's Ontological argument, Aquinas had argued that a real distinction exists between ideal being and real being. The meaning of an idea is not to be confused with the truth of an idea. If we want to speak about truth and reality, we must speak about evidence which exists as something which is other than the meaning or the intelligibility of an idea. From evidence, we move toward the truth of an idea. The only kind of exception which we can possibly consider is the case of Aristotle's indemonstrables. The law of contradiction (in conjunction with the principle of identity and the principle of the excluded middle) cannot be proved from an external point of view (from something which exists outside the mind) since every kind of argument which tries to prove the truth of these laws must work from premisses which assume the truth of these laws. No contradictions can exist in any arguments which would want to be valid.

However, if we want then to speak about any contribution which comes to us from St. Anselm and which has been confirmed by the Church's teaching office, we can perhaps do no better than to recall words that come to us *proximately* from the First Vatican Council and its teaching about the relation which exists between acts of belief regarding truths of faith and acts of understanding about the meaning which belongs to these same truths:

...if [human] reason illuminated by faith inquiries in an earnest, pious and sober manner, it attains by God's grace a certain understanding of the mysteries, which is most fruitful, both from the analogy with the objects of its natural knowledge and from the connection of these mysteries with one another and with man's ultimate end.

Hence, while the Church proclaims truths of faith which always hold (no denials being possible), truths of faith are not to be confused with what can be grasped by the compass of our understanding. In conjunction with a faith which humbly submits to the truths of faith that are taught to us by the Church's Magisterium, the Church's Magisterium also speaks to us about a faith which should grow in its own luminosity (a faith which should grow in its own sense or its own meaningfulness). Besides growth in faith and belief, much more is needed. In the words of the First Vatican Council:

...let there be growth and abundant progress in understanding, knowledge and wisdom, in each and all, in individuals and in the whole Church, at all times and in the progress of all ages, but only within the proper limits, i.e., with the same dogma, the same meaning, the same judgement.

It is one thing thus to affirm and argue for the truth of a given teaching (here our understanding moves towards truth as a specific object) and, in determining what is true and what is false, we can encounter a very large number of truths. Truths suggest certitude. We want to be certain about what we want to believe. But, it is another thing to think about meaning and understanding and what we have when we think about how truths are joined to each other. Some understandings can encompass a large number of many different truths and if, in our understanding, we relate a larger number of truths than what we do if we use some other understanding, we prefer the first to the second. The greater an understanding, the richer our experience. In understanding, more elements or parts are put into an intelligible order and, whenever we put variables or truths into an order which we understand, conflicts and tensions are lessened. Hence, when things fit together within our understanding and when more things can fit

together within our understanding, our world changes as it presents itself to us in a way which is more wondrous than what we had thought or known. Better decisions come more easily. Our attitudes soften. In our self-experience, we encounter less turmoil. We have inner peace. We are less troubled by the contradictions which so frequently appear within the course of our daily lives.

The firmness or hardness which thus exists in our knowledge of truth with respect to matters of faith is thus overshadowed or perhaps we can say that it is supplemented or enriched by a cultivation of mind which has often been referred in a manner which speaks about “the milk of understanding.” In our Catholic theological tradition, we argue and know that our human freedom is grounded in our understanding. In our ability to devise new ways of coping, in finding new ways of responding to problems and difficulties, we reveal to ourselves (and to others) a freedom that goes with the manner of our human existence, a freedom which informs our living in a way which differs from the living of other beings who exist in our world. In our inventiveness, in our new attitudes, in new possible courses of action, in our understanding, freedoms are enjoyed which can never be taken from us.

However, while, in the 19th Century, the Church's Magisterium gives us a teaching about the importance of understanding in our faith lives, theological teaching about the importance of understanding predates this teaching by some centuries. Witness what St. Thomas Aquinas has to say in text taken from the *Quaestiones quodlibetales* 4, q. 9, a. 3:

...every act should be performed in a way adapted to its end. Now an argumentation can be directed to either of two ends. One kind of argumentation is directed to removing doubts as to whether something is so. In such argumentation in theology, one relies especially on the authorities... But another kind of argumentation is that of the teachers in the schools. It seeks not to remove doubts but to instruct the students so that they understand the truth that the teacher hopes to convey. In such cases it is necessary to base one's arguments on reasons that go to the root of the truth in question, that make hearers understand how what is said is true. Otherwise, if the teacher settles a question simply by an appeal to authorities alone, the students will have their certitude that the facts are indeed as stated, but they will acquire no knowledge or understanding, and they will go empty away.

In Aquinas, we can have two kinds of inquiry in theology. We can move from what we obviously already know toward what we less obviously know (toward what we can know if we can find proofs and arguments). This is the way of analysis. In this manner of procedure, we find the ways and means of dogmatic theology. However, if we move in a converse direction, we can begin with some kind of understanding that we propose and, from this understanding, using this understanding as a kind of base of operations, we can propose a new possible order of things which can relate this dogmatic truth with this other dogmatic truth. A better understanding is able to reveal how a larger number of religious truths are related to each other, the truth of a given truth revealing more about what can be said or understood about the meaning of some other truth. In this approach where the focus is on the comprehension of understanding, we have the ways and means of systematic theology. Instead of analysis, we have a way of thinking and understanding which is interested in synthesis, putting things together.

However, if in the conceptuality of Aquinas we have a focus on understanding and the value of understanding, and a distinction which can speak about two different kinds of theology (two different kinds of theological inquiry), we can ask about the origins of this insight in Aquinas. Does Aquinas's insight come from St. Augustine? We know that, in the corpus of this works, Aquinas refers to Augustine more frequently than to anybody else.

With respect then to what St. Augustine says about understanding, we find in a commentary on the Gospel of John the following phrase: *crede, ut intellegas* or, in other words, “believe so that you may understand.” Believing and understanding differ from each other if you have to have one in order to have the other. However, if belief must exist as a fundamental point of departure, we must first get to belief before we can go on from there to do anything else. Or, in other words, as a kind of corollary, we say: *intellego ut credam*: “I think so that I may believe.” We use our minds in order to move toward faith and belief and so, in the theology of St. Augustine, we have an approach that jives with the interests and the demands of dogmatic theology. The object is an understanding which affirms the reality which belongs to truths of faith and, if we are to move toward these truths, we must assemble every kind of evidence which can be used to elicit acts of rational assent which are to be joined to acts of faith and belief or which are to be equated, in some way, with acts of faith and belief. While acts of faith need a kind of help which can only be given to them by God, in our human context, we do what we can to prepare ourselves for the kind of certainty which we want when we think about acts of faith and belief and how we should respond to them with a complete type of personal commitment which is needed if we are fully to give ourselves to truths that belong to a higher order of meaning and being.

In the life and work of St. Augustine, however, we encounter a major concern with arguments which try to prove the truth of Catholic teaching and other arguments which try to indicate why other beliefs should be seen as false. In St. Augustine, the theologian, we find St. Augustine, the bishop. A bishop guards the truth of the Church's teaching although, in Augustine, we also find questions and reflections which point to a measure of interest in understanding (a desire for a growth in understanding which can attend to how one teaching is related to another). In his *On the Trinity*, analogies are taken from our human understanding of self and then they are applied to how we can think about the relations which exist within the Trinity: how God the Father relates to God the Son and how these two divine persons relate to God the Holy Spirit. However, in Augustine, despite a primary interest in settling questions about truth and a secondary interest in understandings which can add to our experiences of meaning, we find no articulation which clearly distinguishes between these two different objectives.

However, in St. Anselm, for the first time, a clear distinction is drawn between truth and understanding. In the *Proslogion*, St. Anselm speaks about “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). The wording closely resembles words which we find in St. Augustine. Belief leads to understanding and we believe in order to understand. St. Anselm works with the familiar conceptuality of St. Augustine. St. Anselm says: *credo ut intelligam*. “I believe so that I may understand.” However, in St. Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why God became Man”), we find a less ambiguous way of speaking. The context is a reflection which does not try to prove the truth of Christ's incarnation but a reflection which tries to find motives or reasons why explain why the Incarnation was as it was. Hence:

While the right order requires that we should believe the deep things of the faith before we undertake to discuss them by reason, it seems careless for us, once we are established in the faith, not to aim at understanding what we believe.

In other words, yes, we use our understanding in order to move toward faith and the truths of faith. But, once we have faith and have been informed by what is given to us in faith, another objective presents itself – a new responsibility which we should elicit our attention. Understanding becomes a focus which differs from any focus that deals with proofs for truths of faith. We start with faith and then we allow our faith to work within our inquiry and understanding: expanding it, extending it, creating a new human culture that works from our faith in a way which can bring everything that exists in our natural and human world back toward God.

It is not without reason thus that St. Anselm can be regarded as the first of the medieval theologians. If

it is true that systematic theology emerged as an achievement of the 13th Century, in the work of St. Anselm, we find an individual achievement: a way of thinking which was matched with a new way of speaking and, from this point of departure, a desire which persons could now begin to speak about in the context of conversations which they could have with each other. The work of a single person shifts into a work that many persons could now do (together). A new school of thought emerges and a development in Catholic theology which can work within a culture to transform it from within in a way which differs from what had been previously known. In attending to the person and work of St. Anselm, we can begin to move into a discovery of our own which now also knows about the difference between dogmatic and systematic theology and what requirements need to be met before there can be any kind of flowering which can exist if we attend to the special kind of inquiry which exists within the work of systematic theology.