

A letter to Anselm: A latticework on which to grow

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

Dear Father Anselm: It's been 900 years since that dawn of April 21, Wednesday in Holy Week, when you fell asleep in Christ. You may be surprised to learn of the fuss that is being made about you, with major conferences in England, Italy and New England, and glasses raised wherever Christian philosophy is prized.

We know you ordered your friend Eadmer to destroy the parchment quires on which he wrote your biography and to let you sink, as far as a powerful abbot and archbishop of Canterbury is allowed to sink, into oblivion. But, thank goodness, Eadmer honored your wish in letter only, making a secret copy before he destroyed the original, though he suffered pangs of conscience for the deception.

I hope you've forgiven Eadmer by now, and I hope he has forgiven you for putting him to such a test. You more than anyone must know the heartache it gives an author to see his creation destroyed. Remember how distraught you were when a careless monk lost the wax tablets on which you had drafted your *Proslogion*, and how your anguish was renewed when you found the second set of tablets mysteriously broken and scattered. And you were the very picture of authorial zeal when you said to your brethren, as death drew near, that you would welcome a little more time to finish your work on the problem of the soul's origin, "for I do not know whether anyone will solve it when I am dead." That's you all over, Father: prodigious humility combined with prodigious but curiously innocent pride.

I have a great deal to thank you for. When I was newly planted in the garden of the church—to use one of your favorite metaphors—you gave my thinking a latticework on which to grow. You showed me that adoration is reasonable and that reason rightly employed is a form of adoration. Given the current tendency to sunder Christian thought into rational apologetics on one side and emotional therapeutics on the other, I found your method of "faith seeking understanding" wonderfully wholesome and sane.

As a Benedictine you inhabited a world of prayer and psalmody so spacious that it could include every good exercise of thought and desire, including logical argument. You even prayed to God to help you find a proof for God's existence. You were convinced that there ought be a single argument capable of demonstrating, without relying upon scripture or authority, "that You exist as we believe, and that You are what we believe You to be." And the answer came to you in a flash: that no one who truly understands the idea of God ("something than which nothing greater can be conceived") can deny God's reality without self-contradiction. In every generation your bold attempt, which philosophers call the ontological argument, collapses into absurdity only to be reformulated and revived. Whatever its defects as technical philosophy, it succeeds in capturing what we mean by God: the unique Being who is worthy of worship, whose nonexistence is inconceivable, in whom all that is truest, loveliest and best converges, and whose service is perfect happiness and freedom.

Your life was hardly that of the serene contemplative. A virtuoso of prayer, friendship and intellectual discipline, you had gifts that condemned you to administrative tasks for which you were less than ideally suited. Though you were his choice for archbishop, King William Rufus harassed you for inadequately supporting his military projects and for siding with the pope he rejected. Things grew worse under Henry I as the lay investiture controversy heated up. But exile had its compensations: it gave you time to complete your masterpiece *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), on the necessity and "fittingness" of the incarnation. You argued that sin put us in arrears, not to the devil but to God; that God could not simply set our accounts right without subverting the very order he sought to reinstate; and that only a God-man could have repaid our debt. I can't say that your satisfaction theory is universally admired today, but even your critics must admire its harmony with your vision of divine perfection and human longing.

When you were a little boy you had a dream in which you climbed a mountain to heaven and met a King who fed you a piece of perfectly white bread. On your deathbed at age 76 you said, "Truly I think I might recover if only I could eat something." But you were beyond all hope of eating. At last your breath failed as you listened to this passage from Luke: "I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table." I love to think that after an arduous life of prayer and work you are finally getting to enjoy the food you craved as a child. Happy anniversary, Father Anselm, and many happy returns!