

‘The love that pierces the heart’: a critical analysis of the concept of sanctification in the writings of St Anselm of Canterbury

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Abstract

Contemporary analyses of Anselm’s objective description of Christ’s atonement have often resulted in a trend of interpretation that tends to ignore the relevance of this model to a development and understanding of a western doctrine of Christian sanctification. Through the examination of some overlooked insights offered in *Cur Deus homo* and their integration with other spiritual writings in Anselm’s corpus, the present article attempts to redirect current scholarship towards a more holistic engagement with Anselm’s doctrine of atonement, out of which an original doctrine of Christian perfection can be outlined.

Keywords: Anselm, atonement, perfection, sanctification, scholasticism

Over the past seventy-five years, theology has witnessed a revival of attention towards early scholasticism, seeking to value its achievements in their own right and within their own context.¹ Some recent academic interest in the theology of Anselm of Canterbury, therefore, can be understood within this broader context of theological *ressourcement*.² Nevertheless, in spite of such

¹ One has only to think of the efforts initiated by the French *ressourcement* in the twentieth century, and of the scholarship that this movement has since established. See e.g. Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir* (Étiolles: Casterman, 1937); Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956); Henri DeLubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (London: SCM Press, 2006). Cf. Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: OUP, 2009); Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie – New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

² See, amongst others, David Luscombe and Gillian Evans, *Anselm: Aosta, Bec, and Canterbury* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Katherin Rogers, *The Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Daniel Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003); Giles E. M. Gasper, *Anselm of Canterbury and his Theological Inheritance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams, *Anselm* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

positive attitudes, practical efforts have not always been accompanied by an equally insightful, contextual and holistic reading of the sources. For example, some slightly misguided interpretations of the fundamental basis of Anselm's doctrine of the atonement have become rather common within certain sections of academic scholarship. As will be shown, a purely external understanding of Anselm's doctrine of the atonement and a rationalistic reading of the archbishop's methodology have given rise to a fundamentally mechanistic interpretation of Anselm's soteriology.

The aim of this article is to point research towards a more holistic reading of Anselm's theology. It will attempt to draw attention to the profoundly mystical foundation of the archbishop's understanding of Christ's sacrifice, which in turn offers the basis for an original doctrine of Christian sanctification which is wholly intrinsic to Anselm's theological model.

Cur Deus homo and the locus of Anselm's doctrine of atonement

On the surface, it is unsurprising that Anselm's description of Christ's substitutionary work has been interpreted as a purely external, forensic exchange, granting objectivity to the atonement, yet preventing any notion of human, inner change through Christ. This is because Anselm's fundamental work on the atonement, *Cur Deus homo*, contains no discussion or reference that acknowledges the significance of a human response to the divine work of salvation.

The question 'Why did God become man?' that Anselm uses as his book's title, is already found in Augustine's *Discourses*,³ and prior to that, in Athanasius' *De incarnatione*.⁴ While both Augustine and Athanasius immediately provide the answer, 'So that man can become like God',⁵ Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* does not seem to lead to any affirmation of this kind. It is true that Anselm declares that 'Man, whose nature is rational, was made holy for this end, that he might be happy in enjoying God',⁶ and that 'God will either complete what he has begun with regard to human nature, or else he has made to no end so lofty a nature, capable of so great good'.⁷ Yet

³ Augustine, *Discorsi: su argomenti vari*, ed. V. Paronetto and A. M. Quartiroli. *Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana* 34 (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1989), 371.1.

⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, trans. a religious of CSMV (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), 54.3.

⁵ Augustine, *Discorsi* 371.1, and Athanasius, *Incarnation* 54.3.

⁶ Anselm, *Cur Deus homo*, in *St. Anselm's Basic Writings: Proslogium, Monologium, Cur Deus homo, Gaunilo's In Behalf of the Fool*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), 2.1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.4. See also *ibid.*, preface. 'Human nature was ordained for this purpose, . . . it was necessary that this design for which man was made should be fulfilled'.

these statements are connected more with the loss of original blessedness after the fall and the need of a restoring Saviour than with a direct idea of human ascension in a love response.⁸ If one considers only the *Cur Deus homo*, it almost seems that Anselm answers his own question by saying, 'So that man's debt could be paid'.⁹ However, Anselm was certainly aware of the descending and ascending movements present in Augustine's writings and in his overall theology, and it seems almost unavoidable to wonder why Anselm uses Augustine's very question without providing Augustine's very answer, at least in an obvious, plain formulation.¹⁰

Any suggestion attempting to solve the impasse by claiming that Anselm modified the core of Augustinian (or Athanasian) theology would be a mistake. As this article intends to demonstrate, the central concerns of Augustine's theology are constantly echoed throughout Anselm's thought. One could perhaps explain the discrepancy more suitably by highlighting the haste with which Anselm claims to have written his treatise, in an attempt to rebuke certain first drafts that someone had imprudently circulated before they had been edited. As the archbishop apologises, 'I have therefore been obliged to finish it [i.e. this work] as best I could, more hurriedly, and so more briefly, than I wished. For had an undisturbed and adequate period been allowed me for publishing it, I should have introduced and subjoined many things about which I have been silent.'¹¹

This would suggest that the *Cur Deus homo* should not be considered singularly representative of the entirety of Anselm's view of the atonement. Indeed, as Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams admit in their recent monograph, no single treatise in itself contains Anselm's complete understanding of the various topics in question. As Anselm did not write systematic analyses but only addressed theological questions as they occurred or as they were presented to him, his theology has to be interpreted as a whole from his entire corpus of writings.¹² Concerning his understanding of the doctrine of the atonement, therefore, the omitted elements, whose consideration would allow a more comprehensive synthesis, should be derived from his comments in some of his spiritual

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.2.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 2.6–7.

¹⁰ See Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.1. Augustine's idea of restlessness and pursuit of God is reaffirmed by Anselm in 'To the Holy Cross', in *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm with the Proslogion*, trans. Benedicta Ward (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 105.

¹¹ Anselm, *Cur Deus homo*, preface.

¹² Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, p. 254.

writings, where the prayerful mystic completes the sharpness of the scholastic thinker.¹³

In these writings, the motif of a substitutionary reading of Christ's atonement for humankind – definitely the fulcrum to Anselm's understanding – is married to a considerable number of references to a kindled, striving, responsive love to the love of God. Ultimately, these themes delineate a parallel and equally crucial portion of Anselm's theology: his hardly explored doctrine of sanctification. The prominence and depth of his understanding of holiness, although scattered across different sections of his prayers, letters and devotional meditations, is such that it cannot be ignored or dismissed, as critics have tended to do. Rather, its analysis can offer an invaluable way to complete Anselm's understanding of grace at work.

Grace, love and the human condition

Following the pattern of Augustine's theology, Anselm's system originates from the consideration of divine grace. As Anselm writes in his address to St John the Baptist, 'I, the accused of God through manifold iniquities, / worth nothing because of so much misery, / come to you whom grace has filled with blessedness'.¹⁴ The condition of holiness, as the product of God's grace, is sharply opposed to man's state of sinfulness, and Anselm portrays the extreme seriousness of human sin in vivid colours. Not only does he define sin as 'Not to render to God his due',¹⁵ and calls sinning 'This calumnious reproach still heaped upon God';¹⁶ he also claims that human sin is more terrible than even that of Satan.¹⁷ In fact, 'He deserted God, and God let him go; / I fled from God, and God came with me. / . . . So we are both set against God: / he against him who does not want him; / I against him who died for me'.¹⁸ Grace, then, is God's gentle response to human perversion.

¹³ See Eadmer's account of how Anselm received in prayer the answer to the question he discusses in *Proslogion*. Eadmer of Canterbury, *The Life of Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. R. W. Southern (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd, 1962), 1.19.

¹⁴ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 127, 'To St John the Baptist' (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Anselm, *Cur Deus homo*, 1.11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.22.

¹⁷ The description of sin as *failure to render to God his due* (*ibid.*, 1.11) is not intended as an all-encompassing definition. Indeed, Anselm offers also another description, this time in terms of *distortion of beauty* (*ibid.*, 1.15), which is almost completely ignored by current scholarship, which seems to have lost perception of the divine signification of beauty as perfection.

¹⁸ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 129, 'To St John the Baptist'.

To sin – which offends God’s goodness¹⁹ and makes us his enemies²⁰ – God replies with love, through grace that not only enfolds us, but also kindles in us the desire to love in return. As Anselm prays, ‘Get for me, I beg you, grace / so that I may be worthy to love him / as I am loved by him’.²¹

If it is correct to identify in justification a descending movement of divine love, and to see in sanctification the product of the ascending love that Christ stirs in us, then in Anselm’s theology the two steps take place in an identity of moments, although they may unfold discursively in *re*. As he writes, ‘Justify your sinner / . . . and in your whole and unceasing grace / let him be refashioned by you’.²² Also, ‘Grant me . . . / to be loved of you and to love you’.²³ Divine love shown in grace triggers – and even ‘constrains’ – a response in the human soul.²⁴ Indeed, love is the fulcrum of Christ’s atonement in Anselm. Christ ‘inspire[s]’ love in us,²⁵ and considering the extent reached by Christ’s love, our desire is to respond by loving God and neighbours in return, for the sake of Christ:

Jesus Christ, my dear and gracious Lord, / You have shown a love greater than that of any man / And which no one can equal, / For you in no way deserved to die, / Yet you laid down your dear life / For those who served you and sinned against you. / . . . / My good Lord, / With what affection should I think of your love / Which is beyond measure? / What return shall I make for your boundless gifts? / . . . / Except to obey his commandment from my heart? / For this is your commandment, that we love one another. / . . . / I love all men, in you and for your sake.²⁶

As has been highlighted, Anselm understands our love, by which we respond to Christ, as an almost inevitable product of the divine love shown to us. Interestingly, more than once this is even defined as our *due return of love to Christ’s grace*, which we can never fully provide in this life.²⁷ If this perspective is analysed *vis-à-vis* that spelled out in the *Cur Deus homo*, a quite peculiar theological synthesis can be made. The God-man, who came by the grace of God to pay our outstanding debt with God, deserves from us our utmost gratitude and adoration. Like our initial debt, though, this latter

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–2, ‘To St Paul’.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–9, ‘To St John the Evangelist (1)’.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165, ‘To St John the Evangelist (2)’.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 156, ‘To St Paul’.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 167, ‘To St John the Evangelist (2)’.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 204, ‘To St Mary Magdalene’.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 212–3, ‘For Friends’. Cf. p. 97, ‘To Christ’.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 95, ‘To Christ’. Cf. p. 125, ‘To St Mary (3)’.

one is too high for us to settle: after Christ paid our debt to the Father, our debt of gratitude to Christ cannot be extinguished either. As Anselm argues, however, in his atonement Christ has also already paid for our insoluble debt of gratitude, so now we can be confident in his grace toward our inability here as well.²⁸ In this sense, our impaired holiness, which Christ's love originates and rouses as ascending love, is also fulfilled in and by Christ himself, whereby both an objective, external accomplishment and an internal change are recognised and effected in Christ's atonement. The language that historically has been seen as the typical Anselmian dialectic of forensic transaction can be applied not only to Anselm's doctrine of justification, but also to his doctrine of holiness, further evidencing that in his system the two understandings stem from each other in mutual continuity.

Duty and the character of love

Anselm's carefully structured system could perhaps be challenged at this point. If Christ has paid both our outstanding debt with the Father and our consequent debt of gratitude with himself, he has atoned for our salvation by grace, imputing his justice to us, and he has also proclaimed us holy, imputing his holiness to us as well. With Christ being both our justification and our sanctification through his accomplished work, we seem to have no reason to strive for an impartation of holiness, contrary the archbishop's encouragement.²⁹

The answer Anselm provides to this argument is twofold. First, we must love God in return *because this is our duty*, a sort of 'categorical imperative' which binds us regardless of any circumstance. Although Christ has paid for us, we still ought to show signs of gratitude to him.³⁰ Secondly, we must love God in return because this is exactly the normal effect of God's grace.³¹ If this effect does not take place, it is because the soul must have not received divine grace in the first place. That is, a life without a right response to God's love is not a life of faith, and without faith we cannot be saved.³² In fact, this inevitable but effective work of God's grace makes us 'Love the love',³³ 'For the love of . . . [Christ's] love'.³⁴

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 95, 97–8, 'To Christ'.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 147, 'To St Paul'.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 93, 'To Christ'. Cf. p. 163, 'To St John the Evangelist (2)'.

³¹ Ibid., p. 217, 'For Enemies'.

³² Ibid., p. 147, 'To St Paul'.

³³ Ibid., p. 161, 'To St John the Evangelist (1)'.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 206, 'To St Mary Magdalene'.

The portrait of Mary Magdalene that Anselm offers is one of the most effective images illustrating this particular point. Mary Magdalene ‘Loved much’³⁵ and her love is connected to the forgiveness she received. Described as the icon of love, after being forgiven by Christ’s grace, she is the one who grieves for him. She could not have prevented the crowd from killing Jesus, but she is tenderly willing to do what she can, by embalming her Lord, to mourn his death. Even when at the tomb she cannot carry her purpose to completion, as she cannot find Christ’s body, she still does what she can: she weeps.³⁶ Likewise, the soul, transformed by grace, responds to God’s love with the best effort of the sincere ‘Love that pierces the heart’ of which it is capable.³⁷

Anselm’s notion of response according to one’s ability is significant. In fact, while the solution to the problem of sin is presented as straightforward – ‘Sinner . . . refuse in your will to sin’³⁸ – Anselm seems to imply in a number of instances that this is an extremely hard process.³⁹ Quite predictably, there does not seem to be room in his system for a doctrine of eradication: sin remains a reality with which the soul needs to struggle every day. Rarely has a more powerful lament for such a condition of internal strife been composed than that which Anselm cries to Mary, asking for intercession:⁴⁰

How disturbed and confused is the state of sin! / How my sins tear my heart in pieces and divide it, / Gnaw at it and torment it. / Because of these sins of mine, Lady, / I desire to come to you and be cured, / But I flee from you for fear of being cursed. / My sins cannot be cured unless they are confessed, / But to acknowledge them throws me into confusion. / If they are concealed they cannot be healed, / If they are seen they are detestable. / They chafe me with sorrow, they terrify me with fear, / They bury me with their weight, they press upon me heavily, / And confound me with shame.⁴¹

To Anselm, the daily oxymoron of the utmost desire to live loving ‘Whatever you [Christ – and therefore Mary] love’,⁴² struggling with the constant burden of indwelling sin, is expressed in a practical life devoted to dying

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201, ‘To St Mary Magdalene’.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 203–4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131, ‘To St John the Baptist’.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 133–4; cf. p. 213, ‘For Friends’.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 212–13, ‘For Friends’.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 108–9, ‘To St Mary (1)’.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 125, ‘To St Mary (3)’.

to sin and living to Christ. The pattern of daily mortification and vivification finds full expression in the discursive unfolding of Anselm's understanding of soteriology. As he prays, 'By you [the cross] my soul is dead to its old life and lives to the new life of righteousness'.⁴³ And elsewhere he begs that he 'May deserve to be / planted in the likeness of your death and resurrection, / by mortifying the old man, / and by renewal of the life of righteousness'.⁴⁴

Because of this motif of continual strife and frequent failure, 'For my love is not sufficient',⁴⁵ the Anselmian system considers perfection in this life to be an unattainable goal, realised only at the 'Consolation of . . . [Christ's] coming'.⁴⁶ The sinful body needs to be refashioned by the grace of God into a glorified one, free from the invasion of sin.⁴⁷ The only thing the transformed believer can do now is to 'Be fed with griefs, / . . . Perhaps then my Redeemer will come to me, / for he is good'.⁴⁸

In parallel with the sharp tones of themes such as struggle, grief, mortification and vivification, Anselm also offers an approach that identifies the effects of responsive love in expressions such as 'cleansing',⁴⁹ 'healing',⁵⁰ and 'love being enkindled'.⁵¹ In fact, verses of pleading that beg the 'True healer . . . [to] heal me' are anything but rare;⁵² and similarly numerous are stanzas of praise:

Heaven, stars, earth, waters, day and night, / and whatever was in the power of use of men was guilty; / . . . But see now how they are raised to life, and praise the Lord, / . . . For they know the very God, the Creator / . . . sanctifying them by use. / So much good has come into the world / through the blessed fruit of Mary's womb.⁵³

Overall, it would be inaccurate to infer from Anselm's negation of the attainability of full perfection in this life that which Denis DeRougemont, in

⁴³ Ibid., p. 105, 'To the Holy Cross'.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 101, 'Before Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ'.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 116, 'To St Mary (3)'.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 95, 'To Christ'. See also Anselm, *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Walter Froehlich, 3 vols (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990–4), vol. 1, pp. 151–2, 'To Frodelina'.

⁴⁷ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 101, 'Before Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ'.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 94, 'To Christ'.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 107, 'To St Mary (1)'.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 167, 'To St John the Evangelist (2)'.

⁵² Ibid., p. 133, 'To St John the Baptist'.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. ii8–9, 'To St Mary (3)'.

a different context, calls a 'Sacred obstruction' or 'Infinite transcendence'.⁵⁴ Indeed, Anselm does not describe the human, ascending movement to God in terms of negative presence or infinitely unachievable achievement. Although the love with which we respond to God is imperfect and constantly inadequate, it still represents the human's best effort, enabled by divine grace. As shown above, this is already fulfilled in Christ's atonement and will be ultimately fulfilled in the believer at Christ's coming in glory. Throughout, Christ's grace struggles, heals and restores, taking the first step.

Love, holiness and the sacramental work of the Holy Spirit

Having analysed the parabolic shape of Anselm's understanding of soteriology and sanctification, it seems helpful to examine whether it is possible to reconstruct Anselm's position on the Holy Spirit's action in the sanctification of the human person. Again, Anselm treats this topic at length in his prayer collections. The 'Prayer to Christ' highlights that both soteriology and holiness are and need to be firmly centred in christology. His words of imploration are clear:

Most merciful Lord, / turn my lukewarmness into a fervent love of you. / Most gentle Lord, / my prayers tend towards this – / that by remembering and mediating on the good things you have done I may be enkindled with your love. / . . . My soul waits for the inbreathing of your grace / in order to be sufficiently penitent/ and live a better life.⁵⁵

Christ, the God-man who came to us and atoned for us, also taught us the way of love. He is indeed the causative agent of our rehabilitation to respond in love. However, although Christ is certainly the one 'Work[ing] . . . good' in us,⁵⁶ to conclude that the Holy Spirit has no activity in Anselm's understanding of sanctification would be incorrect. The Holy Spirit is understood to 'inflare' our minds to holy living.⁵⁷ While Christ communicates holiness to us, as he is the 'Restorer',⁵⁸ the Holy Spirit helps us forward in the actual practice of the holy way.

Regrettably, clear comments such as the above on the nature and work of the Holy Spirit are rather infrequent in Anselm's writings. As well as inspiring us to Christ, Anselm clearly states that the Holy Spirit *teaches* us, *convinces* us,

⁵⁴ Denis DeRougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion, rev. edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 59–60, 62.

⁵⁵ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 94, 'To Christ'.

⁵⁶ Anselm, *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 152, 'To Frodelina'.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 119, 'To St Mary (3)'.

persuades us and guides us to the right path in God.⁵⁹ Yet one cannot evade disappointment at the sporadic character of direct references to the vivifying activity of the Holy Spirit. This has led John Milbank, for example, to contest that the Holy Spirit is ultimately marginalised in Anselm's theology, which thus tends to undermine personal distinctions in the Trinity. 'It is he [Anselm] who deepens the Augustinian tendency to subordinate the persons to the substance . . . This move is on the road to modalism.'⁶⁰

Nonetheless, a closer analysis of Anselm's writings reveals a much more dynamic trinitarian theology. As Thomas Williams has convincingly argued, in Anselm's unsystematised corpus of writings, the Holy Spirit should be identified as the tiller of divine growth in creation, 'An agent of supernatural fecundity and growth' in the cosmos,⁶¹ and, equally as fundamentally, in the human heart.⁶² Indeed, in Anselm's words, 'The Holy Spirit, through whom charity is poured into the hearts of the servants of God, has made your soul fruitful with so much and such great affection'.⁶³

In this sense, all references to *love* and *growth in love* in Anselm's writings are to be interpreted within the greater scope of the work of the Holy Spirit in human redemptive sanctification.⁶⁴ This becomes clear also in passages in which he links a theology of *cognitio* and *intellectum* with that of *amor* and *dilectio*. As he writes,

Make me taste by love (*per amorem*) what I taste by knowledge (*per cognitionem*); let me know by love (*per affectum*) what I know by understanding (*per intellectum*). . . . Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of love (*amorem tuum totum*). I am wholly yours by creation (*conditione*); make me all yours, too, in love (*dilectione*).⁶⁵

⁵⁹ E.g. Anselm prays that the Holy Spirit may convince Adelaide to continue in the path towards Christ and love for him (Anselm, *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 93, 'To Adelaide'); that he may convince Ernulf to continue in a life of death to sin and living for God (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 298, 'To Ernulf the Prior and the Monks of Canterbury'); that he, through his anointing, may teach and persuade Mathilda to continue to live a salvific life pleasing to God (*ibid.*, p. 301, 'To Mathilda, Queen of the English'); and that he may guide Robert in God's truth (*ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 261, 'To Robert, Count of Meulan').

⁶⁰ John Milbank, 'The Second Difference: A Trinitarianism without Reserve', *Modern Theology* 2 (1986), pp. 214–15.

⁶¹ Thomas Williams, 'God who Sows the Seed and Gives the Growth: Anselm's Theology of the Holy Spirit', *Anglican Theological Review* 89/4 (2007), p. 620.

⁶² Anselm, *De conceptu virginali et de originali peccato* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), p. 11.

⁶³ Anselm, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 213, 'To the Monk Walter'.

⁶⁴ Ultimately, Anselm's overall association of the Holy Spirit with the 'gift of love' is consistent with his general, trinitarian Augustinianism, as will be evidenced later.

⁶⁵ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 237, 'Meditation on Human Redemption'.

Obviously, the holiness Anselm describes is neither separate nor independent from the church's sacramental structure. Sanctification, like justification, can only be understood as divinely communicated through the means of grace. As Anselm prays before receiving the eucharist,

Make me, o Lord, so to perceive with lips and heart / And know by faith and by love, / That by the virtue of this sacrament I may deserve to be / Planted in the likeness of your death and resurrection, / By mortifying the old man, / And by renewal of the life of righteousness.⁶⁶

The dependence of holiness on sacramental impartation should be understood as a fundamental step in the believer's gain of awareness of divine grace and personal sin. In fact, while baptism represents the initial moment of Christian rebirth, the soul's inability to keep baptismal vows allows sin to defile the human person again.⁶⁷ As Anselm states, 'All these things were given to me / by "the blessed fruit of . . . [Mary's] womb" / through his baptism of regeneration, / some in fact, others in hope; / yet by sinning I put it all away from me'.⁶⁸ Thus, the sacramental system is fundamental for a full restoration in holiness: through baptism we have been regenerated in Christ and by grace, in the penitence of a contrite heart, aware of personal incapacity, we are sustained through the eucharist. As Anselm prays, 'Renew in me the grace of your baptising. / Go before me with your grace; follow me with your mercy. / Give me back through the sorrow of penitence / what you have given through the sacrament of baptism'.⁶⁹

Holiness as the universal Christian condition

The importance of the sacramental foundation of Anselm's concept of Christian holiness indicates that Anselm's 'theology of loving response' is not a condition only reserved for the very few. On the contrary, it is a state pertaining to all baptised Christians. Certain sections of historic scholarship have tended to assign the strife of holy living exclusively to the ordained priesthood. As John Grant once commented, 'The cloister seemed to be the only place where a holy life was possible, and was the only place where learning could be acquired and intellect trained for the service of God.'⁷⁰ While the second part of this statement seems hard to doubt, the idea that

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101, 'Before Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ'.

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 138, 'To St Peter': 'My soul reborn by baptism in Christ'.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117, 'To St Mary (3)'. See also p. 128, 'To St John the Baptist'.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132, 'To St John the Baptist'.

⁷⁰ *Anselm's Cur Deus Homo, to which is Added a Selection from his Letters*, ed. and trans. John Grant (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909), p. xii.

only monasteries – and not street markets – could provide a conceivable cradle for the practice of holiness should be reconsidered in favour of a more inclusive approach. For example, Anselm sent a collection of his own prayers to Mathilda of Tuscany for her personal devotional time, ‘So that by reading them the mind may be stirred up either to the love or fear of God, or to a consideration of both’.⁷¹

Even so, one could still argue against a universal application of the condition of holiness from Anselm’s words to Albert, an Italian physician who was presumably struggling in deciding whether or not to take monastic vows. In fact, both in his first and in his second letter, Anselm encourages him not to be a friend of the world, seeking earthly goods but rather to choose Christ and follow him in his poverty.⁷² The language he uses is quite surprising, going as far as saying he is ‘Long[ing] for . . . [Albert’s] conversion’, referring to the moment in which Albert would finally join the monastic community.⁷³ However, Anselm’s statements could be interpreted within the context of Albert’s peculiar struggle with a personal religious vocation. Even more simply, it could be said that Anselm noticed Albert’s remarkable spiritual gifts and theological potential, so that in his response he was simply trying to influence a spiritual son to make the most appropriate decision in a brave step of faith.

An understanding of sanctification limited to a subgroup of the baptised is, in fact, inconsistent with other statements of Anselm, particularly those found in some of his letters written to noblemen and other laypersons. The *Letter to Odo and Lanzo*, two lay friends of the archbishop, is a compendium of encouragements on daily holy living. In it the two gentlemen are urged ‘To study Holy Scriptures’, and then they are pastorally inspired not to dwell on the past in personal progression in holiness, but rather to persevere with constancy, so to grow daily.⁷⁴ As he writes, ‘Always consider . . . past achievements as if they are of little value, so that you do not despise maintaining what you have achieved, and always aspire, although hindered by infirmity, to add something to it by perseverance.’⁷⁵

The indispensability of constant progression in every Christian’s personal holiness is confirmed by Anselm’s insistence on the fact that the Bible claims many to be called, but only few to be chosen.⁷⁶ Even in the *Cur Deus homo* Anselm dedicates a surprisingly considerable section to arguing how the

⁷¹ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 90, ‘Letter of Anselm to the Countess Mathilda of Tuscany’.

⁷² Anselm, *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 131–2, pp. 149–50, ‘To Albert, the Physician’.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 132, ‘To Albert, the Physician’.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76, ‘To Odo and Lanzo’.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Matt 20:16; 22:14.

number of the elect must equal the number of the fallen angels and is therefore limited. His encouragement to Odo and Lanzo, then, is that since no one really knows how few the few are (although we know that the saints are already part of that limited number⁷⁷) every Christian should strive to their best ability to live already here and now in a heavenly lifestyle, so to be accepted among the few for whom there is still room in heaven. As he asserts,

For we are all told by Truth that, from among many called, few are chosen. We are certain that all [are called] but just how few [are chosen] we are uncertain of because Truth is silent . . . Since nobody among us knows to how few the number of chosen is limited, so nobody knows if he is already among this small number of the chosen . . . Let . . . [each person] consider anxiously whether he is advancing in the same way as those whose election none of the faithful doubts . . . Let [the fear of God] flame daily higher and higher until, transformed, it lights your way into eternal security.⁷⁸

It is interesting that these words are almost identical to those Anselm delivers to Monk Herluin, further evidence that Anselm understood holiness as a necessary process for all baptised Christians.⁷⁹ Everybody should start persevering in holy living immediately, since 'As with every single day you see your past life growing longer . . . so you may be certain that your span of time for living a good life is daily getting shorter. So take care, my friend, to spend the lifespan left to you . . . in such a way that day by day you make progress toward what is better in the holy intentions of your mind.'⁸⁰

Sanctification and Anselm's Augustinianism

As mentioned before, Anselm's entire theological system is pervaded by an Augustinian understanding of grace as prior to repentance and as the basis for human rehabilitation to a life of loving God. His words, 'Your goodness, Lord, created me; / your mercy cleansed what you had created / from original sin',⁸¹ seem to mirror Augustine's words, 'Who will clean my . . . [soul]? To whom but yourself can I cry, Cleanse me of my hidden sins, O Lord . . . You will turn mercifully towards me.'⁸² To Anselm, in fact, Christ is the one

⁷⁷ See Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.16–18.

⁷⁸ Anselm, *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 76–7, 'To Odo and Lanzo'.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60, 'To the Monks Herluin, Gundulf, and Maurice'.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77, 'To Odo and Lanzo'.

⁸¹ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 94, 'To Christ'.

⁸² Augustine, *Confessions* 1.6–7.

who inspires the good, and the good is to love God. His prayer, 'Lord, if what you inspire is good, / or rather because it is good, that I should want to love you, / give me what you had made me want: / grant that I may attain to love you as much as you command',⁸³ reflects Augustine's understanding of the 'Love of God carried even to the point of contempt for self'.⁸⁴ Just as Augustine talks about a restlessness in the human heart until it rests in God,⁸⁵ Anselm begs that 'By . . . [the Cross, he] may come to those good things / for which man was created'.⁸⁶

The fact that Augustine and Anselm share the same understanding of grace is paralleled by the fact that they both share the same understanding of sin. For both, the body, originally created perfect, was afterwards invaded by sin. To Augustine, who states that, 'The human nature was created good by the good God, but . . . vitiated by sin, [now] needs the cures of Christ',⁸⁷ Anselm provides an echo, praising Christ because 'At the Resurrection you will refashion / the body of my humiliation / according to the body of your glory'.⁸⁸ Neither of the two theologians claims that the love of sin in the perverted soul may be characterised as false love, but both of them consider it as a misdirected love, which needs redirection. Augustine's idea of self-destructive love 'To the point of contempt for God'⁸⁹ is re-expressed by Anselm in his invective, 'If you [i.e. sin] have made me mad with love for you, / why have you made my senses unfeeling with your torpor?'⁹⁰

Anselm is indebted to the Augustinian tradition also in the exclusive centrality that he assigns to Calvary in Christ's vicarious work for humanity. Every time a reference is made to Christ's accomplishments, which enable the soul to respond in love, its focus is always concentrated on Christ's passion, death, resurrection and ascension, with almost no attention given to his earthly ministry prior to the Triduum. Justification and sanctification are both approached only through a Calvary perspective. As Anselm claims, 'In you [the cross] and through you is my life and my salvation;

⁸³ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 93, 'To Christ'.

⁸⁴ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. G. P. Goold, 7 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1988), 14.28.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.

⁸⁶ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 105, 'To the Holy Cross'.

⁸⁷ Augustine, 'Nozze e concupiscienza', in *Matrimonio e verginità*, trans. M. Palmieri, V. Tarulli, and N. Cipriani. Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana 7/1 (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1978), 2.3.9.

⁸⁸ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 101, 'Before Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ'.

⁸⁹ Augustine, *City* 14.28.

⁹⁰ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 108, 'To St Mary (1)'.

/ in you and through you is the whole and all my good; / . . . By you my sins are wiped out, / by you my soul is dead to my old life / and lives to the new life of righteousness'.⁹¹ Although Anselm's position in this regard does not seem surprising for a mediaeval, western theologian, more attention to Christ's life of righteousness by the power of the Spirit is definitely something to be desired in his model of holiness.

Finally, one must note that the whole corpus of Anselm's writings seems to be pervaded by a background persuasion of love's irresistibility. Two centuries after Anselm, in describing the inevitability of Paolo Malatesta and Francesca of Rimini's affair, Dante will write that, 'Love, that denial takes from none beloved, / Caught me with pleasing him so passing well, / That, as thou seest, he yet deserts me not'.⁹² But even before the Italian *dolce stil novo*, the poetry of the *trouvères* expressed a similar concept in the myth of Tristan and Isolde. The two main characters, in love with love but not with each other – as DeRougemont reminds the reader,⁹³ – visit Ogrin the hermit who tells them that, 'Love leads you irresistibly!'⁹⁴

In his 'Letter to Odo and Lanzo', Anselm expresses a very similar concept: 'True love honourably bestowed demands to be loved blamelessly in return'.⁹⁵ Analysed in the context of divine love freely given to the human soul, then, such a peculiar understanding sheds further light on the necessity of a human response of love. This response becomes almost inevitable, because by love's very nature, if a person is loved he or she cannot do anything else but love in return. Given the haste with which Anselm published his *Cur Deus homo*, this consideration might help in understanding why the idea of response is not included in that masterpiece. It could be argued, perhaps, that Anselm was concerned at that moment to put forth only the fundamental concept of soteriology, that is, God's overflowing, gratuitous love for humanity. The reader's mind, embedded in a culture which considered love irresistible, would then have inferred that if God loves us, we cannot but respond to God in love. This is clearly only speculation, but if accurate it could represent an invaluable key to understanding the parabola of justification and sanctification implied in Anselm's doctrine of the atonement.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105, 'To the Holy Cross'.

⁹² Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry F. Cary (London: George Bell & Sons, 1910), *Inferno* V.103–5.

⁹³ DeRougemont, *Love*, 82–3.

⁹⁴ 'Amors par force vos demeine!' Henri Bérout, *The Romance of Tristan*, ed. A. Ewert (Bristol: Bristol Classic Press, 1991), v. 2296.

⁹⁵ Anselm, *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 75, 'To Odo and Lanzo'.

Addressing current scholarship

The above interpretation of Anselm's doctrine of sanctification should redirect current misreadings of Anselm's theology. Thomas Noble has recently offered an appraisal of the type of doctrine of Christian sanctification that can be derived from Anselm's understanding of Christ's atonement. While acknowledging Anselm's contribution towards an interpretation of sin as an objective reality, and not merely as an 'attitude',⁹⁶ his assessment concludes that Anselm's view

deals with the atonement entirely in external categories . . . The Anselmic model may be of greatest value, therefore, in understanding how the atonement is the basis for our pardon and acquittal – in short, our justification . . . It does not seem to have anything to say about sin as a reality internal to us. . . . it provides no basis for sanctification.⁹⁷

Although rather stark in tone, Noble's interpretation is not an isolated occurrence. Thomas Merton had already claimed that Anselm's soteriology is the paramount example of the 'Strict, literal and objective value of Christ's redemptive death for man'.⁹⁸ Similarly and more recently, Michael Winter has concluded that in Anselm's theology Christ's death, effecting satisfaction in purely external categories, makes atonement arbitrary, as it is unable to account for any type of change in relation between us as sinners and the Father. Even more concerning, if it did, the very need of sacrificial satisfaction would constitute the causative step triggering a loving relationship from and with God – thereby setting up a semi-Pelagian understanding of the role of human effort in sanctification that is incompatible with Jesus' own example in the Gospels.⁹⁹

Such an interpretation of Anselm's model of atonement finds its natural counterpart – and possibly its cause – in a rationalistic misreading of the archbishop's methodological *credo ut intelligam*, and the consequent relationship he identifies between faith and reason. In 1992, philosopher

⁹⁶ Thomas A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People. The Theology of Christian Perfecting* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2013), p. 144.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.

⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter, Doctor Mellifluus* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1954), p. 57.

⁹⁹ Michael Winter, *The Atonement* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), pp. 66–7. Yet, satisfaction is for Anselm necessary to divine reconciliation (as it is for Athanasius in *Incarnation* 7), not because God is expecting something that may provoke his grace, but because sin is an objective reality and not merely a subjective illusion, which could be undone by a simple act of human contrition and divine forgiveness. See Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 1.12.

Zino Zini controversially argued that Anselm had reversed ‘*Il crede ut intelligas di Sant’Agostino . . . in un Intellige ut credas*’ (‘Saint Augustine’s *Crede ut intelligas . . .* into an *Intellige ut credas*’),¹⁰⁰ *de facto* denying any possible understanding of grace enabling human responsive, upward love.¹⁰¹ More recently, although perhaps in a less iconoclastic tone, Visser and Williams have reformulated a similar rationalistic analysis of Anselm’s methodology in their assessment of the *ratio fidei*, arguing that, ‘[This] refers to the intrinsically rational character of Christian doctrines in virtue of which they form a coherent and rationally defensible system . . . And because human beings are rational by nature, we can grasp the reason of faith.’¹⁰² Such a reading of Anselm’s methodology leads Visser and Williams to argue that the ‘fool’ of the *Proslogion* – no longer a fool after listening to Anselm’s argument – finds himself thusly capable of faithful enquiry.¹⁰³

Unfortunately, this approach seems to share a similar false premise with Gaunilo, who – on behalf of the fool – sought to debunk Anselm’s reasonable argument on the grounds of reason itself. Yet Anselm refused to respond to the fool, preferring rather to address the brother in Christ, that is, choosing to reason on the premise of faith.¹⁰⁴ In Anselm’s system, faith comes first, as the initiative of grace always rests with God. Faith thus shows reason not to be an enemy, but a liberated friend, whose source and context is the very God of faith and revelation.

One can see a suspicious common ground between the misplaced assumption of a background methodological rationalism of inquiry in Anselm’s thought and the interpretation of a purely external, mechanistic doctrine of atonement, which does not take into consideration the parabola of grace and holiness. In contrast, as noted above, Anselm’s theology is centred around Christ, who by offering satisfaction to God, provides the medium through which the gratuitously initiated movement of divine grace

¹⁰⁰ *Grande dizionario enciclopedico*, ed. Pietro Fedele et al., 28 vols. (Turin: Unione Tipografica Editoriale Torinese, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 893–4.

¹⁰¹ In fundamental harmony with Winter’s appraisal, if Zini’s analysis were correct, the human effort, far from being a response of love triggered by God’s grace, would represent the causative agent of the descent of God’s grace. On the contrary, at the beginning of his *Proslogion*, Anselm provides the very key to understand his theology: ‘I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, / but I believe so that I may understand; / and what is more, / I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand’. Anselm, *Proslogion*, 1.1, p. 244.

¹⁰² Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, pp. 13–14. For a radically different interpretation, see Gasper, *Anselm of Canterbury*, pp. 107–8.

¹⁰³ Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, pp. 24–5 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁴ Anselm, ‘Anselm’s Apologetic in Reply to Gaunilo’, in *St Anselm’s Basic Writings*, 1.1.

re-establishes an ontological relationship with alienated human beings, who respond in love, grown by the Spirit.

Conclusion

On the basis of the evidence collected, one can now attempt a holistic synthesis of Anselm's soteriology as a framework for his doctrine of sanctification. Humanity offended God by sinning and thus is now separate from God, in a condition that renders them unable to make amends for its sin. Only God could be capable of such repayment of satisfaction, but only man ought to offer it.¹⁰⁵ Thus, by God's grace, Christ, the God-man, was made incarnate and died a vicarious death for us. In this, by God's grace, we are freely reconciled with God. Seeing this grace freely given, every baptised Christian is bound to gratitude towards Christ, who has freely loved us. Indeed, when the soul comprehends the extent to which Christ's love has reached, it spontaneously wants to be grateful, so that Christ's love triggers in the human being an inevitable love response, enabled by God's grace (without which there is no possibility of love at all). While it is true that this response is qualitatively inadequate to raise human beings to God because it is expressed in the sinful body, Christ has atoned also for inadequacies in the human response to divine love. While we have been reborn in Christ through baptism, and we are sustained by the eucharist in penitence, knowing our inability, we are constantly inflamed by the Holy Spirit to want to live a holy life of love. This life of holiness will be expressed in a continual process of mortification and vivification, death to sin and life to Christ until the heavenly glory.

With its descending and ascending movements, this very Calvary-centred model is entirely grounded in the notion of God's free grace, since the soul, understanding its condition of sin, cannot but trust in the grace of God alone. For Anselm, then, grace does not only descend to bring justification, but it also kindles a new flame of love that was incapacitated before, with the result that it both justifies and sanctifies, making us just. As Anselm prays, 'I want your love to burn in me as you command/ so that I may desire to love you alone / and sacrifice to you a troubled spirit'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* 2.6.

¹⁰⁶ Anselm, *Prayers*, p. 206, 'To St Mary Magdalene'.