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MOTHER, KNOW AGAIN YOUR DEAD SON:

ANSELM OF CANTURBURY'S FIVE MOVEMENTS OF RITUAL HEALING

Cody Maynus

St Anselm of Canterbury, lauded through time as the father of scholasticism, is best known for his systematic defense of the existence of God and the reality of the Incarnation. Although one does not often associate scholasticism with mysticism, Anselm offers a *media via* in a prayer of directed to St. Paul. Although the whole prayer is moving, invoking both St Paul and Jesus in maternal and avian imagery, the latter half of prayer is truly the most inspiring, for it speaks directly to the Christian experience of healing.

Anselm outlines five movements for his healing prayer which follows: 1) gather in contrition (lines 1-3), 2) acknowledge God's mercy (lines 4-7), 3) confess sins (lines 8-9), 4) ask for healing (lines 10-14), and 5) receive healing and thank God (lines 15-16.) Although the church's understanding of Christian healing has evolved through the millennia, the five movements offered by Anselm can very clearly be seen in contemporary rites.¹

In the prayer, Anselm addresses himself directly to Jesus, using the appellation of "Mother." Already showing contrition, he requests to be positioned spiritually under the care of Christ's wings. He first speaks broadly, requesting that Jesus "gather [his] chickens" and only then moves to the personal, "*this* chicken of yours *puts* himself under those wings."² Anselm begins his prayer

by showing both contrition and agency. He acknowledges that he is dead, which is to say burdened by sin. He also claims right of action by putting himself under Christ's wings.

In *The Book of Common Prayer's* "Reconciliation of a Penitent", the priest and penitent begin the rite by praying together the words of Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness...For I know my transgressions only too well, and my sin is ever before me."³ The penitent continues by imploring the priest to "Pray for me, a sinner." The penitent's contrition is apparent in the praying of the opening psalm, as is the agency in presenting oneself for the sacrament of reconciliation.

Although Anselm has shown contrition and a desire for healing, he is not yet in a position to confess his sins. Before he can confess his own sins, he must praise God for God's own virtues, namely God's unending mercy. "For by your gentleness the badly frightened are comforted," writes Anselm. "[B]y your sweet smell the despairing are revived."⁴ Two characteristics of God are presented here: gentleness and sweetness. Both of these characteristics are identified traditionally with the feminine, as evidenced earlier in the prayer, when Anselm refers to St Paul as "sweet nurse, sweet mother" and speaks of St Paul and Jesus being mothers by their "affection... kindness...[and] mercy."⁵ Anselm transitions this section to the next by praising God because "[God's] warmth give life to the dead, / [God's] touch justifies sinners."⁶ It is clear that Anselm, who has already identified himself as being "dead," is hoping that he will be justified and vivified by God's touch.⁷

God's gentleness, sweetness, and ability to save are further revealed in the rite for reconciliation. After the recitation of the psalm at the beginning of the rite, which itself underscores God's mercy, the priest then offers the penitent a word of encouragement, saying "May God in his love enlighten your heart, that you may remember in truth all your sins and his unfailing mercy", adding one of the traditional Scriptural comfortable words.⁸

Anselm's next section is his shortest, though it is perhaps the dearest. He once more addresses Christ as Mother, saying "Mother, know again your dead son, / both by the sign of your cross and the voice of his confession."⁹ His language speaks to the intimacy of the moment, a tender exchange between God-in-Christ and the penitent Anselm. This movement ends by alluding to Anselm's confession. Although the saint does not offer his sins in "number and kinds," it is clear that he intends for this to be a moment of confession of wrongdoing.¹⁰

In the contemporary rite, the priest begins this third movement by making the invitation to "confess your sins with a humble and obedient heart to Almighty God, our Creator and our Redeemer."¹¹ The structured prayer of confession begins with an echoing of the previous movements, the penitent saying, "Through the water of baptism you clothed me with the shining garment of [Christ's] righteousness, and established me among your children in your kingdom. But I have squandered the inheritance of your saints, and have wandered far in a land that is waste."¹² Both the contrition of the first movement and the praise of God's mercy in the second are found in this confession. The penitent then moves very quickly onto the formal act of personal confession. The rubrics indicate that "Here the Penitent confesses particular sins." As in Anselm's prayer, the text does not give instruction as to what kind of sins are or ought to be plaguing the individual. The details of the confession are particular to the person and have no place in the rubrics of either prayer.

The fourth movement begins with Anselm asking to be healed. He petitions Christ to "[w]arm your chicken, give life to your dead man, justify your sinner."¹³ Anselm does not posit this healing as something that might come, but rather as something that can be expected. His tone is declarative. "Let your terrified one be consoled by you...and in your whole and unceasing grace / let him be refashioned in you."¹⁴ One gets the impression that, given the tender

language by which Anselm addresses his plea for healing, that the saint has perhaps prayed this prayer many times previously.¹⁵

The penitent's prayer of confession concludes with the following request, "Receive me again into the arms of your mercy, and restore me to the blessed company of your faithful people."¹⁶ The penitent, like Anselm, is petitioning Christ to offer warmth, justification, consolation, and comfort. The similarities between Anselm's "refashion" and the rite's "restore" are striking. They both imply a state of wholeness which has been fractured. They also suggest that Christ is the one who is able to reestablish that wholeness.

The final movement of Anselm's prayer is the culmination of the entire process. Only after progressing through the previous four movements—only after expressing contrition, lauding God's mercy, confessing one's sins, and requesting to be healed—can true "consolation for sinners" be imparted.¹⁷ Anselm, who has previously been vexed by his sinfulness in the prayer, concludes by offering benediction: "to [Christ] the blessings for ages and ages. Amen."¹⁸ The conciliatory healing which comes from Christ is enough to inspire a once-"dead chicken" to give eternal praise to God.¹⁹

The rite concludes, as does Anselm's prayer, with the reception of healing and the offering of benediction. The priest offers the absolution: "Our Lord Jesus Christ...absolve you through my ministry...and restore you in the perfect peace of the Church."²⁰ The priest immediately concludes the rite by offering, "Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go (*or* abide) in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins."²¹ The penitent signals their gratitude by declaring, "Thanks be to God."²² The movements of the rite have taken the penitent from a place of expressing "wickedness" to a place of "[abiding] in peace."²³ To that holistic movement, the former penitent gives hearty thanks.

Appendix A :
 Sister Benedicta Ward, SLG’s Translation of
 Anselm of Canterbury’s “Prayer to St Paul, Our Greatest Mother”

1 Christ, my mother,
 2 you gather your chickens under your wings;
 3 this dead chicken of yours puts himself under those wings.
 4 For by your gentleness the badly frightened are comforted,
 5 by your sweet smell the despairing are revived,
 6 your warmth gives life to the dead,
 7 your touch justifies sinners.
 8 Mother, know again your dead son,
 9 both by the sign of your cross and the voice of his confession,
 10 Warm your chicken, give life to your dead man, justify your sinner.
 11 Let your terrified one be consoled by you;
 12 despairing of himself, let him be comforted by you.
 13 And in your whole and unceasing grace
 14 let him be refashioned by you.
 15 For from you flows consolation for sinners;
 16 to you the blessing for ages and ages. Amen.

Notes

1 For the purpose of this essay, I will be focusing on the rite for reconciliation found in the Episcopal Church’s *The Book of Common Prayer*. Other ecumenical rites, particularly from the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions, would offer equally fruitful structure and reflection.

- 2 Benedicta Ward, SLG, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 152-6, emphasis added. For the sake of clarity, hereafter I will be referring not to the page number, but to the specific line within the text. For the text, please see Appendix A.
- 3 *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church.* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), 449.
- 4 Ward, 4-5.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 6-7.
- 7 Ibid., 3.
- 8 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 449-450. Referring to Mt. 11:28, Jn.3:1, I Tm. 1:15, 1 Jn 2:1-2.
- 9 Ward, 8-9.
- 10 Connell, Frances J. *The New Baltimore Catechism, No. 3.* (New York: Benziger, 1941), 789.
- 11 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 550.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ward, 10.
- 14 Ibid., 11, 13.
- 15 Ibid., 8.
- 16 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 450.
- 17 Ward, 15.
- 18 Ibid., 16.
- 19 Ibid., 3.
- 20 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 451.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., 449, 451.