

Article

Living *toto corde*: Monastic Vows and the Knowledge of God

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Received: 6 June 2019; Accepted: 6 July 2019; Published: 11 July 2019



Abstract: Monastic vows have been a source of religious controversy at least since the Reformation. Today, new monastic movements recover many elements of the tradition (e.g., community life and prayer, material solidarity and poverty), but vows—understood as a lifelong or binding commitment to obedience, stability and conversion to the monastic way of life—do not appear to capture much enthusiasm. Even the Benedictine tradition in the Catholic Church appears, at least in certain regions, to struggle to attract young men and women to give themselves away through vows. In this context, I ask whether vows should belong to the “future of Christian monasticisms”. I will look at Anselm of Canterbury for inspiration regarding their meaning. For him, monastic vows enact the “total” gift of self or the “total” belonging to God. I will suggest, following Anselm, that such vows enable an existential commitment that is in a unique way morally and intellectually enlivening, and that such vows should remain an element in any future monasticism wanting to stand in continuity with the “Christian monasticism” of the past. During my conclusion, I acknowledge that our imagination regarding the concrete forms the total gift could take may develop.

Keywords: Anselm; vows; new monasticism; Proslogion; proof of God’s existence

1. Introduction

One of the marks of the monastic vocation is its prophetic witness to the reality of God.¹ And so, it is not surprising if the tradition of monastic life struggles today in lands marked by the ‘death’ of God, or by the Nietzschean desire to usurp God as the measure of all life and meaning. Our sense for the reality of God and our willingness to give ourselves entirely to him are mutually related. When God is not sensed, monastic life withers; and when men and women resist giving themselves to God, their sense for him atrophies. Thus, I am convinced by what one scholar has written about arguments for God’s existence:

Indeed, if theistic arguments no longer make sense to so many of us today, this may be because we no longer find it possible to participate fully in the forms of life in which they were once so firmly embedded. That, I say, rather than the reverse. It is not because they make no sense to us that we no longer participate, but because we do not participate, they no longer make sense. Understanding can often be gained more readily in *doing* than in *thinking*. To recover a taste

¹ Biblical citations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version. Latin citations of Anselm are from the critical edition by F.S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: 1938–1961, 1968), abbreviated here by “S” along with volume, page and line numbers, and from (Schmitt and Southern 1991), abbreviated here by “SS” along with page and line numbers. English citations of the *Proslogion* are from (Walz 2013). Unless otherwise indicated, English citations of Anselm’s letters are from (Fröhlich 1990, 3 volumes). Where necessary, I conformed Fröhlich’s spelling to American English.

for these proofs and their earlier uses, therefore, may require not just or not even principally a change of mind. That recovery may require more radically a change of life.²

In this essay, I attempt to confirm this connection between *doing* and *thinking* by elucidating the connection between monastic life and the knowledge of God in Anselm.³ In other words, I will be arguing with Anselm that there is a speculative advantage to making the practical commitments that are embodied in monastic life.⁴ In this way, I hope to make a spiritual case for the importance of vows in the Church.

Monastic vows have been controversial since at least the Reformation.⁵ Today, many new monastic movements are recovering elements of the monastic tradition (such as community life and prayer, material simplicity and solidarity), but monastic vows—which I understand in a traditionally Benedictine way as a lifelong or binding commitment to obedience, stability and the monastic way of life, which includes embracing the evangelical counsels⁶—have not captured much enthusiasm. On the contrary, today even traditional forms of monasticism, such as the Benedictine tradition in the Catholic Church, appear to be struggling, at least in many regions, to attract young men and women to give their lives away in this form. In this context, I would like to consider whether monastic vows should even belong to the future of Christian monasticisms at all. The answer I offer here will be determined by what emerges from the connection between life and thought in Anselm.

Therefore, in this essay I will rely chiefly on Anselm for inspiration regarding the meaning of monastic vows. Briefly stated, for him vows enact the total gift of self (total and so lifelong and binding), or the total belonging to God that is the term or end of Christian life. I argue that these vows enact an existential commitment that is in a unique way morally and intellectually enlivening, and I suggest that they should therefore remain a part of any future monasticism that wants to stand in continuity with what has been called ‘Christian monasticism’ in the past. Vows, presuming they are made authentically, unify the heart and thus allow it to see God and testify to his reality. As an act by which the human being can give herself entirely over to God, they are integral to the Christian dispensation. However, since what is critical is the existential commitment, and not the specific form in which it is enacted, it seems to me we can and should exercise our imagination regarding the concrete forms in which this total gift could be offered. As far as I can see, we need not feel restricted to those forms known in the middle ages, presuming the intention for spiritual totality remains real and ecclesial.

² (Clayton 1995).

³ Parts of this essay are adapted from my dissertation, (Bayer 2019).

⁴ In this respect, I am following an insight of R.W. Southern: “In a word, his monastic commitment was total, because he believed that a total commitment was the only acceptable relationship between Man and God. This aspect of Anselm’s thought is fundamental to the understanding of his practical life as well as his theology.” (Southern 1990, p. 217). Other authors affirm the real connection between monastic life and thought, or the union of the existential and speculative efforts of the human being: (Ogliari 1991; and Palmeri 2016, pp. 191–209). Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI, in an important address in Paris at the Collège des Bernardins on 12 September 2008, argued for a connection between the monastic *quaerere Deum* and the possibility of culture.

⁵ In (Peters 2014), G. Peters relates the views of various Protestant authors on monasticism. He shows that their views are more nuanced than is often assumed. Several authors, in fact, valued spiritual practices (e.g., community life, prayer) and apostolates (e.g., education, healthcare) of the monastic tradition. However, most of those who appreciated this tradition still rejected lifelong vows as somehow contrary to the Gospel. But there are a few exceptions at least in the Anglican (89) and Lutheran traditions (124).

⁶ In *The Rule of St. Benedict* 58, St. Benedict lists the vows made by the new member of a monastic community: “When he is to be received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability, fidelity to monastic life [*conversazione morum suorum*], and obedience.” (RB 1980: Benedict 1981, pp. 268–69). The phrase “fidelity to the monastic life” includes the evangelical counsels, that is, those exhortations Christ did not oblige upon anyone other than those who have been called, or “those to whom it is given” (Mt 19:11; cf. Mt 19:1–30; 1 Cor 7:7). As I understand these counsels, they are not open invitations extended to everyone; rather, they are personal invitations extended to those whom God chooses. The words of Christ in Mt 19 do not suggest to me that someone can decide for himself to embrace these counsels; they can only be embraced as a response to a personal call, for the embrace is “given” by God. Thus, the difference between a counsel and a commandment concerns the addressee and not only our sense of obligation. In other words, it appears from the words of Christ that God does not call everyone to something like celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God. But he does call some, and so it should be pursued within a horizon of vocation.

2. Purity and the Search for God

Anselm opens the *Proslogion*, that most famous effort to prove the existence of God, by exhorting himself to relativize all things and so to be free for the discovery of God.

Quick now, little man, flee a short while your occupations; hide yourself a short time from your tumultuous thoughts. Cast off your burdensome cares now, and put off until later your laborious distresses. Empty a little bit for God [*Vaca aliquantulum deo*], and rest a little bit in him. Enter into the chamber of your mind, close off all things besides God and what may help you in seeking him, and with door closed seek him. Speak now, my whole heart [*totum cor meum*], speak now to God: I seek your countenance; your countenance, O Lord, I seek again.⁷

To search for God, we must first “be free” for him (*vaca deo*). Everything else must be set aside. To find what is absolute, we must first be able to acknowledge that all else is relative. What we cannot lay down holds our hearts hostage and inhibits us from searching for God. It has in fact taken his place. Interior freedom is necessary to find God. Anselm therefore asserts his freedom by temporarily withdrawing from everything except for what leads to God. Our lives are all filled with good and important things; but none of these things is absolute and so there is a moment in which they should all be relativized—not destroyed or ignored but rather simply subordinated to what is alone truly absolute. Only in this way can the heart find the coherence and wholeness (*totum cor meum*) necessary to search for God.

Vacare deo is essential to understanding who God is in the *Proslogion* and therefore what searching for him means to Anselm. In the monastic tradition, we cannot search for God without putting ourselves into question. Thus, the verb *vacare* is “almost always” (*presque toujours*) used in monastic literature to refer to the moment someone chooses the monastic vocation.⁸ To set aside all things and search for God with a “pure” (*totum*) heart—this is the only way to search for him. He must be sought as the absolute, as the one who relativizes and so orders everything else in my life. *Vacare deo* is not about making time in a busy schedule for a new study or discipline. It is about discovering the freedom and desire necessary for the purity that bestows in this life the contemplative insight that is the vision of God: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

3. Pure Love: The Spirituality of Anselm’s Letters

If the vision of God is granted to those who are pure in heart, then the search for him is coincident with the search for purity. It is an effort of integrating all our faculties of mind and will, and of training them upon what alone can animate them all and all together. For Anselm, the ultimate and most enlivening target for our intellect and will is the transcendent greatness of God—whom he identifies with the *summa natura* or divine *rectitudo* that in the *Monologion* and *De Veritate* ontologically anchors and spiritually animates all our intellectual and moral striving by incessantly provoking our thoughts and actions to rise to what is greater. Totalizing love for God is therefore what drives all his life and thought; it is the existential commitment that underlies all his willing and reasoning. This gives his spirituality a real tension, since the faith, hope and love that he seeks are constantly being stretched by the greatness of God. We can see this in the spirituality he enjoins upon all Christians in his letters.

In his letters, we see that Anselm understood the spiritual life most essentially as an effort of love. Everything follows from the desire to gather all his affections and understanding into a coherent, undivided love for God. It is the love called for in the Gospel: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your

⁷ *Proslogion* 1 (Walz 2013, 21); S I, 97:4–10.

⁸ (Leclercq 1961).

neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27; cf. Mt 22:37, Mk 12:30 and Dt 6:5). Anselm described this love in his letters, as well as in other places such as the *Proslogion* and in his homily *De beatitudine*.

We can explore Anselm's view of love and its centrality by beginning with an exposition of Ep 112, which he wrote to a hermit named Hugo. Written around 1086, this letter is basically a homily to incite secular people (*saecularium mentes hominum*) to contempt for the world and to love for heaven.⁹ It is perhaps the most extensive consideration of the love of God and its implications for the love of neighbor in his letters. At times, it parallels passages in the *Proslogion* and *De beatitudine*, suggesting that Anselm's theological insights about God are connected to his understanding of happiness and to his spiritual disposition marked by hope for an eternal union of love among all human beings.

Anselm begins his homily in Ep 112 in a way resonate of the Rule of St. Benedict, namely, by directing his reader to the voice of God inviting all human beings to participate in his kingdom: "Dearest brother, God proclaims that he has the kingdom of heaven up for sale."¹⁰ God is offering a kingdom. Although the eye cannot see, nor the ear hear, nor the heart imagine (*cogitare*) the blessedness and glory of this heavenly kingdom, we can nevertheless in a certain way (*aliquo modo*) imagine (*cogitare*) it by examining our own desires: "if anyone deserves to reign there, whatever he wills shall be done in heaven and on earth; whatever he does not will shall be done neither in heaven nor on earth."¹¹ Whatever we desire will be in heaven; and whatever we do not desire will be absent. To someone jaded by a world in which selfishness so often rules the human heart, such a description could sound more appropriate for hell rather than heaven. Could heaven really be where each gets what he wants? Do our desires not contradict each other? Can they not be evil? How could our desires give us an insight into union with God? What anthropology corresponds to this description of heaven?

It is likely in response to such questions that Anselm adds his understanding of the human heart and therefore the nature of its desires: he believes that what the heart truly desires is love. Human beings want to love—or to be united in will with God—and this most fundamental human desire is fulfilled in heaven. Beatitude unites the wills of all human beings in God and thereby bestows every blessing imaginable:

For so great shall be the love between God and those who shall be there, and between themselves, that they shall all love each other as they love themselves but all shall love God more than themselves. And because of this, no one there shall will anything but what God wills; and what one wills, all shall will; and what one or all will, this shall God himself will. Wherefore, whatever anyone individually wills, shall come about for himself and for all the others, for the whole of creation, and for God himself.¹²

Anselm believed that the human heart was made for love, and so he had no fear of its authentic desires. His confidence was so great that he thought all creation and even God himself will one day accede to our desires, since each person will love God above everything else, and therefore all wills will be united in the one will of God.¹³

⁹ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 268); S III, 244:3–7.

¹⁰ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 269); S III, 244:21. This is like the opening exhortation in the Rule of St. Benedict: "Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his voice again: *Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?*" (RB 1980, Prologue 14–15, cf. Ps 34:13).

¹¹ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 269); S III, 245:24–26. Elsewhere, Anselm refers to the heart (*cor*) as the place in which we perceive the ineffable joys of love (*sapor dilectionis*). The experienced conscience (*experta conscientia*) testifies that true love between friends cannot be adequately expressed in words; and nevertheless, that it can in some way be perceived in the heart of someone who loves (Ep 59, S III, 174:12–18).

¹² Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 269); S III, 245:26–31.

¹³ In *De beatitudine*, Anselm says that no one will desire his own good absolutely; rather each person will desire his good in a way proportionate to his identity within the one Body of Christ (*corpus, ecclesia, sponsa Christi*). No one will want to distort the beauty of the whole by wishing to occupy a position disproportionate to his identity (the foot will not wish to replace the hand, for example). Moreover, no one will want to be equal in identity (*in persona*) to another, for that would be to want to annihilate oneself, which is impossible (*namque si hoc vellet, seipsum nihil esse vellet: quod velle nequit*). Each member of the Body of Christ is unique and irreplaceable; and to wish to be someone other than who one is by the will of God (*dispositione*

Since they love nothing more than God, the blessed in heaven rule as kings and queens. They are united to each other and to God as a single human being or king.¹⁴ This is, for Anselm, the essence of heaven: to be welded together (*conglutinari*) with God and all his angels and saints through the love experienced in having a single, regal will (*per dilectionem in unam voluntatem*).¹⁵ This is his definition of heaven; and it is this basic description which emerges in all the heavenly blessings he identifies.¹⁶

4. Undivided Desire

This union in love is the kingdom God offers to human beings, or the goods (*mercem*) that he has for sale (*venalem*).¹⁷ But what does it mean to say that he *sells* his kingdom? At what price could God sell anything, since he in fact already possesses everything? Can we really buy heaven? Anselm clears up any potential confusion resulting from his economic imagery by again pointing to love. We do not purchase the kingdom of God by compensating him with our affection. Looked at from the point of view of an exchange economy, the kingdom is given without cost—it is a gift. But God, Anselm says, chooses to give his gifts only to those who want them: to those who want his kingdom of love. Thus, there is an exchange, but not one by which two parties mutually enrich each other. In the economy between God and man, God gains nothing for himself by bestowing his gifts. But he still demands a “price” (*pretio*) insofar as the human being must actually choose to love in order to enjoy love’s delights.

Yet God does not give so great a gift for nothing, for he does not give it to anyone who does not love. No one gives what he holds dear away to someone to whom it is not dear. Since God does not need your gift, therefore, he is not bound to give such a gift to someone who scorns loving it: he asks for nothing but love; without it he is not bound to give. Give love, therefore, and receive the kingdom; love and possess.¹⁸

The gift of God is freely given: “love and possess” (*ama et habe*). But this gift implicates the will of the receiver since it is precisely an opportunity to love—that is, to will in concord with all others, the whole of creation and God. If someone refuses to love, then he also refuses the gift; but if someone wills to love, then he receives the gift, for the gift is simply a power to love. God gives his gift only to those who want it: to whom it is *carum*. This is, of course, not a sign of divine stinginess. It is simply a condition belonging to the nature of the gift. The gift cannot be enjoyed by one to whom it is not desirable (*carum*), since the gift itself is a desiring. Love cannot be given to one who refuses to love.

One must desire the gift or he will not enjoy its possession. For this reason, Anselm spends the rest of Ep 112 exhorting the reader to the undivided love that defines the life of the blessed: “love God more than yourself and you will already begin to hold what you want to have there in perfection.”¹⁹ The more one unites his will to God now, the more he anticipates the harmony of wills enjoyed in heaven. Anselm exhorts his readers to unify their love according to the pattern provided by those in heaven, where everyone loves God above everything else. The love of the blessed is undivided, and

beatae civitatis dei) is to wish to disturb the *concordia* of the whole and to destroy oneself (SS 282–283). This is impossible in heaven.

¹⁴ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 269); S III, 245:32–34.

¹⁵ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 269); S III, 245:42–43.

¹⁶ In Ep 112, Anselm identifies the heavenly blessing of love or a regal unity of will (*rex, regnare*). But in the *De beatitudine* and in the *Proslogion*, to which he explicitly refers at the end of Ep 112 (S III, 246:76), he extends the list of blessings to include other goods, all contingent upon obedience or union with the will of God. In the *De beatitudine*, there are separate chapters devoted to such goods as beauty, speed, strength, freedom, impassibility, pleasure, eternal life, wisdom, security, joy, friendship, concord, power and honor. In *Proslogion* 23–26, God is the *unum necessarium* in which all goods of body and soul can be found. Here Anselm lists the same goods as in the *De beatitudine*, adding, it seems, only a few others such as satiety, inebriation and melody. Anselm also says that union of will multiplies every delight, since everyone rejoices over the good of another just as much as over his own. The blessed rejoice because they love God with their whole heart, mind and soul. This joy, being God himself, fills and transcends the capacity of every heart, mind and soul (cf. S II, 120:17–20). Anselm gives other lists of heavenly blessings in *De humanis moribus* 48–71 (SS 57–63) and *Dicta Anselmi* 5 (SS 127–41).

¹⁷ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 269); S III, 245:34; cf. 244:21.

¹⁸ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 269); S III, 245:37–41.

¹⁹ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 270); S III, 245:44–45.

therefore it can no more be enjoyed by those whose love is divided or incoherent than by those who refuse to love at all: “But you shall not be able to possess this perfect love until you have emptied your heart of all other love.”²⁰ This love is marked by the singularity of its object: God above everything else. Through the love of God, Anselm wants to unify the human heart.²¹

Indeed with the human heart and this love it is as with the vessel and the oil. The more water, or any other similar liquid, the vessel holds, the less oil it can contain; so, too, to the extent the heart is occupied by any other love, in the same measure it excludes this one.²²

Anselm is not suggesting that we love no one other than God. On the contrary, he describes heaven as a love that is shared by everyone for everyone. But what he is claiming is that the human heart cannot *divide* its love: that is, it cannot set one love against another. If my love is not coherent and unified, then the various unreconciled loves exist in my heart like water and oil in a glass: the more I have of one the less I have of the other. In other words, “You cannot serve both God and mammon” (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13).

Just as opposites cannot exist together at the same time, therefore, so this love cannot reside within a single heart along with any other love. So it is that those who fill their hearts with love of God and their neighbor will nothing but what God wills or another person wills—as long as this is not contrary to God.²³

The unity and universality of love are connected. Only if there is an absolute—God above all—can the ‘all’ truly be loved. For without the absolute, there is no principle or reality by which all loves can be harmonized. Love for God unifies the heart around a single desire; and thus God harmonizes the hearts of all those who love him. For Anselm, when all hearts collectively love the origin and end of all things—namely, God the creator—they are *ipso facto* united in love among themselves. Beatitude is the gift of living and thinking in light of the absolute whose will relativizes and thus also reconciles all others.

5. Love and Life

Anselm’s spirituality springs from the pursuit of the undivided love enjoyed by the blessed. In the closing lines of Ep 112, he sketches the ethical vision which expresses this pursuit: those striving for an undivided love will enjoy speaking, listening and thinking about the one they love; they will be united in affection (cf. Rom 12:15) with those whom they love as themselves; and they will scorn riches, power, pleasures and honors since those who love such things often fail in love for God and neighbor: “For someone who loves these things often does something contrary to God and his neighbor.”²⁴ Anselm thus captures the whole of Christian life in the love of God and the love of neighbor, recalling that “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:40).²⁵ Loving God above all things and her neighbor as herself, the Christian will “not love the world or the things in the world”

²⁰ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 270); S III, 245–46:52–53.

²¹ Anselm’s goal of unification is also clear from the way he describes sin as a movement toward disintegration. In *De humanis moribus* 9–36, he compares a sinful will to a well with three separate spouts, each pouring out into innumerable streams that crisscross each other. These are pleasure, exaltation and curiosity: three spouts which lead to the disintegration of our corporeal and spiritual desires (SS 41–50). Elsewhere, he says one good is never opposed to another, and thus all goods can be unified; but one vice can oppose another, and thus they divide the soul (*De humanis moribus*, Appendix; SS 94–97). In heaven, there will be perfect *concordia* between body and soul (*De humanis moribus* 63; SS 61).

²² Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 270); S III, 246:54–56.

²³ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 270); S III, 246:57–61.

²⁴ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 270); S III, 246:67–68. Anselm does not reject riches, power, pleasure or honors as incompatible with the Christian vocation. Nor does he reject pursuing them for just purposes. But he is suspicious of those “who love” (*qui [. . .] amat*) these things, since these “often” (*saepe*) divide our love. The less we love these things, the better. Here I am reminded of the *Litany of Humility* by Cardinal Merry del Val, in which it is the desire for such things that is rejected, not the things themselves.

²⁵ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 270); S III, 246:62–72. In *De humanis moribus* Anselm links inseparably the love of God and neighbor (Appendix; SS 95:16–24). These two loves are also the first “tool” for good works according to the Rule of St. Benedict (4:1).

(1 Jn 2:15). On the contrary, “anyone who wishes to possess perfectly this love with which the kingdom of heaven is purchased should love contempt, poverty, hard work and submission, as do holy men.”²⁶ The highest expression of undivided love involves contempt for whatever divides it. At the core of Anselm’s life and thought there is an absolute: love for God which unifies the heart and reconciles all. Everything is ordered in relation to the one to be loved above all things.

As an elderly archbishop, in Ep 420 Anselm encouraged a lay woman (Basilica) to consider profoundly and keep the “Christian intention” (*Christianam intentionem*).²⁷ He says, “the whole of Holy Scripture” teaches this intention or the way that Christians are to live.²⁸ Then he offers to her meditation something which, if considered frequently and intensely, would inspire her to the fear of God and to the love of living well: namely, the transitory character of human life. His point is not simply to remind her that no one knows the hour of his own death. His point is to remind her that our “life is a journey” (*vita praesens via est*) and therefore that we are always in motion in one direction or another, either ascending toward heaven or descending toward hell.²⁹ In every thought and action, we are either approaching the undivided love enjoyed by the blessed or departing from it.³⁰ There simply are no morally or spiritually neutral moments in life, for each moment is defined by its intention or direction: either toward life in heaven with the holy angels or eternity in hell with the lost angels.

For this reason a Christian man and a Christian woman should consider carefully in each of their desires or actions whether they are ascending or descending; and they should embrace with their whole heart those things in which they see themselves ascending. Those things, however, in which they perceive descent they should flee and abhor just as they would hell.³¹

Anselm exhorts every Christian to consider *toto corde* the dignity of every moment in his or her life, since even the most seemingly insignificant action is a step along a path toward eternity.

The desire to cultivate an undivided love brings Anselm to be concerned about absolutely everything in his letters. All the advice he gives to Christians, no matter whether they live inside or outside the monastery, manifests his incessant desire to unify our every thought and action in undivided love for God. The pursuit of this love is therefore the critical criterion in all matters of discernment. It is also the critical means by which commitments, such as monastic life, are to be evaluated.

6. Monastic Vows

Up to this point, we have been considering the *Christianam intentionem*, or the spirituality that Anselm enjoined upon all Christians. Now it is time to look at what he thought distinguished the monastic commitment, and to see what effect this commitment could have upon our reason, giving rise to a particularly ‘monastic’ way of thinking.

In Ep 121, Anselm described monastic life as the “commitment” (*propositum*) “than which one cannot have a greater” (*quo maius habere non potest*) and “than which one cannot make a better” (*proponere quo melius non potest*).³² These phrases sound strikingly like his identification of God in the *Proslogion*, written about ten years earlier, as “that than which a greater cannot be thought” (*id quo*

²⁶ Ep 112 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 270–71); S III, 246:69–71.

²⁷ Ep 420 (Fröhlich, vol. III, 191); S V, 365:4.

²⁸ *Quamvis ergo tota sacra scriptura vos doceat qualiter vivere debeatis* (Ep 420 [Fröhlich, vol. III, 191]; S V, 365:6–7).

²⁹ *Vita praesens via est. Nam quamdiu vivit homo, non facit nisi ire. Semper enim aut ascendit aut descendit* (Ep 420 [Fröhlich, vol. III, 191–92]; S V, 365–66:13–15).

³⁰ Anselm teaches the same thing in *De humanis moribus* 41 using the image of a mill: there are no neutral moments in life because we are always either milling thoughts for good or for evil: *Hoc itaque molendinum, semper, aliquid molens, cor est humanum, assidue aliquid cogitans* (SS 54:14–15). In this passage, good thoughts are about God purely, about the increase of virtue or about the abandonment of vice. When we are empty of such thoughts, the devil fills our mill with thoughts that soil, corrupt and destroy. Where vice recedes, virtue necessarily increases, and vice versa. *Semper enim homo vel virtutibus est praeditus, vel vitiis subiectus* (*De humanis moribus*, Appendix; SS 96:1, cf. 1–15).

³¹ Ep 420 (Fröhlich, vol. III, 192); S V, 366:22–26.

³² *Plus namque placet deo, etiam post grave peccatum, cuius propositum est et ante et post quo maius habere non potest, quam ille, qui nec ante nec post simile peccatum vult proponere quo melius non potest.* (Ep 121, S III, 261:38–40). These phrases have an active

maius cogitari nequit).³³ The parallels suggest an intrinsic connection between life and thought rooted in the apprehension of the transcendent “greater” (*maius*) and “better” (*melius*) that animates all our intellectual and moral striving. Both Ep 121 and the *Proslogion* refer to something transcendent that impinges upon all our concrete thinking and willing by ordering all our intellectual and moral values. The apprehension of what is *maius* or *melius* always pushes us toward a new way of thinking and living. The parallels between these phrases suggest there is a real connection between Anselm’s commitment to monastic life and his intellectual search for God in the *Proslogion*.

Anselm unabashedly proclaimed monastic life as superior to any other. But why?³⁴ What is it essentially? He described monastic life as a response to a personal call from God. It is not a life that someone chooses by his own initiative or for his own purposes, however noble those purposes might be (like virtue, peace, prayer, service). Therefore, when Anselm tried to convince someone to join the monastery, he frequently distinguishes between the will of God and his own desires for the candidate. Thus, he writes to one man (Albert) that he should come to the monastery, “if ever heavenly grace so enkindles” in him “the desire for heavenly bliss”.³⁵ And when he tries to convince another man (Robert) to become a monk, he acknowledges that the call comes from God and is not subject to our own will.³⁶ Even though he is not afraid to express his hopes for candidates, he consistently appeals to their freedom to respond to the divine initiative.³⁷ The decision to become a monk is therefore not based on a calculus that compares vocations in the abstract or initiates in oneself; it emerges in the life of the individual conscience as a personal response to the concrete will of God.³⁸

What does it mean to accept the call to monastic life? For Anselm, when someone takes monastic vows he gives everything he is to God and expects to receive from him whatever he needs.³⁹ In short, the monk enters the monastery in response to the promises of Christ. Referring to Mt 19:21–29, in Ep 56 Anselm encourages a candidate to trust Christ and therefore to pursue the “hundredfold” that he promises.⁴⁰ In Ep 161, he again refers to Mt 19:21–29, or to where Christ “counsels those striving

infinitive (*habere, proponere*) rather than a passive one (*cogitari*) like in the *Proslogion*. They are active because they appear in reference to a hypothetical sinner rather than in a grammatically impersonal context like in the *Proslogion*.

³³ In passing, I note that Anselm also echoed the *Proslogion* when describing monastic life in other letters. In Ep 56, he tells a candidate: *ea semper de te desidero quibus meliora non possum* (S III, 171:11–12). In Ep 232, he tells a monk to love his monastic commitment above all things (*monachicum propositum super omnia dilige*) so that he might enjoy the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which is sweeter and more joyful than anything he can imagine: *Quae res in tantam tibi convertetur delectationem, ut nihil dulcius, nihil umquam existimare possis iucundius* (S IV, 138:11–12; 139:27–29).

³⁴ In passing, I dismiss certain explanations for Anselm’s conviction about the superiority of monastic life. He did not defend its superiority by appealing to an immanent eschatology. On the contrary, he often expressed concern for the temporal well-being and prosperity of others (cf. Epp 9, 32, 33, 36, 39, 53, 75, 147, 196, 243 and 446). He was open to being affected by “every worldly adversity” according to its character: *omnis mundana adversitas pro suo modo et ratione tangat animum meum* (Ep 293, S IV, 213:20–21). Moreover, he did not think that life in the world is inherently sinful. Therefore, we must read carefully those letters in which he tries to persuade someone to leave the world to go to the monastery. In these letters, comparisons between secular and monastic life are often wrapped up in concrete questions about which life was right for the specific person he is addressing. For example, in Ep 168 Anselm tells Gunhilda in no uncertain terms that hell awaits her unless she leaves her husband and returns to the monastery. This is because he understood her life in the world as a failure to follow through on her original monastic commitment to love God above all things. We should take him at his word when he says he is not talking about lawful marriage—*non loquor nunc de legitimo coniugio*—but rather about the situation of someone who, in his view, had broken the dynamism of Christian life by choosing against an ever-increasing love of God (Ep 168, S IV, 44:22). For Anselm, life in the world is not intrinsically sinful; but to withdraw a commitment to love God above all things is spiritually perilous.

³⁵ Ep 36 (Fröhlich, vol. I, 132); S III, 144:13–14.

³⁶ *Quod solius dei commissimus consilio, non audeo proprio decernere arbitrio. Licet mihi tamen meum promere desiderium* (Ep 76, S III, 198:4–5).

³⁷ See Epp 56, 76, 81, 95, 101, 115, 117, 120, 121, 133 and 169. Ep 120 is particularly moving, since here Anselm prays to Jesus to convince the candidates to give up everything to follow him.

³⁸ For example, Anselm advised Matilda to wait in patience until it was clear to her that God willed for her to enter the monastery (Ep 325, S V, 257:23–26).

³⁹ *Vos deo vovistis; ab illo, cui totum dedistis quod habuistis, ab illo expectate totum quo indigetis* (Ep 156, S IV, 22:146–147).

⁴⁰ *Unde hortor, precor, obsecro, mi dilectissime: crede verum esse quod veritas dixit, et ama quod relinquentibus saeculum propter se promisit. Incipe parare tam magnum quaestum, accelera ad tantum lucrum, ut quae mundi sunt relinquens, centuplum accipias, et vitam aeternam possideas* (Ep 56, S III, 171:15–19).

for perfection”⁴¹ (*consulit ad perfectionem nitentibus*); he says that the church fathers understood this counsel to be fulfilled more in the monastic way of life than in any other.⁴² Anselm thus understood monastic vows as a more complete (*magis* [. . .] *impleri*) response to the promises of Christ.

But why, for Anselm, are monastic vows a more complete response? We can discover an answer to this question by looking at Ep 189, where he encourages a monk (William) to pursue the holiness proper to his monastic commitment. During his exhortation, he compares three ways of life—*laici*, *clerici* and *monachi*—as various ways of responding to the call to Christian perfection. He sees different levels (*gradus*) of holiness (*sanctitas*) corresponding to each way of life.⁴³ All three responses aim at the same term or end of Christian perfection, even if not all three commit to it in the same degree.

He will judge every member of the faithful good, who strives to attain perfection in his state of life. For although not everyone can reach the height of perfection equally, yet we will not be excluded from the number of the good, for it is written *your eyes have looked on my imperfection, and all will be written in your book* [Ps 138(139):16], if we are willing to go on trying unceasingly and courageously to reach this perfection. Let laymen in their state of life, clerics in theirs, monks in theirs valiantly apply themselves to making continual progress, so that those placed in a superior position should excel their inferiors in humility—for the more a man advances in this virtue the more he is raised on high—and also in the other virtues. ⁴⁴

It is important to notice that the difference between each level of holiness is an interior reality: namely, a commitment to Christian perfection (*propositi gradum*).⁴⁵ All Christians, no matter the level in which they “were placed” (*propositi sunt*) by God, should strive for perfection by constantly progressing toward greater things.⁴⁶ External differences, such as a monastic habit, are only signs of this interior reality or commitment.⁴⁷ This means that anyone placed in a higher level cannot be content to live like someone placed in a lower level, even if those in a lower level will not for that reason “be excluded from the number of the good” (*non tamen erimus extra numerum bonorum*). For while the imperfect can enter heaven, no one will enter who does not strive for perfection. Anselm continues,

Wherefore, dearest son, remember always the degree of that intention to which you vowed to ascend, and do not let the holiness of your life ever satisfy you unless you exceed in holiness those who are of an inferior degree. For just as those whose intention is inferior merit praise when they rise to the virtues of a superior level, so those who intended to pursue greater things are worthy of censure if they descend to the level of those having chosen lesser things. Since you profess to be a monk by your habit, I exhort, I beg, I advise you always to endeavor to be inwardly, in the sight of God, what you appear to be outwardly, in the sight of men. ⁴⁸

Again, it is important to see that what makes monastic life superior is the interior commitment to striving for perfection (*propositi gradum*) and not anything merely external. As Anselm says in this

⁴¹ Ep 161 (Fröhlich, vol. II, 48–49); S IV, 32:21.

⁴² *Hoc consilium magis in monachico quam in alio vitae proposito impleri sancti patres intellexerunt* (Ep 161, S IV, 32:26–27).

⁴³ Ep 189, S IV, 75:33–35.

⁴⁴ Ep 189 (Fröhlich, vol. II, 112); S IV, 75:24–32. I have modified Fröhlich’s translation of the first sentence. The Latin is: *Bonus autem quisque fidelis ab eo iudicatur, qui in suo ordine perfectionem attingere conatur*.

⁴⁵ Ep 189, S IV, 75:33.

⁴⁶ In the previous sentence, I quoted Anselm’s use of two nouns (*propositi gradum*) to refer to the way of life that William has chosen for himself. But before and after his use of this phrase, Anselm uses the passive form of the related verb, suggesting that lay persons, clerics and monks “were placed” (*propositi sunt*) in their ways of life by another, namely God (S IV, 75:30; 75:35–36). Elsewhere, he exhorts each person to serve God in the way God determines (*De humanis moribus* 126, SS 86:33–34).

⁴⁷ Anselm insisted that monastic observances (*consuetudines nostri ordinis*) have a deeper meaning: *nulla inutilis est, nulla supervacua* (Ep 335, S IV, 272:23–25). Ultimately, that meaning is charity. He tells Gundulf their monastic “rule” (*regula*) forms charity (Ep 16, S III, 121:9–12). Praying to St. Benedict, he says charity is the way of life that he enjoined upon monks: *Age, advocate monachorum, per caritatem qua sollicitus fuisti quomodo vivere deberemus* (*Oratio* 15, S III, 64:59–60). He tells Lanzo that progress in monastic life is useless without love (Ep 37, S III, 147:65–66).

⁴⁸ Ep 189 (Fröhlich, vol. II, 112–13); S IV, 75:33–40.

citation, those in a lower order can rise to the virtues proper to those in a higher order. Their difference concerns neither their goal nor their external circumstances. Their difference concerns only their conscious, interior commitment to the pursuit of Christian perfection.

But why do monastic vows represent the highest commitment to Christian perfection? In short, because they are total.⁴⁹ While all strive for perfection, only the monk binds himself to do so completely. In *De humanis moribus* 82–84, Anselm uses some images to describe “the great difference” (*tanta distantia*) between someone who makes vows and someone who does not.⁵⁰ It is essentially a difference in desire to belong totally to God. Someone who does not make vows is like a servant unwilling to promise total fidelity to his master. He refuses to commit himself fully so that he can avoid the punishment proper to a perjurer if he ever fails to be faithful. Having never promised to belong totally to his master, he expects to be judged more leniently. The lay person, according to this image, chooses to retain some independence from God, his master. By contrast, someone who makes vows is like a servant who promises his fidelity precisely in order to belong to his master totally, such that, in the event that he fails to be faithful, his master will still recognize him as his own and heal him: *non me iudices ut alienum, sed emendes ut proprium servum*.⁵¹ While the lay person chooses to stay relatively uncommitted (*liberius*⁵²), and thus to avoid the punishment of a perjurer, the monk commits himself totally to his master, even at the risk of incurring a greater punishment.

Anselm says that the lay person and the monk will be treated differently, even if they both commit the same sin and appeal penitently to the mercy of God. For each will be treated in accordance with his commitment. God will not identify himself as closely with the person who did not want to give himself totally to him. In some measure, he will act toward him as toward a stranger (*adversus alienum*⁵³), and so seek full satisfaction for the offense. On the other hand, God identifies closely with the one who committed himself totally to him. When he punishes the monk, God will act toward him as toward a part of himself: *Cum ergo voluero de te vindictam accipiam ut de meo*.⁵⁴

Anselm describes monastic vows in the same way using other images in *De humanis moribus* 83–84. The difference between those who make monastic vows and those who do not is consistently explained as a difference in desire to belong to God: the lay person wishes to retain a measure of independence, while the monk wishes to belong to God entirely. This results in a difference in friendship (*familiarius*), love (*diligere*) and belonging (*proprium* and not *alienum*). Making monastic vows, one wills to belong to God in every way. Anselm attributed the highest significance to this vow, so much that he counseled a noble laywoman (Matilda), whose work on behalf of the Church prohibited her from realizing her desire to make this vow, to keep a veil nearby just so that she could use it to give herself “totally” to God before she died: *vos deo omnino reddatis*.⁵⁵ For his culture and imagination, monastic profession was understood as the way in which one gives everything to God.

⁴⁹ Anselm refers to the monastic vow as the way in which someone binds himself in all things to his good intention: *voto se ligare ad faciendum quod bonum est, ut iam non sit liber ad non faciendum* (Ep 101, S IV, 234:68–69; cf. *De humanis moribus* 82–84, SS 71–74). So, while all Christians strive for perfection, only the monk, according to Anselm, binds himself in all things to its pursuit such that he is no longer free to pursue anything else without risk to his spiritual health. In this passage, he justifies this practice by appeal to Ps 75:12. This seems to have been the understanding of monastic profession at Bec. In an anonymous treatise written at Bec around the time of Anselm, the author says that what is unique about the monastic order is that a monk gives himself to God totally (*seipsum totum*) and can no longer withdraw without incurring the penalties of a perjurer, apostate and thief, having taken from God what belongs to him and that for which he deigned to become man and shed his blood (*illam rem pro qua deus dignatus est fieri homo, et pro qua sanguinem suum fu(n)di permisit id est animam et corpus hominis* (G. Constable–B. Smith, *Three Treatises from Bec on the Nature of Monastic Life* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008], 42, 46, cf. 42–71). J. Leclercq referred to this idea of monastic life as a total gift of oneself in a way that suggests it is in some sense original to Anselm—*cette idée anselmienne*—and something that his disciples developed (“Une doctrine de la vie monastique au Bec” in *Spicilegium Beccense* [Paris: Le Bec-Hellouin, 1959], 482, cf. 478–81).

⁵⁰ *De humanis moribus* 82, SS 71:40.

⁵¹ *De humanis moribus* 82, SS 72:5–6.

⁵² *De humanis moribus* 82, SS 72:12.

⁵³ *De humanis moribus* 82, SS 72:13.

⁵⁴ *De humanis moribus* 82, SS 72:22–23.

⁵⁵ Ep 325 (Fröhlich, vol. III, 39); S V, 257:27–28.

7. The Monastic Heart of All the Baptized

It may seem strange to attribute such importance to the monastic vow, and especially to deathbed professions.⁵⁶ Is a veil really so important? Is this not simply a sign of some medieval prejudice against the laity? I think Anselm's position is intelligible if we appreciate the centrality of love for him. The veil is only a means by which an interior act is expressed, and it is this act—the act of love—that is important. Moreover, before judging Anselm negatively, we must, I think, be careful to identify our terms. For him, the essential difference between secular and monastic life had little to do with external matters such as outward observances. For him, the essence of monastic life was an interior reality: an act of the will, or the desire to commit oneself to God entirely. If we want to criticize him, we should do so carefully. For he cannot be faulted for giving absolute value to the greatest commandment of Christ: to love God above all things (Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27; cf. Dt 6:5). If Anselm failed to appreciate the lay vocation, it is because he could not imagine a way for secular persons—as seculars in the world—to commit themselves entirely to God, and not because he made this commitment the criterion by which to evaluate the spiritual life.

Surely, Anselm could not have been wrong to insist that we enjoy salvation in proportion to our love for God, and that we risk his wrath in the measure that our love for him is divided.⁵⁷ But he could be criticized for lacking the imagination through which other vocations can be seen to involve an absolute or monastic commitment to the pursuit of Christian perfection. We share his fault, however, so long as we accept the presupposition that a lay vocation can be defined as one not wholly given to God: in other words, we should accept that the lay vocation is ultimately open to a monastic vocation in the interior or Anselmian sense, and that lifelong or 'totallizing' vows are crucial. We should not deny the superiority of monastic life; but we should insist that one can indeed undertake this commitment in other ways than the ones we identify exteriorly as the monastic life. We should insist someone can commit himself entirely—his days, thoughts, affections, sexuality, possessions and whatever else—to the love of God, and therefore to contempt for the world, without entering into the currently recognized orders. For what is to stop laypeople today from committing themselves to evangelical obedience and poverty in new forms hitherto unimagined by our current traditions of religious life or by our modern world? And even if we want to make a real distinction between marriage and celibacy, it could still be said that vows to Christian marriage—with all its radical demands and joys—nevertheless involve a kind of "virginal" or monastic commitment to the love of God above all.⁵⁸ Couples must often exercise immense obedience, poverty and undivided love for God as they fulfill their vows to lifelong, faithful and fruitful love in sacramental marriage. We should, therefore, promote the monastic heart of all the baptized and recognize that the goal of spiritual totality should be common to all Christians, even if the measure and means of our self-gift will differ according to the specific design of God for each member of the Body of Christ. Concretely, many lay men and women live in evangelical obedience,

⁵⁶ Anselm once counseled someone who had committed himself to the monastic life while in danger of death. He insisted that a resolution made under such conditions is no less valuable than one made freely in a time of health. As the example of St. Paul shows, God does not consider the motivation with which one begins to serve him—Anselm says that St. Paul was "forced" (*coactus*) to convert—but rather the devotion and resolution with which one retains the graces he is given (Ep 335, S V, 271:8–15). He appears to have left behind a form for deathbed professions in fragments of his writings (SS 352–53). A distinct element of this profession is an expression of desire (*voluntatem emendandi*).

⁵⁷ *Irascitur enim, si videt ullum ab ullo amari plus quam se* (Ep 117, S III, 253:41–42).

⁵⁸ (Prosperi 2018). With my comments in this paragraph, I certainly have not explained clearly or fully the relationship between marriage and celibacy, or a life vowed to the evangelical counsels and one that is not. I am trying to hold two things in tension. First, there does seem to be clear warrant in the words of Christ to see as 'more perfect' (cf. Mt 19) a life that is consciously and totally given over to the love of God, and therefore also to detachment from the world, through vows to evangelical poverty, obedience and celibacy. However, and this is the second side of the tension, it seems to me that married men and women, depending on their intention, can in a way vow themselves to the evangelical counsels. After all, as Christian spouses they profess mutual obedience under God (cf. Ephesians 5:21), and the obedience of family life is totalizing in so many ways; they can profess a material simplicity and solidarity in their union "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer" until death; and their union "in sickness and in health" until death, as well as their discerning openness to life, would appear to involve a submission of their sexual powers to God that is in fact open to periodic celibacy—even indefinite celibacy, should illness, for example, prohibit their conjugal union.

poverty and celibacy for the sake of love and fidelity to the Gospel. But what some might be missing today is a readiness to gather themselves up with as much totality as they can summon in a conscious and binding (lifelong) act—a vow. There is a difference between living the evangelical counsels *de facto* day after day and choosing to do so for a lifetime in response to God’s call. In the former, we accept passively to give away our present; in the later, we offer to God freely also our future—our totality. Making lifelong vows enacts the greatest commitment to Christian perfection. It is greatest because it is total. Given the primacy of love (cf. Mt 22:36–40), the Church can consider new ways to encourage the faithful to commit themselves entirely to their baptismal call to perfection.

8. The Reach of Reason

For Anselm, monastic vows enact a total commitment to love God above all things. After identifying the specific character of the monastic commitment, we are now ready to consider whether this commitment can shape the way we reason, and especially our ability to apprehend the existence of God.

Does the heart unified in love for God enjoy a special vision of him (cf. Mt 5:8)? Is there an intellectual advantage for those who vow themselves to converting *a vanitate ad veritatem* through monastic life?⁵⁹ Anselm seems to think there is, and the reason seems to be rooted in the proportionality between love and knowledge: the more we love the world, the less unified are our desires and therefore the less able we are to apprehend the transcendent *maius* or *melius* relativizing all things; but the more our hearts are unified by love, the more we can reason rightly and apprehend the one Anselm calls God.

Searching for God presupposes our desire actually to see him. This desire cannot be taken for granted. To be sure, in an ultimate sense, all men and women desire God. As St. Augustine so famously said, “our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” And yet, God is not a trivial reality; discovering him has absolutely significant consequences. And so long as we want to avoid these consequences, we are, tragically, in a way actively desiring not to see him and so frustrating our search.⁶⁰ The discovery of God presumes we are ready to discover what is absolute, or the one who relativizes all things under himself—and thus to give ourselves away to him entirely. In other words, it presupposes our readiness to vow ourselves to him totally in response to his concrete invitation. The most coherent way to search for God is as someone looking to give himself away entirely to the one he discovers.

This is why, as noted above, Anselm begins the *Proslogion* by exhorting his reader to be ready for what is absolute (*vacare Deo*), and therefore to be willing to see everything in her life relativized. This readiness gives us a speculative advantage in our search for God. The reader whose desire is so great that he is existentially ready to commit himself totally is ready to discover what is truly absolute, or the one Anselm calls God. By contrast, the one who prefers to hold on to even a very small measure of independence is trying to carve out a space protected from the comprehensive demands of what is transcendently great (*maius* or *melius*). Such a one is setting up unreconciled loyalties and loves, and therefore dividing his heart. Such a heart ultimately does not *want* to see God—at least not “totally” (*toto corde*)—because it does not want to see all its loves relativized or ordered under what is absolute.

The connection between purity of love and the vision of God can become more intelligible if we consider briefly how Anselm understood human reason. He says reason “ought to be leader and

⁵⁹ This citation is taken from Ep 418 (S V, 363, 5), but the comparison between a love for the world and a love for God in terms of *vanitas* and *veritas* emerges in several letters, such as Epp 46, 99, 101, 117, 120, 133, 169 and 418.

⁶⁰ This desire is what I think Henri de Lubac calls a “taste” for God. “So, in the matter of God, whatever certain people may be tempted to think, it is never the proof which is lacking. What is lacking is taste for God. The most distressing diagnosis that can be made of the present age, and the most alarming, is that to all appearances at least it has lost the taste for God. Man prefers himself to God. And so he deflects the movement which leads to God; or since he is unable to alter its direction, he persists in interpreting it falsely. He imagines he has liquidated the proofs. He concentrates on the critique of the proofs and never gets beyond them. He turns away from that which convinces him. If the taste returned, we may be sure that the proofs would soon be restored in everybody’s eyes, and would seem—what they really are if one considers the kernel of them—clearer than day.” (De Lubac 1996, p. 83).

judge of all things which pertain to human beings” (*ratio, quae et princeps et iudex debet omnium esse quae sunt in homine*).⁶¹ Existentially, when Anselm thinks and wills he commits himself to discerning everything in life rationally, that is, to evaluating everything by its relative participation in what is just, true and good.⁶² Reason is therefore animated by its apprehension of the transcendent greatness in which all things participate to various degrees and against which they can be measured. The more readily we measure, that is, the more readily we reason, or the more readily we order all things under what is absolutely just, true and good, the more ready we are to apprehend our measuring rod—the transcendent *maius*, or the one Anselm calls God.

But if we make some opposing existential commitment—say, by refusing to order something rationally in relation to everything else—then we deny the transcendental character of justice, truth and goodness, and thereby we also deny the unity of all things under what is absolutely great. In this way, we pretend there are things which concretely cannot be measured against each other, or which cannot be rationally ordered. The unity of all things falls away, or at least not all things can be unified under justice, truth and goodness. If we refuse to subordinate something to God, no matter what it is, or if we deny the transcendental character of values, we handicap our reason and its relation to the real. For reason, as Anselm understands it, is precisely the power to order whatever we encounter by its relative greatness.

When Anselm and other authors in the Christian tradition go searching for God, they are searching for the one who magnetizes their every faculty, the one who gives their every thought and decision a direction. To understand the one for whom Anselm searches, we must understand the way in which this one puts his life into question by inviting him to make the only fully coherent response to its discovery: to give his life away. If we wish to join him and, more broadly, the Christian monastic tradition in this search for God, we must be ready to put ourselves in question as well, and then to give our own lives away.

9. Conclusions

I am not a historian nor am I an expert in sociological and ecclesial trends. I am relatively young in religious life and in the formal study of theology. I write as a millennial, who, following St. Anselm of Canterbury, suspects that true happiness is found only in turning away from the empty loneliness of radical self-determination and toward the spiritual abundance and communion of co-creating our lives by giving them away freely to God. In my approximately ten years as a monk, I think I can understand something of the connection between life and thought that validates Anselm’s idea of vows and their connection to the knowledge of God. Depending upon God totally, or trusting in the coherence of a life given away in every thought and action to the benevolent and transcendent ground of all justice, truth and goodness—this is a commitment that can be carried in monastic vows, and it is a commitment that shapes our reason by anchoring it in an intuition of what is absolute, that is, in a vision of God.

The world needs men and women who are ready to give themselves away totally and in this way to testify to the reality of God. If we are honest with ourselves, we long to unify our lives under a single absolute, and yet no one other than God is worthy of a total commitment. How precious it is that we can root ourselves existentially in what is absolute; how precious it is that vows are possible in the Christian dispensation, and that we, by God’s tremendous gift, are not so weak as to be unable to give our *selves* away in love—not just one of our days or our possessions but our whole *selves*. The author of all things is kind and provident, and therefore a life given over entirely to him is one that is indeed lived in a way than which no greater way can be thought. By his grace, we can love “to the end” (Jn 13:1) and give our lives away apart from physical martyrdom. We are not helpless victims

⁶¹ *De incarnatione Verbi* 1, S II, 10:1–2.

⁶² Thus, in the *Monologion* Anselm defines reason as an ability to discern relative values: *Denique rationali naturae non est aliud esse rationalem, quam posse discernere iustum a non iusto, verum a non vero, bonum a non bono, magis bonum a minus bono* (*Monologion* 68, S I, 78:21–23).

of sin and circumstance who must always hedge their bets and therefore avoid making a definitive commitment. God can help us to possess ourselves with sufficient freedom to give our lives away in response to his call. We can promise fidelity until our last breath, and the world can take us seriously because of him.

And so, I hope the future of Christian monasticisms includes many lives offering this radical witness to the goodness of God, and that the world will thus be moved to reject all cynical self-reliance and to orient itself under him. These future monks will, I imagine, include many who in some respects do not look like the monks whose traditions are rooted in the middle ages, although I hope many of them will, since these forms still remain relevant. I imagine that the rediscovery of the lifelong vows inherent in Christian baptism and marriage will provoke many to enact more consciously and fully the total gift of self that marks the monastic commitment. These vows, if they are lived authentically, will manifest the prophetic vocation that the monk offers the world: giving himself away purely (*toto corde*), and therefore holding nothing back, he will provoke others to believe in God and to love him with their whole heart.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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