

# PROSLOGION

## (SELECTION)

Anselm

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*Anselm (1033-1109) was born in Aosta, Italy. Against the wishes of his father, who wanted him to enter politics, Anselm joined the Benedictine order, entering a monastery in Normandy in 1060. He became abbot in 1078, making several trips across the channel to England to inspect lands given to the monastery by William the Conqueror. In 1093 he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by William's son and successor, Willam Rufus.*

*His works include Monologion, Proslogion (from which the following selection comes), and De Veritate. [Translation from the Latin is by Ronald Rubin.]*

### CHAPTER ONE

#### A CALL FOR THE MIND TO CONTEMPLATE GOD

... I gratefully acknowledge, Lord, that you created your image in me so that I would remember you, conceive of you, and love you. But this image has been so worn away by my corruption, so obscured by the filth of my sins, that it cannot serve its purpose unless you renew and reshape it. I won't try to reach your heights, Lord, since I could never make my understanding reach that high. Yet I still want somehow to understand your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For, rather than seeking to understand so that I can believe, I believe so that I can understand. In fact, one of the things that I believe is that, "unless I believe, I cannot understand" [Isa. 7:9].<sup>1</sup>

### CHAPTER TWO

#### GOD TRULY EXISTS

So Lord — you who reward faith with understanding — let me understand, insofar as you see fit, whether you are as we believe and whether you are what we believe you to be. We believe you to be something than which nothing greater

can be conceived. The question, then, is whether something with this nature exists, since "the fool has said in his heart that there is not God" [Ps. 14:1, 53:1]. But, surely, when the fool hears the words "something than which nothing greater can be conceived," he understands what he hears, and what he understands exists in his understanding — even if he doesn't think that it exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in someone's understanding, and another for him to think that it exists. When a painter plans out a painting, he has it in his understanding, but — yet having produced it — he doesn't yet think that it exists. After he has painted it, he has the painting in his understanding, and — having produced it — he thinks that it exists. This should convince even the fool that something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists, if only in the understanding — since the fool understands the phrase "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" when he hears it, and whatever a person understands exists in his understanding. And surely that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot exist *just* in the understanding. If it were to exist *just* in the understanding, we could conceive it to exist in reality too, in which case it would be greater. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be conceived exists just in the understanding, the very thing than which a greater cannot be conceived is something than which a greater *can* be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Without doubt, then, something than which a greater can't be conceived does exist — both in the understanding and in reality.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO CONCEIVE THAT GOD DOESN'T EXIST

In fact, this thing so truly exists that it can't be conceived not to exist. For something that can be conceived to exist but can't be conceived not to exist is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that than which a greater can't be conceived can be conceived not to exist, then that than which a greater can't be conceived is not that than which a greater can't be conceived. But this would be

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<sup>1</sup> [Attentive readers will note that this is a mistranslation of the Hebrew, which is more accurately rendered as: "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established" (RSV). Anselm was working from the same Septuagint translation (a translation of the Hebrew into Greek, and from which Jerome prepared his Latin "vulgate" translation) as had Augustine, who centuries earlier had made good use of this error, turning it into a central theme of his theology: "I believe in order to understand."]

a contradiction. Therefore, something than which a greater can't be conceived so truly exists that it can't be conceived not to exist.

And this thing is you, Lord our God. Therefore, you so truly exist, Lord my God, that you can't be conceived not to exist. And this is as it should be. For, if one's mind could conceive of something better than you, a created thing would rise above its creator and pass judgment on it, which would be completely absurd. Yes, anything other than you can be conceived not to exist. Therefore, you alone have the truest, and hence the greatest, being of all; nothing else has being as true or as great. Then why has the fool said in his heart that there is no God, when it is evident to a rational mind that your being is the greatest of all? Why — unless because he is stupid and a fool!

#### **CHAPTER FOUR**

##### **HOW THE FOOL CAN SAY IN HIS HEART THAT WHICH CAN'T BE CONCEIVED**

But how could the fool say in his heart something that he couldn't conceive of? And how could he fail to conceive of what he said in his heart, when saying something in one's heart is the same as conceiving of it? If — or rather, since

— he did conceive (since he spoke his heart) but did not speak in his heart (since he could not conceive), there is more than one way to say something in the heart or to conceive of it. We conceive of something in one way when we conceive of words that signify it, but in another when we understand what the thing itself is. In the first way, we can conceive of God's not existing; in the second way, we cannot. No one who understands what God is can possibly conceive that He doesn't exist — although he can say the "God does not exist" in his heart, if he regards the words as meaningless or takes them in unusual senses. For God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived. He who really understands this correctly understands God so to exist that He can't fail to exist, even in our conception. Therefore, he who understands God to be that than which a greater can't be conceived cannot conceive of His not existing.

I thank you, Lord. I thank you because what I once believed through your generosity I now understand through your enlightenment. If I now wanted not to believe that you exist, I wouldn't be able to prevent myself from understanding that you do.