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All About Angels

BY

ANTHONY SULAVIK

General Editor
Reverend Gabriel B. O'Donnell, O.P.
Director of the Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council
PO Box 1971
New Haven, CT 06521-1971

www.kofc.org/cis
cis@kofc.org
203-752-4267
203-752-4018 fax

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WHAT CATHOLICS BELIEVE ABOUT ANGELS

Central to the Catholic understanding of angels is the fundamental belief that God's love overflows into his creation, the redemption, and the consummation of the world. The angels are a significant manifestation of God's overflowing, transforming, and perfecting love for his entire creation. Enterprising minds wishing to know more about these spiritual creatures, therefore, will discover that angels are part of the vast *unseen portion of God's creation*, that they diligently assist with *the redemption of mankind*, and that they will be *participants in the new creation* when Christ returns in glory (cf. Revelation 21:1).

The Catholic approach to angels begins with the belief that we live in a created universe of *things visible and invisible*. Things *visible* include the material aspect of creation, namely those things that we can perceive with our senses. Things *invisible* include the spiritual aspect of creation which elude sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

THE VISIBLE

Consider how we live in the material world. As citizens of cyberspace, we uncritically accept a scientific and technological view of the universe, a view that leaves no room for the possible existence of angels and their active presence in the world. The modern mind tends to be skeptical regarding what it cannot prove through empirical evidence and accepts only what can be physically measured. Measuring the boundaries of the world according to the five senses alone leads to the confined conclusion that only a material world exists. Such a conclusion leaves a person apparently content to rest in things visible to the neglect of things *invisible*.

THE INVISIBLE

Those who believe in and acknowledge a spiritual world step beyond the boundaries of the physical world. Both faith and reason point to a spiritual dimension populated with angels. Yet, even with the assistance of faith and reason, we humans cannot see angels unless they reveal themselves to us. As the naturally visible, sensible world seems more real to us than the nonsensible, invisible world, we must make a constant commitment to render it real to ourselves, especially if we wish to pass, as Saint Paul urges, from visible and created things to the invisible things of God (cf. Romans 1:20).

Fortunately, we do not have to do this on our own, since we have divine assistance to help penetrate this hidden world of angels. God reveals his spiritual creatures to us through divine Revelation and Christian tradition. The Bible, Church teaching (doctrine), theology, and the liturgy amply attest to the existence of angels and guarantee them a prominent place in Catholic belief. According to these sources, the world is actually brimming with spiritual beings. When faith seeks to understand the vast, unseen portion of the universe, it leads the mind to an ever increasing and elevated awareness of creation's horizons. Along the way, the truths about angels can influence our faith in God and his Son and open our minds concerning the next world.¹

CREATION, ANGELS, AND CHRIST

The Catholic Christian view of the world begins with a belief in an invisible and omnipotent Creator who willed the existence of angels for the purpose of worshiping, serving, and glorifying him. All of creation, from the angels to the atoms that are the building blocks of the universe, boasts of a Creator. In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine describes all of creation as pointing beyond itself to a Creator:

See heaven and earth exist, they cry aloud that they were made.... They also cry aloud that they have not made themselves: 'The manner of our existence shows that we are made. For before we came to be, we did not exist to be able to make ourselves.' And the voice with which they speak is self-evidence (XI, 4, 6).²

Since angels are the handiwork of God, whatever truths we gain from a knowledge of angels will disclose to us a better understanding of their Creator. Conversely, whatever misunderstandings we make concerning angels will corrupt our understanding of God. This is because God gives witness to himself through his creation. Knowledge of angels also reveals to us something about the God who humbled himself to become a man in the person of Jesus Christ. The deepest truths about God, angels, and salvation all shine out in the person of Christ, who is:

the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

The nature and purpose of angels can only be properly understood with respect to Christ, through whom and for whom they were created. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts that "Christ is the center of the angelic world" (n. 331) precisely because in Christ "all things hold together." The unfathomable riches of Christ and the salvation that he alone offers are things into which the angels long to look (cf. 1 Peter 1:12). Their mission, inextricably bound to Christ and his Church, is to assist us toward our salvation; for they are "ministering spirits sent

forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation” (Hebrews 1:14).

How did this immense part of creation, which we cannot see, enter into the Christian world-picture? The existence of angels has been accepted by Christians through the ages because the Bible tells of their existence and because the Judeo-Christian understanding of an all powerful Creator makes their existence a reasonable possibility.

ANGELS IN THE BIBLE

Israel and the ancient world accepted the understanding that angels are part of the created order. Consequently, it is no surprise to find that the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, bears testimony to the existence of angels. One finds an array of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek terms in the Bible expressing the nature and function of angels. Many of these terms, found mostly in the Psalms and the Book of Job, describe angels as: “the mighty,” “sons of God,” “gods,” “ministers,” “servants,” “watchers,” “hosts” and “holy ones.” The most commonly used term for the word “angel,” however, comes from the Greek word *aggelos*, a translation of the Hebrew *mal’ak*, meaning “messenger.” But whichever Biblical term is used, we must not lose sight that each term signifies a real being, superior to humans yet inferior to God. The presence of angels in the Bible should neither be reduced to a myth symbolizing God’s providence nor to a literary expression of the human subconscious. The Biblical authors, in most instances, clearly intended their references to angels to be understood primarily in a literal sense, and only secondarily in a figurative or metaphorical sense.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Hebrews believed that the visible world represented only a fraction of the diversity and beauty of the created universe, and that the far greater, invisible part of the universe was populated with spiritual beings. It is clear from the two creation accounts in Genesis that God intended an orderly universe of great diversity and a gradation of creatures. In the opening line of Genesis the phrase “the heavens” can be interpreted by the lines that follow to mean that there exists both a visible and an invisible world. As we read through the Old Testament we are given sporadic accounts of angels breaking through the celestial barrier to make their appearance. The first sighting of an angel is reported after the fall of Adam and Eve. In that account, we are told that God placed a cherub with a flaming sword to keep the couple from ever again approaching the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).

More often, however, angels appear in a *multitude* (cf. Daniel 7:10). When they do, the Old Testament writers employ military metaphors to describe their collective presence. Metaphors such as “host” or “army of the Lord” and “encampment of God” all suggest that angels could be found in large numbers, arranged in an orderly fashion. In rare displays of cordial greetings between men and angels, we are told the proper names of three angels: *Michael* (Daniel 10:13), which means “Who is Like God?”; *Gabriel* (Daniel 8:16), which means “Power of God”; and *Raphael* (Tobit 7:8), which means “God has healed.” These named beings were later identified by Catholic tradition as “archangels.” Although these personal names tell us something about the nature of God, they should not be considered solely as metaphors for God’s attributes. An archangel’s name, like our own, reveals the identity of a unique, personal being.

The Hebrew universe is dominated by a Creator who inspires worship and praise from all celestial creatures. The praise and

glorification of God by the angels give them their full significance. In prophetic visions of the heavenly court and council, cherubim and seraphim are singled out as surrounding the throne of God. The prophet Ezekiel, in two different visions of the cherubim, describes them as standing below God's throne. In one vision, Ezekiel describes cherubim as having four wings and four faces (Ezekiel 1:6), while in another as having two faces, a man's and a lion's (Ezekiel 41:18-19). The prophet Isaiah had a vision of a seraph standing above God's throne who had "six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory'" (Isaiah 6:2, 3).

The Scriptures attest that the angels not only praise God, but they also serve him. In heaven as on earth, the angels are the first of God's servants. This is seen by the psalmist who sings, "Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all you his hosts, his ministers that do his will" (Psalm 103:20-21)! An angel's primary function is to serve God's will and communicate it to men. Angels stood guard at the entrance of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24); warned Lot of the impending destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:15); preserved the life of Hagar and her son (Genesis 21:17); stayed the hand of Abraham from slaying his son Isaac (Genesis 22:11); appeared to Jacob in a dream, ascending and descending on a ladder (Genesis 28:12); led the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 23:20); announced the birth of Sampson to Minoah and his wife (Judges 13:7); protected Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:25); and delivered Daniel from the lions (Daniel 6:22), to cite only a few examples. In order to act in the world on behalf of those they were sent to help, angels sometimes assumed the appearance of men. "Three men" visited Abraham to inform him

that his wife Sarah would have a son, despite her old age (Genesis 18:2); and Tobias was accompanied on his journey by a “young man,” later revealed as the archangel Raphael (Tobit 5:5-6).

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, the presence of angels is integral to the message of the Gospel. Jesus and most of his contemporaries believed that angels served to accomplish the divine plan. The New Testament references to angels and demons, which far outnumber those found in the Old, reveal more information about angels and their functions in God’s governance. More importantly, the New Testament writers reveal that angels are no longer the primary intermediaries between God and man. In the Old Testament, angels functioned as messengers of God’s law to man, but in the New Testament, they serve Christ, who is the fulfillment of the Law (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2). Although Jesus Christ’s perfect mediation overshadows the angelic intermediaries, he does so without eliminating them. The angels of the New Testament continue to act as messengers and guardians, but their primary function is to serve Christ (Acts 8:26; 10:3, 22; 27:23-24) and those who shall inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14).

The angels were the first heralds of Christ’s coming. They announced to Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist, would prepare the way for the Lord (Luke 1:14-17); they announced the Incarnation to Mary (Luke 1:26, 28); and they announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds (Luke 2:9-14). Angels also protected Christ throughout his life. They warned Joseph in a dream to take Christ and his mother and flee into Egypt (Matthew 2:13); and twelve legions of angels stood ready to come to Christ’s aid when he was arrested by the Romans in the Garden of Olivet (Matthew 26:53). Angels also ministered to

Christ in the desert (Matthew 4:11) and in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36; Luke 22:43). The angels, who are inferior to Christ (Hebrews 1:4), worship him (Hebrews 1:6), and remain subject to his authority forever (Ephesians 1:20-22; Hebrews 2:5-18; 1 Peter 3:22; Revelation 22:16). On the Day of Judgment the angels will separate the wicked from the just (Matthew 13:41) and, together with the saints, they will gather around the Blessed Trinity to participate in the divine glory (Luke 9:26; Matthew 25:31).

THE CHURCH'S DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS ON ANGELS

The purpose of doctrinal pronouncements is to establish and confirm what the Church has received and believed from the beginning, the teaching of the Apostles, and what sacred Scripture and Christian tradition have fixed as a matter of faith. The doctrinal tradition of the Church on the existence and creation of angels does not further develop the Scriptural writings on the angels. In fact, pronouncements on the existence of angels are rare and remarkably succinct. The doctrinal history of the Catholic Church certainly affirms the existence of angels. In addition, the large body of writings by the Fathers and the many nondefinitive but important documents of the Councils and Popes also reaffirm the existence of angels.

Until publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 1992, we had only a rather meager collection of doctrinal statements on angels derived from the Bible, early creeds, and liturgical rites. The earliest pronouncements on angels are clearly subordinated to credal declarations that God is the Creator of all things visible and invisible. These earlier pronouncements *assume* that the existence of angels is an article of faith. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) declared not only that God created angels

before the creation of the world, but also that demons (evil angels) were created good by nature and that they became bad or fell through their own fault. The Council, however, declined to explain how these angels fell. In our own century, Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) points out that such spiritual beings (angels) are personal beings, not merely powers. The *Catechism*, however, states explicitly that the existence of angels is "a truth of faith" (n. 328).

The Church clearly teaches that belief in angels is an essential element of Christian faith. Angels truly exist as personal, spiritual beings and have been revealed to us by God to increase our faith. The *Catechism* directs our attention to the ways in which our knowledge of angels increases our faith in God: angels glorify God without ceasing (n. 350); surround Christ and assist him in his mission of salvation (n. 351); aid the Church in her earthly pilgrimage (n. 352); and through their watchful care and intercession protect every human life from infancy until death (n. 336).

To be sure, inquisitive minds may come away disappointed by this rather lean array of doctrinal pronouncements. The human intellect seeks ever greater understanding about spiritual realities such as angels. Fortunately, some of the finest minds throughout the centuries have reflected on Scripture and on Church teachings in order to garner additional, speculative knowledge about these spiritual creatures.

CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

It is important to bear in mind that Catholic theology is not "official" Church doctrine. The theologian's task is to investigate in a prayerful manner the content of faith by means of reason, enlightened by faith. The views offered in this section are not simply a distillation of the Catholic tradition, but rather they are

a summary of some of the best theological and philosophical opinions on angels. These views on angels reflect a great appreciation for God's providence, as well as a reverential awe for the richness, diversity, and order of the world.

ANGEL: MYTH, OR LEGEND?

As we have seen, sacred Scripture and Catholic doctrine both attest to the existence of angels. Yet it is commonly asserted by those who admit only the material world that angels belong to a parade of mythic creatures such as sprites, goblins, imps, and trolls. Over the centuries arguments for the existence of angels have been developed in order to render intelligible and rational what is believed about them. Since angels are first and foremost objects of religious belief, any rational argument for their existence must be used with caution. The following "proof" has probable force only; it is not meant to provide an unassailable proof for the existence of angels, since it is not possible to have necessarily certain knowledge about them.

This "proof" for the existence of angels stems from the principle of fittingness. Basically, this means that if one is willing to accept as a self-evident principle that the universe God freely created has a certain measure of perfection, then it is fitting that this perfection not end with corporeal creatures but that it include spiritual creatures as well.

The argument suggests that the perfection and fullness of the universe require that there be an unbroken hierarchy. In order for us to appreciate such a hierarchy we must enter imaginatively the great chain of being, or, if you will, a great staircase extending from earth to God. A roughly hewn sketch of this staircase of creation looks something like this: on the lowest step is inorganic matter, such as minerals; the next step up brings us to plants or other living beings without minds; climbing still higher we find

animals with minds and animate bodies; next, we come to humans who have minds and are a combination of spirit and body; and finally, we arrive at the highest step which holds the most perfect of creatures, angels, who are purely spiritual beings without bodies.

As with any schema, there is always the danger of oversimplification. Reducing this complex order to elemental parts defines the place of angels within the scope of creation, thus enabling us to see that the removal of the angels from this schema leaves us with an inexplicable gap between human beings and God.

THE ANGELIC ORDERS

Since the fourth century Christians have attempted to construct lists of all the spiritual beings mentioned in the Bible. A list of nine ranks of angels was eventually collected from the various books of the Bible. We noted earlier that the Old Testament gives names to three groups of angelic beings: *Cherubim*, *Seraphim* and *Angels*. In the New Testament, the other six groups are given to us by Saint Paul who names *Thrones*, *Dominations*, *Principalities*, *Virtues*, *Powers* and *Archangels* (cf. Colossians 1:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Ephesians 1:21). These various spiritual beings are directed towards one single end, an ultimate good, namely God, who created each angel to contribute to the perfection of the whole of which it is a part. By their degree of knowledge, their love of God, and their type of service, the angels are categorized according to nine different ranks.

In his treatise, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c. A.D. 500) was the first to explain how the nine ranks of angels transmit God's love and truth to human persons. The Areopagite model has withstood the test of time largely because it offers a harmonious synthesis based on the Biblical descriptions of the angelic world. His model operates on the

principle that in the world of spirits as well as in the world of bodies, God acts through a series of intermediaries. Therefore, the love and knowledge of God descend gradually from God to human beings through a graduated series of beings, the nine ranks of angels. Thus, by means of this community of spiritual beings, God communicates his love, knowledge, and concern for all his creation. This multitude of angelic beings renders the universe ordered and intelligible.

The nine ranks of angels are organized into three ranks of three, in an order that can be understood in terms of proximity to or remoteness from God. The first rank of angelic beings consists of the *Seraphim*, *Cherubim* and *Thrones*. This rank is immediately before God, contemplating the essence of God, God as he is in himself. The *Seraphim*, whose name means “fire-makers” or “carriers of warmth,” possess the most perfect knowledge of God and therefore they are aflame with love of God. The *Cherubim*, whose name means “fullness of knowledge” or “outflowing of wisdom,” contemplate God’s goodness and providence. The *Thrones* contemplate God’s divine judgments. Those who are redeemed by Christ and are granted the beatific vision of God will be privy to a higher degree of participation in the life of God than these ranks of angels.

The second rank of angelic beings consists of the *Dominations*, *Virtues* and *Powers*. This second rank of angels is responsible for the universal order of creation; it does not know God in himself, but his effects, the reasons for things, or what we would call the laws of nature. The *Dominations*, whose name signifies authority, direct and command the activities of the Virtues. The *Virtues* in turn are responsible for the operation of celestial bodies such as planets and stars. The *Powers* work to prevent evil influences from infiltrating and disrupting the good order of divine Providence.

The final rank consists of the *Principalities*, *Archangels* and *Angels*. This rank orchestrates human affairs. The *Principalities* are

concerned with the common good and general welfare of kingdoms, nations, and cities. The *Archangels* are charged with protecting an individual or a multitude of individuals or with delivering solemn messages from God to man, such as when the Archangel Gabriel greeted the Blessed Virgin Mary with the news of the Incarnation. Finally, we arrive at the *Angels*, otherwise known as Guardian Angels, whose task it is to protect individuals and to deliver messages of lesser import.

Of all the spiritual beings discussed, Guardian Angels are most proximate to us. That Guardian Angels exist is a conviction that the Church, the Bible, and the saints all confirm. The Church authorizes a feast in their honor on the Roman calendar. Two Biblical texts point to their existence: “See, I am sending an angel before you, to guard you on the way” (Exodus 23:20-23); and Jesus’ words, “I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:11). Numerous saints have also been convinced of their existence. In particular, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux tells us:

And so the angels are here; they are at your side; they are with you, present on your behalf. They are here to protect you and to serve you. But even if it is God who has given them this charge, we must nonetheless be grateful to them for the great love with which they obey and come to help us in our great need.³

It is important to bear in mind that Guardian Angels are able to direct us to our own particular ends (salvation) and to our shared ultimate end (communion with the triune God) only because they are engaged in accomplishing God’s will and divine Providence. The Guardian Angels glorify God by freely guiding human beings back to their Creator. Without these angels we lose an effective and significant source of direction back to God.

WHAT IS AN ANGEL?

Up to this point we have formed a general impression about what angels do, but have explained nothing about their nature. Saint Augustine wrote that “‘angel’ is the name of their function, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is ‘spirit.’”⁴ Precisely what a pure “spirit” or an angel is has been the object of much theological debate. Saint Thomas Aquinas thought that an angel is a totally immaterial, limited being which possesses a separate intellectual substance. In this light we see that in no way should an angel be mistaken for a ghost or a soul separated from a human body. An angel by its nature is created to exist apart from a body. Because angels are not composed of any material substance whatsoever, but are held in being by God, they cannot decay and perish; and they are not vulnerable to physical injury or death at the hands of other creatures. Angels, like human souls, do not occupy a quantitative space. A human soul does not occupy any single part of the human body, and yet it exercises its power everywhere in the body. In this respect, angels are similar to the human soul, since they act upon the physical world and have effects there in large and small ways without occupying a certain place.

Aside from acting as celestial couriers who deliver messages between God and humans, angels can also act directly on material things and can influence human actions in a number of ways. As we have already noted, the actions of angels on earth and in relation to human beings sometimes require that an angel assume a quasi-human form in order to accomplish a mission. Such an assumed body is not a living organism, however, but only looks and acts like one. How angels appropriate matter into a human form is their own practical concern. The important point for us to remember is that the ultimate cause of all such change is God. Likewise, when an angel moves a material object

locally, it is only by God's will that this is achieved. Angels assist us and only perform miracles as God's agents, at his command and with his consent.

An angel can act indirectly upon the intellect and will of a person in much the same way as one human influences another. However, an angel's ability to influence someone is far more powerful than any human attempt to do the same. Yet, even with their superior intellect and will, an angel has no privileged access to our thoughts or to our free will. An angel is able to stir a person's imagination and emotions in persuasive and effective ways in order to influence the will. What an angel cannot do is infuse knowledge into a human mind anymore than a teacher can pour ideas into a student's mind.

ANGELS AND FALLEN ANGELS

In Genesis we are told that God created everything good, including the angels. But if all angels were created good, then why did some fall? Our knowledge of fallen angels comes only from the many references to the Devil and demons made in the New Testament. One explanation for their fall, given by Saint Augustine, is that the angels turned to themselves or took more delight in themselves than in God. These angels through pride freely chose to reject God. This is what happened to the Devil. As for the angels who freely chose to remain in union with God, the Church considers them saints. Why some angels rejected God is not as important as the fact that it occurred. The Catholic tradition holds that as a result of the fall, which affected all of creation, there are malevolent spiritual beings (demons) who play havoc with human affairs. The *Catechism* (n. 395) teaches that the Devil "may cause grave injuries of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature to each man and to society," but he cannot prevent the building up of God's reign. In spite of the Devil's attempts to

divert people away from God, God's providence "works for good with those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

A NEW AGE FOR ANGELS?

The so called "New Age" movement has influenced how many Catholics and non-Catholics think about angels. While the New Age movement does advance some positive teachings about angels, it also distorts the truth about them. On the positive side, some New Age adherents teach that angels are real spiritual beings who never interfere with or take over one's consciousness or in any way counter human freedom. On the surface, this teaching is compatible with Catholic belief about angels. But their teachings do not end there. The New Age movement is intent on creating a greater awareness of the existence of angels because angels provide humanity with essential information for the coming age of a new spiritual culture. Many New Age proponents also believe that angels or "spirit guides" are benevolent by their very nature and that they "touch" human lives in ways that are always spiritually beneficial. Therefore, participation with angels and working with one's spirit guide is encouraged through a process called channelling. Channelling or contacting an angel is usually done in order to obtain personal help or information about the future.

A Catholic finds the New Age assertion that all angels are benevolent to be an alarming half-truth because it does not take full account of what the Bible and Catholic teaching reveal about the spirit world. As we have already seen, the Catholic world-picture consists of a divided spirit world, one composed of both benevolent and malevolent spiritual beings. Moreover, appearances can be deceiving. Discerning which spirits are good and which are evil is a difficult and sometimes dangerous spiritual endeavor. From the earliest days of Christianity people

have been warned not to be deceived by angelic appearances. Saint Paul warned the Corinthians that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). The dangers are no different now than they were during Saint Paul’s time. The *Catechism* warns Catholics not to attempt contact with spiritual powers (especially demons or Satan) for the purpose of attaining “power over time, history, and in the last analysis, other human beings” because such an action contradicts “the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone” (n. 2116). It should be noted, finally, that members of the New Age often channel or contact an angel by ascribing to it a name; the practice of ascribing names to individual angels, except to Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, is considered dangerous and false by the Church.

ANGELS IN THE ROMAN LITURGY

On a practical level, the liturgy increases our love for Christ and brings us into closer communion with spiritual truths and beings. As an integral part of the Catholic liturgy, angels cannot be separated from the full liturgical life of the Church. Joining with believers on earth (who enjoy a foretaste of the heavenly glory through active participation in the liturgy), the angels and saints in heaven eternally glorify God in his presence. Like Jacob’s vision of the angels ascending and descending a ladder that reached from heaven to earth, the angels are constantly “flying” back and forth between the eternal, heavenly liturgy and the temporal, earthly liturgy. This angelic relationship that connects both liturgies is poignantly summed up in one sentence taken from the First Eucharistic Prayer: “Almighty God, we pray that your angel may take this sacrifice to your altar in heaven.”

The liturgical prayers of the Mass instruct us that we are in the presence of an angelic society that is eternally glorifying and praising God. At the beginning of Mass we confess our sins in the

presence of the angels and ask them to pray for us to the Lord our God. At the end of every Preface we unite our voices with the angels to proclaim praise to the thrice-holy God in the *Sanctus* (Holy, holy, holy, Lord...), which is the song of the angels in heaven. The Prayer over the Gifts for the Votive Mass of the Angels reminds us that the angels are intermediaries who bring our sacrifice at Mass before God: “Lord, by the ministry of your angels let this sacrifice of praise we offer come before you.” The Preface of the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer emphasizes the fact that the angels cleave completely to God’s will and worship him ceaselessly:

Countless hosts of angels stand before you to do your will; they look upon your splendor and praise you, night and day. United with them, and in the name of every creature under heaven, we too praise your glory as we say: Holy, holy, holy...

Finally, the Prayer after Communion on the Feast of the Archangels serves as a reminder that divine providence has placed us “under the watchful care of the angels” so that “we may advance along the way of salvation.” Through the liturgy of the Mass we are encouraged, then, to love, respect, and invoke the angels.

Invoking the angels may seem like an odd practice, but when we recall that those angels who did not reject God are saints, we quickly realize that there is little difference between this practice and the ancient practice of invoking human saints. We pray to the angels as we do to the saints, for the same reasons, namely, so that they will guide and protect us, as well as intercede with God on our behalf. At the end of the funeral liturgy, in the Prayer of Commendation we invoke the angels and saints to aid and accompany us as we leave this world:

Saints of God, come to his/her aid!

Come to meet him/her, angels of the Lord!
Receive his/her soul and present him/her to
God the Most High.
May Christ, who called you, take you to himself;
may angels lead you to Abraham's side.

The Roman calendar sets aside two feast days to honor God's invisible servants. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council's reform of the sacred liturgy, we continue to celebrate (as we have for centuries) the feasts of the Archangels and of the holy Guardian Angels. The feast day of Saint Michael, Saint Gabriel, and Saint Raphael, which the Church now celebrates on September 29, was first approved by the Lateran Council in 745. The feast day of the Guardian Angels, celebrated on October 2, originated in 1411 at Valencia, Spain. The liturgical celebration of these two feast days makes us mindful of our communion with the angels and of the immense expanse of the Church, which encompasses heaven and earth. The Opening Prayer for the feast of the archangels emphasizes the universal scope of God's providence: "God our Father, in a wonderful way you guide the work of angels and men. May those who serve you constantly in heaven keep our lives safe from all harm on earth."

Finally, the liturgy inspires a beneficial and authentic devotion to the angels, a devotion which always directs us to praise and glorify the Creator God. The Preface for Masses in honor of the angels addresses this important point: "In praising your faithful angels and archangels, we also praise your glory, for in honoring them, we honor you, their Creator."

THE IMPLICATIONS OF BELIEF

We have moved from a Scriptural knowledge to doctrinal statements, to theological speculation about angels, and finally, in the Roman liturgy, to a practical knowledge of angels. These

sources of Christian tradition confirm the Catholic Church's teaching that the existence of angels is a truth of the faith. However, these sources of the Catholic Church's knowledge and experience of angels are not simply an appropriation of the past; they are also an expression of the Church's contemporary faith. Such faith in the existence of angels informs the lives of Catholics and speaks to the particular needs and experiences of every age, including our own. The present and past are constantly being woven together to form a uniform Catholic vision that helps explain how angels fit into the created universe. But is it still possible for Catholics to reconcile this teaching to our modern knowledge of how things work in the universe?

If we take God seriously as the Creator of the universe, as the Architect of its laws and Source of its existence, then the answer to this question is a resounding, "Yes"! The truth about angels becomes all the more reasonable to believe when we consider that God is certainly capable of creating beings of a higher order than ourselves in a multidimensional universe. Without denying God the possibility of governing the universe through the natural laws, we can easily fit angels into the general understanding of God's governance of the universe. Furthermore, the belief that angels guide natural events helps us avoid the error of ascribing all that we see solely to certain assumed laws of nature. It also helps us avoid the erroneous but popular notion that we live in a mechanical universe where God's presence and governance are not needed.

If we take our beliefs seriously and embrace the view of a multidimensional universe populated with angels, then we are forced to reconsider our place in the universe and must humbly admit that we are not the pinnacle of God's creation. It is then not unreasonable to believe that out of God's concern and care for us he would create spiritual beings with intellects and wills superior to our own for the purpose of protecting and guiding us

on our difficult pilgrimage back to himself. God created angels as one means of shepherding his creation, for angelic activity represents God's knowing and loving solicitude for every creature. The better we understand how angels minister to us, the better we appreciate God's loving concern for us.

In an age that tends to forget God or at best keeps him at a distance, our belief in angels is a powerful reminder that Christ is at the center of the human and angelic worlds. The Letter to the Ephesians reminds us of the purpose that God had set forth in Christ, "as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:9-10). We should be aware that we are united with the angels in Christ, and that we share a common mission with them, namely, announcing the Good News of Christ to all nations. Our knowledge and reverence for angels contribute to our preparing for a new springtime of evangelization in our new millennium by reminding us that we have been called to holiness of life, a life devoted to knowing, loving, and serving God.

Finally, God created things visible and invisible in order to share his blessed life with the angels and humans. In a sermon on the Ascension, Saint John Chrysostom (c. 400-450) describes the joy that the angels will experience at seeing Christ lead humanity back into heaven at the Ascension. The angels will rejoice with us at that time because they will see "what they were always waiting for: human nature resplendent in beauty and glory."⁵ Thus it is that, for the Christian, a life of grace brings with it the unfailing hope of enjoying a "communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1024).

NOTES

¹From a sermon by John Henry Newman entitled, “The Powers of Nature” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902.

²St. Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. by Henry Chadwick. Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 224.

³*Sermo 12 in psalmum Qui habitat (Liturgia Horarum IV, 1263)*.

⁴*Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Psalm 103), eds. D. Eligius Delckers, OSB et Johannes Fraipont. CCSL 40. Turnholti: Brepols, 1990, p. 1488. CCSL 40, p. 1488, par. 15, vs 8-9: “*Angelus enim officii nomen est, non naturae.*”

⁵*Sermo in Ascensionem Domini nostri Jesu Christi* “*hodie aspexerunt archangeli, quod diu concupierant: hodie nostram naturam de throno regali fulgoris instar resplendentem gloria et pulchritudine immortaliter viderunt.*” J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca, S.P.N. Joannis Chrysostomi Opera Omnia que Exstant*, t. II, vol. 50, col. 447 (Paris, 1862).