

## ON ANGELS

Devotions to angels have become very popular in the last few decades, but as with so many subjects of popular devotion, the understanding of Catholic doctrine is not so widespread. The following article is an attempt to summarize some background on angels and some popular devotions. For more information, I would recommend Peter Kreeft's book *Angels (and Demons.)* For a vivid literary description of angels I would recommend C.S. Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, i.e. *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*.

### I. WHAT ARE ANGELS?

An angel is a pure spirit created to glorify God forever in heaven. The term angel (*aggelos* in Greek, *angelus* in Latin) means messenger, for the description of angels in the Bible is mostly, although not exclusively, as messengers and guardians from God. See, e.g., Gen. 19, 22:11; Judges 6:11-24; 1 Kings 19:5; Zech. 1:7-17; Matt. 1:20, 2:19; Luke 1:10-20, 26-38; Heb. 2:2. Being pure spirit, they are magnificent in splendor and glory, with greater majesty and power than any human even imaginable on this earth. Thus, when people realize that they have seen an angel, they often believe that they will die from the glory of it. See, e.g., Judges 6:22, 13:22; Tob. 12:16; Dan. 9:17-19. As a result, among the first words an angel addresses to a human are frequently, "Be not afraid." See, e.g., Tob. 12:16; Luke 1:13, 2:10. Because angels are so close to God, when people in the Bible see them, they describe the occasion as seeing the Lord. See, e.g., Gen. 16:13, 32:31; Ex. 3:2-6. St. John was even tempted to give an angel the worship due to God. See Rev. 19:10, 22:9-10. And because angels show forth the majesty and holiness of God with such great power, they are at the same time the guardians of God's people, but also very dangerous if approached without the proper respect. See, e.g., Gen. 19:11; Ex. 23:20-26; Num. 22:22-35; 2 Pet. 2:10. The Book of Revelation thus describes them as both: (1) guiding and guarding God's people, especially in their worship, but also (2) announcing God's wrath upon the world. See, e.g., Rev. 7:1-8, 8:3-10:11, 16:1-21.

When angels were created, they had one choice, for or against God. They angels at creation were so close to God that that one choice was final, for never-ending glory or never-ending shame. The angels who chose to serve God became what we call angels

and praise Him forever in heaven in magnificent splendor beyond the ability of human words to describe. That choice for God required divine grace, for no one can approach God without His special favor; but, as with Mary, that grace was one of attaining perfection, not forgiveness of sins, for the angels in heaven never sinned. God also sends some angels to earth to serve us and carry out His will. See Catechism 329-35.

The spirits who chose against God became what we call demons and, in their hatred for God and us, they seek to turn as many people against God as possible. They are weaker than the angels in heaven, but if humans do not turn to God and His angels for help, they can trap people in their darkness. There is a continuing battle between the angels and demons, which will end only in the final consummation of all things on this earth, when Christ appears with His angels to judge all people and nations. See Matt. 25:14-46; Rev. 20-22.

## II. TYPES OF ANGELS

One may also ask what we mean by calling some angels simply "angels," and others archangels, cherubim, seraphim and the like. These terms come from the Bible and have been used by theologians to describe different types of angels. St. Thomas Aquinas in particular described nine "choirs" of angels according to their closeness to the glory of God. It should be noted that all angels are glorious beyond our imagining, and the idea of nine choirs of angels is not a matter of Church doctrine. Still, this way of referring to different angels is based upon Scripture and has been very helpful for centuries in distinguishing between angels.

St. Thomas's description of the angelic choirs builds upon the work of Church fathers such as Dionysius and St. Gregory the Great, and Catholic descriptions of angels have used this ordering ever since. According to this vision, there are nine choirs of angels: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and angels. Each of these terms is used in Scripture, and St. Thomas argues that each choir described by them has a special place in divine government. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica part I, question 108, articles 5-6. St. Thomas fully recognized that each angel is unique and that these organizing terms are insufficient to capture their individual glory. Still, he said that, given the limitations of the human intellect and vision here on earth, this ordering helps us understand the angels better. See Summa Theologica part I, question 50, article 4 and question 108, article 3.

Within this ordering, there are three hierarchies, with Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones in the highest hierarchy, dominions, virtues and powers in the middle hierarchy, and principalities, archangels and angels in the third hierarchy. The first hierarchy is focused most

perfectly on the contemplation of God. Thus, the seraphim, whom Isaiah describes in his vision of the heavenly temple, see, praise and teach about God in Himself more perfectly than any creature except the Blessed Mother. See Is. 6:2-4. The cherubim, whose images were on the ancient Ark of the Covenant and whom Ezekiel describes as upholding the glory of God, contemplate and show that glory with a brilliance that the prophet describes as like moving wheels of fire. See Ex. 25:18-22; Ez. 10. St. Thomas argues that thrones, described by St. Paul as the first of the invisible realm, see Col 1:16, contemplate, praise and demonstrate God's power and magnificence above all else.

In his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, St. Paul also describes the next hierarchy of angels: the dominions, virtues and powers. See Col. 1:16; Eph. 2:20-21. These angels are more in charge of the governance of all things in both the visible and (vastly greater) invisible realm. The dominions are given overall governance over implementing the eternal law in general, the virtues the more specific aspects of governance regarding such definite things such as science, miracles and justice, and the powers the means of carrying out this government. The third choir of angels exercises this governance over specific things and peoples. Thus, principalities, whom St. Paul also describes in his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians as leaders of the invisible realm, protect and guide peoples and nations. Archangels announce and carry out particularly glorious news of the realm of grace and angels guide people according to reason. The Scriptures deal more with archangels, probably because the seven higher choirs are too high for human language to

### III. ANGELS NAMED IN THE BIBLE

The Bible specifically names three archangels: Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. And the Church celebrates especially these angels on the Feast of the Archangels. Although there are no doubt myriads of archangels, there has historically been a special devotion to seven archangels. This number is based upon Raphael's declaration in the Book of Tobit that he is one of seven angels that "enter and serve before the glory of the Lord" and St. John's vision in the Book of Revelation of seven angels blowing seven trumpets of the judgment of God. See Tob.12:15; Rev. 8:2. In addition, chapter 20 of the non-Biblical, but still very interesting Book of Enoch, which was composed from about 300 B.C. to about 70 A.D., also supports the special veneration of seven archangels. The names of the other four archangels of common devotion in addition to Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael varies according to different Christian traditions. All of the traditional devotions tend to emphasize common elements, however, and the Church has seen no need to endorse one of those traditions to the exclusion of others. But one common devotion from the eastern traditions of the Catholic Church, as well as some of the Orthodox churches, is to venerate the seven archangels under the names Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Selaphiel, Jehudiel, and Barachiel.

The Book of Daniel shows the archangel Michael as the special defender of God's Chosen People and the Book of Revelation describes him as the one who led the forces of God against Satan and the other fallen angels, casting them out of heaven. See Dan. 10:10-21, 12:1; Rev. 12:7-9. We especially associate him with guarding the Church as a whole, each local church, each family, and every one of the faithful against the wiles of the demons. And Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) specifically asked people to pray the Prayer of St. Michael regularly, and particularly after Mass, for the defense of the Church.

The archangel Gabriel is especially associated with bringing people confidence and good news of salvation. He explained to the prophet Daniel visions about the redemption of God's people and the end of abominations. See Dan. 8:15-26, 9:20-27. When the time of Christ dawned, he first gave Zechariah the news that his son would restore prophesy and prepare the way of the Lord. See Luke 1:5-25. Then, at the height of his mission, he announced to the Blessed Virgin Mary that she would be the mother of Christ. See Luke 1:26-38. He may well also have been the one who announced the news of Jesus Christ to Joseph and to the shepherds.

The archangel Raphael is the quintessential guardian angel. The Book of Tobit describes him as guiding Tobit's son Tobias on his mission to recover the family fortune. On the way, Raphael not only guides Tobias, but teaches him how to achieve the even more glorious mission of finding a cure for his father's blindness and driving away the demon Azmodius, who has been persecuting a young woman named Sarah, and whom Tobias marries before returning home in triumph. We can pray to the archangel Raphael especially for healing and guidance in carrying out our vocations and missions in life.

#### IV. OTHER ANGELS OF POPULAR DEVOTION

there is no one official list of the archangels other than Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, but there are often lists of seven archangels of popular devotion; and one common tradition lists the other four archangels as Uriel, Selaphiel, Jehudiel, and Barachiel.

Uriel, whose name means "fire of God" in Hebrew, is especially associated with enlightening the faithful with both a deeper understanding of the truth and a more powerful love of God and neighbor. He is often portrayed with the sword of truth that cuts to the heart and releases the power of love. See Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12. Salaphiel, whose name means "prayer of God," is associated with helping people in prayer, especially when one is experiencing difficulties in concentrating, for we need the help of heaven to win this battle of prayer. See Catechism 2725. He is often portrayed carrying incense symbolizing our prayers rising to heaven, and is sometimes identified with the angel offering the prayers of the faithful in Revelation 8:3. Jehudiel, whose name means "the praise of

God" is a defender of workers and of those who are suffering from oppressions from illness and injustice. For in dedicated labor and patient suffering, we offer God praise in union with His Son who labored and suffered for us. See Catechism 1508, 2427. He is often portrayed carrying a crown to be given to those who work and struggle well, representing heaven's reward for those who are usually not rewarded on earth. See Wis. 5:15-16. Barachiel, whose name means "the blessings of God," is especially associated with helping people recognize the blessings God has given them, and particularly those associated with married life. Often portrayed carrying the Bible or other writings of the Church, he especially helps people wisely sense the goodness that God offers them, rather than some other goodness they want or expect. And, particularly in marriage, he helps couples sense that God is with them, helping them make their family a "domestic church." See Catechism 1642, 1656.

## V. GUARDIAN ANGELS

Such angels have general roles in providing for God's people in addition to their calling in heaven to praise God forever. But God also sends to each of us specific guardian angels to guide, help, and assist us on the road to salvation. The Book of Tobit gives a lengthy description of a guardian angel guiding Tobias to find a cure for his father's blindness, meet his future wife Sarah, and then drive away the demon Azmodeus who was persecuting her. This narrative is a dramatic example of these "ministering spirits, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation." Heb. 1:14. The Psalmist promises that the angels will ever guide our way and Jesus declares that we should never look down on the little ones, for "their angels always look on the face of My heavenly Father." Ps. 91:10-13; Matt. 18:10. St. Thomas Aquinas says that this earth is the perilous road to heaven and thus God gives each community and each person an angel to instruct, protect and encourage him along that path. See Summa Theologica, Part I, question 113, articles 1-6. C.S. Lewis in one of his books exquisitely describes what a blessed one arrives in heaven and meets the guardian angels that were assigned to him, his family, and his communities, "The dim consciousness of friends about him which had haunted his solitudes from infancy was now at last explained; the central music in every pure experience which had always just evaded memory was now at last recovered."