

THE ANGELIC COMBAT

THOMAS AQUINAS JOYCE, O.P.



HE unfathomable heavens contain many secrets—secrets of an all-pervading Godhead—secrets hidden in the beginning of time—secrets of invisible creatures. Vague whisperings of these mysteries have been vouchsafed to man through divine revelation. Clarified and simplified by the speculations of the great luminaries in the science of the one true religion, these murmurings from another realm have enabled man to catch a measure here and there of the celestial harmonies that sound eternally beyond the spheres. From these fonts, revelation and theology, man has come to know, in particular, another world of creatures—the angel world—a world veiled in the obscurity of the divine plan, which revelation alone can pierce. Sacred Scripture has brought to light many facts concerning these superb creatures, facts dealing with their nature, facts about their duties and their offices. The important events occurring in the angel world have been disclosed by the Holy Writers—their creation out of nothingness—their trial and probation, the result of which has been the determining of the status of each for all eternity—the struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. This last, the War in the Heavens, is one of the most interesting of the occurrences in the world above us, and one which presents ample opportunity for speculation.

In the Apocalypse of Saint John, it is written, “and there was a great battle in heaven.”¹ It is further learned from this same book that this combat took place between Michael and the good angels on the one side and the Dragon and his angels on the other. The fact that there was such a battle must be accepted on the authority of Holy Scripture. Human reason must ever depend on revelation for a knowledge of those events occurring in an order higher than its own. But with regard to the nature of the strife, once its reality has been established, human

¹ Apoc. 12: 7.

speculation may enter in. From the constitution and nature of the angels as known from Scripture and tradition, an understanding may be had of this event narrated by St. John. What was the occasion of the battle—the reason for it? Who were the combatants? What kind of a struggle was it—its nature? What were some of its results? These are some of the questions which may be asked with regard to the Angelic Combat.

The occasion of this conflict between the angels was the fact that some of the members of the heavenly choirs fell into sin. The existence of the angels is an obvious truth. It is to be found both in the Holy Writings and in Tradition. Their creation out of nothingness is also undoubtedly "De Fide." In the beginning of time, God created both spiritual and corporeal creatures. The spiritual beings or angels as they are more commonly called, were destined to enjoy God for all eternity. Theirs was to be an everlasting beatitude—the continual contemplation of God forever. This was a joy, however, far removed from their natural capacities; no matter how well the angels used their natural accomplishments, they never could, by these alone, attain to that goal which God had set for them. On the other hand this beatific vision was not to be given to them as a gratuitous gift. The angels had to merit this reward. No creature can attain anything except by means of some operation which produces it, or makes the thing possible of attainment, or else by an action which merits that thing. It is evident that no act of a created being, be he the highest in the order of created things, can attain something above its nature unless by that act it merit the thing desired. The destiny of the angels was the participation of the inner life of the Godhead, a goal far exceeding the capacity of the angelic nature—a goal that could be reached only by a meritorious act. Hence the angels were put on trial. A period of probation was theirs. This is called the second instant of the angels, the first being the instant of their creation.

During this stage in the existence of the angels, some remained faithful; others fell into sin. The sin of the fallen was the sin of pride. St. Thomas teaches that "since a spirit is immaterial his fall cannot have been due to fleshly or material desires but only to spiritual ones; in an angel there can be no sin save of insubordination or pride which resided in an undue desire to be 'like to God' in that he sought as the ultimate goal of his happiness something to which he could attain by his own natural powers, turning away his desires from that supernatural

happiness which comes from the grace of God. Or, if he wished to find his happiness in such likeness to God as is due to grace, then he sought it by the powers of his own nature." That some of the angels did sin is known from Scripture "Behold they that serve him are not steadfast, and in his angels he found wickedness."² That they could sin can be shown by reason. Sin is nothing else than the falling away from that rectitude which an act of free will should have. This rectitude consists in the conformity to a rule. No created will is the rule of its conduct;—the divine will alone has this perfection—but must regulate itself by the supreme uncreated will. Now since the will of the angels should be conformed in all things to the divine will, and was free so to conform itself or not, hence the angels could disobey that will and fall into sin. This some of the angels did, and the first sin was perpetrated. Every sin deserves a punishment. The fault of the angels was to be avenged immediately after their one act of disobedience. For just as the good angels received their reward after one act of merit, so the evil were punished immediately after their one act of rebellion. This is the third instant in the existence of the angels—the instant of punishment or reward. It was during this period that the great battle took place—that battle occasioned by sin and carried on in a unique way.

Before discussing the nature of the battle, it is well to consider who they were who engaged in the fray. The importance of every war, of every conflict, is determined not only by the cause begetting it, or the issue involved, but also by the personality of the combatants. In this conflict of the heavens, on the one side was Michael and his angels, on the other the dragon and his host. What is the rank of each among the angel choirs? The common teaching is that there are three hierarchies of angels and in each hierarchy, three orders. Each order contains a great number of celestial spirits. According to Dionysius, these orders are listed as follows: Angels, Archangels, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Dominations, Thrones, Cherubs and Seraphs. The angels are the lowest in nature and dignity; the seraphs the highest and most perfect. From Holy Writ, it is learned that Michael belongs to the second lowest order of angels, the archangels. He is one of "the seven that stand before the Lord." Michael is accorded the role of Protector of the

² Job 4: 18.

Church of the old Testament and now of its successor, the Holy Catholic Church. It is easy to suppose that "His angels" were taken from the order of Archangels or else from the lower order of angels. By nature Michael is subordinate to the higher angels. He does not lead them but rather sees to it that their commands are put into execution. The office of the lower orders was to fulfill the commands of God, to execute the mandates of the divinity transmitted to them by the higher orders.

So much for the one army of the angelic spirits; on the other side was the Dragon and his angels. He is the leader of the evil spirits. This "dragon" is commonly identified with Lucifer—the highest of the Seraphim, the most like unto God. St. Thomas teaches that the highest of all the angels was the first one to sin. This he shows by reason. For if the motive behind the sin—excellence—is considered, then the sinful act was first performed by the highest of all, for the supreme one has the greatest excellence, the greatest motive for sinning. There was no other motive, no proneness to sin in the angelic nature. Hence it is that Lucifer, the greatest of all, was the first to fall. His splendid endowments fascinated others, who were ready to serve him as their natural good instead of the supreme supernatural good—God. Lucifer drew a third part of the heavens to his banners. These angels were enlisted from all the orders. Every hierarchy and choir furnished its contingent to the host of the revolting angels. The army of evil was marshalled, the battle of the heavens was to begin. Michael with his angels—the weakest of all the angels in nature—stood arrayed against Lucifer and his host—they who had greater natural attainments. The war of the heavens was on.

It was a terrific struggle—gigantic and fearful. It was carried on between forces of immense energies. It may have lasted a long time; probably it did, for God did not intervene to check natural activities. He allowed them full scope for good or evil, till at last good by its innate divine force prevailed over evil. It could not have been a physical combat. The angels had no bodies. They were immaterial, incorporeal. This is certain doctrine. What then was the nature of this war between the heavenly hosts? An investigation into the nature of the angels may give the answer.

The operations of any creature follow the nature of that creature. The angels are pure spirits. They possess intelligence and will. Whatever an angel does, he does by the imperium of

his will. True the angels are intellectual creatures, but it does not follow from this that they have only intellectual operations. An intellect does not act except through the medium of a will. For the will is nothing else than the motion or the inclination following a form which has been understood by the intellect. The intelligence of the angels always expressed itself in regard to things exterior to itself, by an act of the will. Hence the battle of the heavens must have been a battle of will, since it was a question of the doing of something external to each individual angel. It was an endeavour to make one will prevail over the other. This was the essential characteristic of the event.

And with regard to this a difficulty enters in. St. Thomas teaches that since a faculty is a medium between an essence and the operation of that essence, the virtue or power of that faculty is in proportion to the essence in which that faculty is rooted. The more noble the essence, therefore, the more powerful the faculty. Hence it is that the superior angels have the more efficacious faculties both for understanding by the intellect and for acting by the will. Applying this doctrine to the battle of the angels, it would seem that Lucifer and his host should have prevailed, should have won the victory. Lucifer had the highest nature of all the angels. He was supreme among the choirs of the heavenly spirits. His was a greater capacity for understanding the movements of his enemy; his a greater knowledge of the weapons to be used in downing his opponent; his a greater capacity for activity. A stronger will was his. Michael, compared to him was weak. Why was it then that the lowly archangel gained the field?

If the warfare be considered solely according to the natural capacities of those taking part in it, then it must be stated that Lucifer would have come out the victor. But this was not the case. There was something more than natural perfections brought into play. The dragon had only the powers of his superior nature to use. Michael, on the other hand, had the innate force of divine goodness on his side. The Archangel had remained faithful. The instant the period of probation ended, he had received his reward—the beatific vision—confirmation in goodness. Again in Lucifer's case, it must be remembered that evil often weakens the powers of nature. The evil angels became obstinate in sin so that whatever they did, they did evilly. Michael was strengthened in goodness; Lucifer debilitated by evil. Their wills clash—on the one side the greatest created will,

puffed up with a false estimate of its own excellence, on the other an inferior will sustained by the knowledge that Goodness Itself was on its side. They battle. The victor is Michael; the vanquished, Lucifer and his angels. It is a triumph of a will fortified by grace over a will debilitated, weakened by the greatest enervating force, pride. The battle comes to an end. The field is Michael's. The Dragon is cast from heaven. He drags with him the third part of the heavenly spirits.

But what is the meaning of this phrase "cast out of heaven." In the first place it must not be taken in the sense that the evil spirits were already in heaven. The joys of heaven belong only to the blessed. It means that the rebellious spirits were barred from the heavenly courts and were cast into the hell which the justice of God prepared for them. They were not cast from heaven as it were bodily. They were incorporeal. They did not lose the perfections of their natures even though they did sin. And God never changes the nature of those things which He has created. All this is true. It would be foolish to consider the expulsion of the angels according to material concepts. The explanation is probably this. The angel is wherever he acts. The *locus*, the place of the angel is that point in which he happens to be in operation by the contact of his power. Hence being cast from heaven means simply that Lucifer and his army could never act in the heavenly court. Never will they be able to chant "Holy, Holy, Holy" before the throne of the Lord. The duties and offices which were due to each angel by nature, are now denied him. Their intellects no longer can consider the Godhead as before. Every action of theirs is tainted with an all-consuming hatred of the Divine Goodness. Their wills are constantly turned against the Eternal Will. Such as these can never find a place in heaven. The operations of such creatures can never terminate in things divine. Consequently they are cast out and thrown to the earth.

The expulsion of the angels who had sinned was the first result of the Angelic Combat. Immediately the struggle had ended, there was a separation of the good from the bad. Those who had remained faithful were rewarded. The evil were punished. God gave the evil angels the lot that they had deliberately chosen for themselves. They had sought for self without God. He leaves them to themselves without any part of the supreme Goodness. They had scorned his love; He withdraws Himself. He leaves His irreconcilable foes to their own pride, blasphemy,

falsehood, unsatisfied desire, frustrated spite, hatred of goodness and virtue. He prepares for them Hell, a place of eternal torment. There they languish forever, never satisfied, continually suffering the pangs of remorse, knowing the throes of a consuming hatred, ever turned against goodness in which alone true happiness lies. These are some of the effects of that great battle that once was waged behind the screen of the heavens, these the indemnities which the vanquished must pay; these the debts that are never satisfied but must continue for all eternity.

But there are still other results of that gigantic struggle, results which concern man. The Dragon was cast out of heaven and cast unto the earth. The actions of the evil spirits, no longer terminated in heaven, now center around man. This God permitted them to do, for man had shown his unfaithfulness by committing original sin. The Devil sends his demons to tempt man to sin, to draw him away from the path of virtue, to drag him down to be a cohabitor with him in the depths of hell for all eternity. Only some of the evil spirits are so sent, and even while they are outside of hell, yet they suffer the pains of the damned. The demons bring all their ingenuity to bear on man in order to make him fall. The forces that fought Michael in the heavens are now arrayed against the will of man, and even more for the demons may use material forces to procure the downfall of human beings. But from the battle of the heavens, many may draw solace. Michael and the angels of goodness are on his side. In its attacks on man, the army of satan is continually repulsed by the army of Michael. The angels are still carrying on the warfare. Man is the battle-ground. The salvation or destruction of a human soul, the end in view. The good angel will always conquer unless man ally himself with Satan. The great battle of the heavens has left its mark. Once good has conquered evil, the subsequent struggles between these two forces will always terminate in a victory for virtue and goodness. The devils will always know defeat. Every time they seem to have won a victory, the joy of conquest will be taken from them. They will know no rest. The vehemence of sin is exercised in them giving them no peace, no contentment. Frustration is their lot for all eternity.

Thus was the battle between the heavenly hosts. It had its origin in a sin of pride—the first sin of all creation. It took place between that superlatively excellent creature, Lucifer, and Michael, the Archangel, lowly in comparison with the natural

attainments of the great Seraph. It was a battle of wills. Michael was the victor. It was the triumph of a will fortified by goodness over a will debilitated by evil. The Dragon was cast from the heavenly courts into an existence of continual frustration. Goodness had prevailed for all eternity.

CHOIR REVERIE

PHILIP REILLY, O.P.

Murmurs midst an amber sheen . . .
Droning over every stall . . .

Guardian angels, guardians near,
Is it you that call?
Checking, chiding, strengthening,
Each one, day by day?

Guardian angels, guardians near,
Yet so far away.
Is that yours, the distant drone,
Guiding each, one soul back home,
Hiding as you call?

Murmurs midst an amber sheen . . .
Droning over every stall. . . .