



The Angel Guardian

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THE ANGELS

The aim of this article is to present a few interesting doctrines regarding the incorporeal beings who are at once so near and so unknown to us. It is a subject on which comparatively little has been revealed in Sacred Scripture, or declared in the infallible definitions of the Church. As a result, there exists considerable theological discussion on minor points touching the angelic nature and operations. In this diversity of opinions, we have chosen as our guide St. Thomas Aquinas, whose sublimity of doctrine and virginal purity of life have merited the titles; "Prince of Theologians," and "Angel of the Schools."

Our theme falls conveniently into four divisions, the first of which treats briefly of the existence, number, and specific diversity of the angels; the second and third, of their perfections of intellect and will, respectively; while the fourth considers their relations among themselves and to the mundane creation.

The most cogent proof of the existence of the angels is found in the Divine authority of Holy Scripture. It is also, however, a postulate of human reason. A being is nobler in proportion as it is a more perfect image of its cause; wherefore it is said that all things tend to produce their like. Consequently, since it is certain that God intends principally the good of His creatures, there should exist spiritual beings, reflecting, by their intelligence, the Divine intellect and will which produced them. As the rational soul enjoys but a limited participation of intellectual light, this is sufficiently accomplished only by the absolutely incorporeal creatures whom we call angels. Thus the universe, which contains at one extreme purely corporal beings, with man, part matter and part spirit, in a medial position, attains the completion and perfection which must characterize the works of God by including, at its opposite extreme, purely spiritual substances.

Of the total number of angels we know little. It is probable that it far exceeds that of all souls existing or to be created, as well as the multitude of material natures; and moreover that those of the higher, surpass in number, as in nature, those of the lower orders, according to the principle that the more perfect beings exceed the inferior in number. This agrees with the testimony of Holy Scripture, which ascribes a larger number to the "assisting" angels, who are more exalted in nature, than to those that minister. "Thousands of thousands ministered to Him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before Him" (Dan. VII.-10).

In this incalculable multitude there cannot be found two angels having the same specific nature. Only where such plurality is necessary for the preservation of the species do we find many individuals in one species, as in men and the lower forms of life. Consequently, in purely spiritual, and therefore incorruptible, substances, there is but one individual in each species. This conclusion follows necessarily from the fact that quantitative matter, the principle of numerical multiplication within one species, is not found in the angels.

In treating of the angelic intellect we must consider two things: the mode of its operation, and the objects to which it extends. The manner of cognition of the angels is quite different from that of men. To be known, a thing must be present in the intellect. But as the intellect, whether angelic or human, is a spiritual faculty, exterior objects cannot be present therein in their material grossness, but only by means of immaterial representations or species. These species are supplied to the human mind through the ministry of the body. The external senses are the camera which impresses the likeness of the material object on the film of the imagination. This film is then submitted to the illumination of the "active" intellect, and the species undergoes a transforming and purifying process which leaves it no longer sensible, but intelligible to the spiritual faculty. In this way man obtains all his knowledge, for nothing can enter the intellect but by the narrow door of the senses.

The angels have no faculty by which to abstract the species of material objects. These types, on the contrary, are infused into their intellects at creation. Being pure spirits, they are free from all the barriers which matter implies. Immateriality and intellectuality are correlative. To how many limitations is

not the corporal instrument of the soul subject! Fatigue and infirmity exhaust its energies, passion and sin impede its operations, time and distance baffle its efforts. The angelic intellect, not thus held captive in a prison of clay, soars aloft in perfect freedom and unwearied activity. What man acquires by laborious application and slow reasoning, the angel intues at a glance; by one simple act it sees both principles and conclusions, the essence of a thing and all that can be said regarding it. Again, the weakness of human reason frequently leads man to assent to what is false, a thing impossible in the angelic knowledge, which, as it proceeds from divinely infused ideas, is immune from error.

According as some angels possess their knowledge in a more excellent manner than others, the angelic multitude is divided into subordinate hierarchies. It is a theological principle that perfections found separately in inferior, are unified in superior beings. Thus, in the infinitely simple Divine Essence is contained, as in a single species, the plenitude of knowledge. In proportion, therefore, as an angel is more exalted in nature, it approaches more nearly to the Divine simplicity by obtaining its knowledge through fewer species. Similarly, a man of trained intellect understands in a single principle several truths which to weaker minds must be explained one by one.

On this basis, the whole angelic creation is divided, to the image of the Triune God, into three great armies. To the highest of these belong the resplendent spirits which ever assist immediately before the Divine throne. These contemplate all things as proceeding from their primal cause, the Divine Will. The angels of the second hierarchy, who are occupied with the general administration of the universe, derive their knowledge from certain universal principles, while those of the lowest hierarchy, to whom is committed the care of particular beings, see things in their more proper and immediate causes. As an illustration of this we may take the principles which shape the policy of government in a nation. These are known to some from personal association with its rulers. Others see them as reflected in the general laws of the whole country, while others, again, only as embodied in the special enactments which secure their execution in given localities.

Having considered the manner of the angelic cognition, we now turn to the question of its extent. The angels, being at the apex of the intelligent creation, must possess all the perfections

of lower orders of being. Now, the adequate object of the human intellect is universal truth. Although for obvious reasons even the most learned of men attain but to a modicum of the sum of knowledge, yet, absolutely speaking, our intellect is capable of all truth. If, therefore, God had not, in the beginning, infused into the angelic intellects the knowledge of all natural truth, man, whose faculties are at least in potency to all such truth, would be superior to the angels, who would neither possess nor have the power of acquiring it. The conclusion drawn from this is confirmed by the words of St. Augustine: "The other things which are lower than the angels are so created that they first receive existence in the knowledge of the angels, and then in their own nature."

Marvelous as is this knowledge, it is yet subject to certain limitations, for God alone is omniscient. We read in the Book of Isaiah (xli-23): "Show the things that are to come, and we shall know that ye are gods." To read the future with certainty is an exclusive sign of the Divinity. The angels have, however, a conjectural knowledge of future events, which, from their wonderful comprehension of antecedent causes, far surpasses our own.

The secret counsels of other spiritual beings are a second domain impervious to the angelic intellect. The species it possesses represent all things comprised within the order of the universe, and, consequently, whatever is above the concatenation of causes constituting this order lies beyond the angels' natural ken. The acts of the free will have no necessary dependence upon natural causes. The will can be effectively moved only by its Creator, and therefore of Him it is said: "Thou alone knowest the hearts of the children of men" (2nd. Paral. vi-30).

The secrets of nature, however, which men strive so toilsomely to penetrate, are the inherent endowment of the angels. The material universe is to them an open book in which they may read at will the wonderful works of God. Yet these manifestations of God's power and glory are not the deepest spring of happiness to the angels. The angelic nature is itself, in the natural order, the most perfect work of the Creator. In each of its companions the angel beholds a world of beauty far surpassing that of the whole material creation. It is in the contemplation of the Divine perfections, as reflected in its own nature, that the highest source of the natural bliss of the angels consists.

The knowledge which the angel possesses by means of innate

species is termed by theologians, following St. Augustine, "evening" knowledge, in contradistinction to "morning" knowledge, which is the vision of all things simultaneously in the Divine Word, as in a single species. "Evening" knowledge remains also in the fallen angels, whose natural powers were neither destroyed nor lessened by their sin.

Every being gifted with an intellect to apprehend truth must also possess the corresponding faculty of will, by which it tends towards universal good. In God, because He is infinitely simple, yet contains within Himself, all truth and goodness, these two faculties, having the same object, are identified. As universal goodness, however, is quite foreign to the nature of a creature, the created will must seek its adequate object in what is outside itself. The intellect, on the contrary, finds the term of its operation in representations contained within it. Hence, in men and angels, will and intellect are distinct faculties.

Natural happiness consists in the ultimate perfection of which these unaided faculties are capable. Nothing can be loved but what is known. We have seen that the angelic intellect was created in the fullness of natural knowledge. Consequently, the operation of the angelic will, also, must have been complete from the beginning. The angels, therefore, unlike men, were created in a state of natural beatitude. Furthermore, according to Thomistic teaching, they were created in sanctifying grace, the germ of their perfection in the supernatural order. Along with sanctifying grace they must have received wonderful gifts and illuminations transcending the powers and exigencies of their nature. Their final supernatural beatitude, however, like that of men, had to be merited by the operation of free will.

As it is proper to the angels to receive their natural perfection not by gradual acquisition, but to be created therein, so likewise they attain to the supernatural life of glory instantly after one act of merit, for grace always perfects nature according to the manner of the nature. To understand this we must consider that the appetitive power is in all beings proportioned to and moved by the apprehensive. Thus in man, whose reason, because of its imperfection, apprehends a thing movably, that is, with liberty to recede from it and cling to the opposite, the will also is flexible to either side both before and after choice. The angel, on the contrary, not being subject to error, apprehends immovably by its intellect. Consequently, its will, though free, and

flexible to either opposite before choice, having once chosen, adheres fixedly and immovably. As long, therefore, as man remains in the present life, he may repent of evil and elect good. The angels were given but one decision, for "the fall is to the angels what death is to men," as St. John Damascene expresses it. By once choosing justice, the good angels were confirmed in grace, whereas the wicked ones, by a single act of evil, became obstinate therein for all eternity.

The sin which brought about the ruin of the bad angels could not have proceeded from any attraction to carnal pleasure. The obscenities of the flesh are, in themselves, repulsive to a spiritual nature. It must, then, have consisted in an inordinate desire for some good of the spiritual order. What this desire was we are told in the Prophecy of Isaias (xiv-13,14), where Lucifer is represented as saying: "I will ascend into heaven, I will be like to the Most High." The resemblance to God to which the rebel angels aspired was not one of equality in nature—which they knew full well to be impossible—but consisted in this, that, as God is the sufficient source of His own supreme happiness, so they also desired to possess final beatitude by their own power, and not through the Divine assistance, according to God's ordering.

Since, from the very sublimity of His gifts, the motive for thus refusing the subjection due to the Almighty was strongest in the highest angel, St. Thomas designates as more probable the view which holds that the highest of those who fell was likewise the highest of all. The number of those who rebelled with him is indicated in the Apocalypse (xii-4), where it is stated that there fell with the dragon "the third part of the stars of heaven." Yet we must not suppose that God's plans were frustrated by this rebellion of His noblest creatures, for the Divine glory is achieved both in the damned and in the saved. The former eternally proclaim His justice, the latter His goodness.

Having discussed their perfections of intellect and will, it remains to consider the various grades among the angels, and their agency in the government of the universe, of which, according to the opinion preferred by our Angelic Preceptor, they form an integral part.

As the perfection of the material world is the result of an infinite variety of beings harmoniously conspiring to the completeness of the whole, so in the invisible creation, of which our

world but faintly reflects the beauties, there is even greater diversity in more perfect order. "Wherever many things are ordered to one end," says Aristotle, "we shall always find one at the head directing them." The ultimate end of all creatures is God Himself; the directive force of all is His Providence, which "readeth from end to end mightily, and ordereth all things sweetly" (Wis. viii-1). In as much as things come from the hand of God in varying degrees of perfection, it has pleased His sovereign wisdom to govern the lower by means of the higher, conferring on His spiritual creatures not only the goodness proper to themselves, but the added perfection of causality, by which they may effect goodness in others.

Under the Supreme Governor of the universe, the angels, as mentioned above, are ranged in three subordinate hierarchies. By the Greek word "hierarchy," is signified "a sacred multitude ordered under the rule of a prince." A multitude, however, would not be ordered, but confused, did it not contain various subdivisions. In an earthly principality there is usually found a threefold order: that of the aristocracy, of the middle classes, and of the common people. Similarly, each angelic hierarchy is adequately divided into three orders or choirs.

The distinction of the nine celestial choirs is not, like that into hierarchies, based upon degrees of intellectual perfection, but on a diversity of offices and actions within each hierarchy. In assigning the various orders to their proper hierarchies it will aid us to recall the manner of cognition characteristic of each hierarchy. In further determining their rank within the hierarchies, we may be guided by the name which Holy Scripture applies to each choir, for these names are expressive of the operations peculiar to each, and the nature of a being is ever manifested by the dignity of its operation.

The first hierarchy contemplates the images of things as proceeding from God Himself, their most universal principle. Consequently we must place in this hierarchy those orders whose names indicate a direct relation to God. These are the Seraphin, Cherubim and Thrones. The Seraphim (from the Hebrew "Saraph" "to burn") are so called from the intense love of God which enkindles them. The word "Cherubim" is interpreted "profusion of wisdom." These resplendent spirits are, as it were, pellucid mirrors reflecting the divine illuminations upon the lower orders. After the

Cherubim come the Thrones, who are elevated in a singular manner to the reception and contemplation of the Divine Majesty. The arrangement in this hierarchy may be illustrated by an army of men, in which some ever abide in a close union with their leader. Others, less privileged, are yet admitted to his secret counsels, while still others may at all times familiarly approach to him.

The distinctive property of the angels of the second hierarchy is the derivation of their knowledge from universal principles. Hence to it belong the orders whose names imply administrative functions of a superior or universal kind. Sovereignty is manifested primarily in the appointment of things to be done. This is the special office of the Dominations, who preside in the middle hierarchy. The second step in government is the communication of power to execute the works prescribed, which is the prerogative of the Virtues, who represent the overwhelming strength of God, and to whom is specially attributed the operation of miracles. Next come the Powers, who determine the manner of performing what has been decided upon. To this order is also confided the coercion of Satan and his hosts.

The choirs belonging to the lowest hierarchy understand the ideas of things in their application to particular effects. They are charged with the actual execution of the angelic ministrations. First among them stand the Principalities. To these, who may be compared to generals and officers, are subordinated the Archangels, who fulfill the more important missions to men, and the Angels, to whom are committed lesser announcements and more ordinary duties.

Our faith teaches that the human race is confided to the guardianship of the good angels. "He hath given His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways" (Ps. xc-11). In the order imposed by Divine Providence the lower are governed by the higher, the particular by the more universal. According to St. Gregory, the various genera of material things are presided over by different orders of angels. Hence it is probable that the different species are guarded by different angels of the same order. Inferior beings are incorruptible only in their common species, but the rational soul of man is incorruptible in itself. Therefore it is reasonable that not only the entire species, but each individual human being, should be committed to the care of a special angel. This angel begins its guardianship at man's birth

and continues it during his lifetime. After death, man no longer needs a guardian, but will have either an angelic companion sharing his glory in heaven, or a demon punishing him in hell. In the intermediate state of Purgatory, the angels assist, not as guardians, but by consoling the suffering souls and interceding for them.

The guardians of individual men are taken from the lowest order of celestial spirits. An angel of a higher order is given to each city and nation. Churches, convents and confraternities have each a tutelary angel. Prelates, kings, and superiors generally, have special angels to aid them in their official capacities.

The guardian angels, though we are seldom mindful of them, are yet nearer to us than our patron saints or even our friends in this world. The ways in which they exert their beneficent influence are manifold. Possessing absolute power over corporeal nature as regards local movement they are potent in averting physical dangers from their charges. They strengthen the intellect in its operation, and illuminate it by presenting intelligible truths under the similitude of sensible objects. In this manner, and by their power over the passions of the sensitive appetite, they indirectly incline man's will to good. Finally, the angels shield us from the assaults of the demons, and present our petitions, strengthened by their own, before the throne of grace.

Such being the relation of the angels to men during their present pilgrimage, it may be asked what will be their relative positions in the future life. St. Thomas answers by distinguishing between the condition of each according to nature and according to grace. Considering them in the first way, the inequality existing between angels and men will remain forever. Considering each according to the gifts of grace, which depend on the liberality of God, the Angelical Doctor states that men can merit a degree of glory equal to that of the angels, and consequently are, after death, transferred to the various angelic orders. Thus, in the words of St. Augustine, "there will not be two societies of men and angels, but only one; because the beatitude of all is to cleave to God alone."

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