

THE SPIRITS OF CHRISTMAS

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HE ANGELS were among the first to celebrate Christmas. St. Luke in sketching for us the scene of the Saviour's birth mentions that a host of the heavenly army were among those who heralded the glory of the Word made Flesh.

And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round them; and they feared with a great fear. And the Angel said to them, fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people. For this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David . . . And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army praising God and saying; Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to men of good will (St. Luke, 2; 9-14).

In reading this ever-familiar Gospel story, a simple question suggests itself. Why were the angels chosen to announce the joyous message of the first Christmas? Many answers might be given. The night of the Divine Infant's birth was certainly a time of contrasts. Since heaven had come to earth, it was not strange that angels should speak to men. In reality, there is only one adequate reason to explain the angels' presence. God willed it. From all eternity Divine Providence had decreed that representatives from the celestial court should add the finishing touch, as it were, to the Christmas scene. Yet if we pause long enough to consider who the angels were and to recall something of their history, their presence in the Christmas Gospel becomes ever more meaningful.

Page after page in both the New and the Old Testament gives testimony to the existence of angels, a testimony stamped with the seal of divine infallibility. These angelic messengers were the heavenly witnesses to the pivotal events upon which man's history was to turn. Angels were present when man and his sons forfeited paradise and passed into a world of death; angels were present when the Son of Man conquered death and re-opened the doors of Paradise. Some of the messengers of the Almighty are known to us by name. We read of Raphael in the

book of Tobias. Gabriel makes himself known during his appearance to Zachary. In the Apocalypse Michael is hailed as the conqueror of Satan and his legions. But even though we have a somewhat extensive knowledge of the angels, if it were not for revelation we could know nothing for certain about them. Unaided, man's mind is not capable of proving even their existence. From the order within the universe, we might make a conjecture about angelic creatures, but we would never have certainty about them.

There is, as it were, a ladder of perfection reaching from the lowest forms of inanimate objects to the Supreme Creator who is life's source. Each rung on the ladder has its own characteristics. Experience provides daily proof of the existence of the lifeless world of stones and stars, of the living world of plants and the sentient world of animals. Experience also tells us of the existence of man, who alone of all earthly creatures can think, and love that about which he has thought. Using this experience as a starting point, a keen mind can come to a knowledge of One who is the Creator, of One who first set all things in motion and is the cause of the harmony and goodness within the world. Yet if we were following the rungs of perfection we would seem to skip a step if we placed God immediately above man. Our gradual ascent would seem to jolt forward too quickly. We might well infer, then, that there must be some creatures more perfect than man and yet lacking in the infinite perfection of God. Our inference, however tentative, would be a good guess, but still not a substantiated fact. It is only by reading the inspired word of Scripture that we are assured our speculation is correct and that creatures exist who are mid-way, as it were, in the scale of perfection between man and God. They are what we call the angels.

ANGELS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

The hosts of heaven are frequently portrayed in Christian art as winged creatures clad in sparkling white garments and crowned with a halo. Artists thus attempt to portray in symbols some of the characteristics of the angelic army. Wings represent the swiftness of their actions. The white garment is a sign of their purity, and the halo, of their holiness and closeness to God. Yet to draw a true picture of an angel would be impossible. Even to describe one is very difficult since our knowledge is often more negative than positive. Perhaps the best description is found in the simple words of the Catechism.

"Angels are bodiless spirits made to adore and enjoy God in heaven."

At times angels appear to men in bodily form, but the body is not part of their make-up. They have a somewhat similar relationship to a body as man has to an overcoat. The overcoat is not part of man, but rather he uses it here and now if it serves his purpose. Similarly an angel can "put on" a body if it is an aid in the task he is performing. Thus the angels on the first Christmas night appeared in bodily form so that they might be seen by the shepherds. The bodily appearance was utilized by the angels, but it does not belong to their natural endowment. The lack of a body no more hampers the activity of angels than the lack of wings can be said to impede the actions of men. Man was not meant to fly as a bird, so nature did not provide him with wings. Angels were not meant to act as men so nature did not equip them with bodies.

Angelic life is devoted to the double activity of thinking and loving. Under both aspects there is a wide variance between angels and men. Man's thinking process has as its point of departure the five senses. At the same time it is true that human intelligence can rise far above sense knowledge. But even though man's mind enables him to have his head in the clouds, man as man must always have his feet firmly planted on the ground. We can think, for example, of the abstract concept of goodness only because at some time we have seen a good person or witnessed a good action. All of our natural knowledge must ultimately come to us through our senses.

For man to understand anything fully, he must consider in turn all of its various aspects and then unite them in one picture like threads in a tapestry. What an elaborate process we must go through to describe a simple thing like a match. We might say that it is made of wood and phosphorus, and other chemicals; that it is of a certain size and shape; that it ignites when struck, etc. We must have a multiplicity of ideas for even an inadequate description.

The angelic intellect does not operate in this fashion. An angel is brilliant from the moment of his creation. At the first instant of his existence, God enriches his mind with a wealth of ideas. For the angels there is no laborious process of learning. Great knowledge is a natural endowment. In a single concept the angel perfectly understands things which we know only with serious difficulty and after a long period of time. Angels are like

people in a skyscraper who in one glance can see a whole city. We are like those on the ground who must discover the city building by building.

Angelic love is also far superior to our own. Human love can prove to be all too fickle. Someone may be our closest friend today and our enemy tomorrow. Even in loving an object as supremely good as God Himself, our devotion is wavering. We tell Our Divine Lord in confession that we love Him and will offend Him no more, and then set aside our promises of fidelity to become sinners once again. God's goodness is quickly forgotten. Angelic love, on the other hand, has a certain permanence about it. Once given it can never be retracted. This perfection in the love of the angels is a consequence of the excellence of angelic knowledge. An Angel has a thorough understanding of the object toward which his love is directed. He can never be deceived about the goodness and therefore the loveliness of that object. Once having chosen to love something, an angel is confirmed in that choice for ever.

By the exalted manner in which these celestial spirits are able to know and to love, they help to fulfill God's purpose in creation. The angels like all else in the universe were made to reflect the glory of God. No one created thing could ever mirror God's infinite majesty. Therefore God made many things in varying degrees of perfection so that by their variety and harmony they might make manifest, however inadequately, the wonder of Divine Goodness. The perfection of the angels suits them well for the position and tasks which God has designed for them. They form part of the heavenly household who, without ceasing, praise and adore the Almighty. They also act as messengers of the Most High in His dealings with men. The angels, by the loftiness of their perfections, show forth the glory of God in a striking manner. If angels have been blessed with such wondrous gifts, what must be the power and wisdom of Him who is their cause?

ANGELIC HISTORY

Angels trace their history to the first moment of time. According to the teachings of St. Thomas and many of the Fathers, angels came into being at the same instant as the rest of creation. From the very beginning of their existence they were endowed with the gift of Divine Grace by which they were constituted in the special friendship of God. By cooperating with this Grace they were to earn the reward of an eternal life of hap-

piness with God, a life which even for them was supernatural. Angels did not have a lifetime of successive days and years in which to merit reward or punishment. They were given but one action in which to show whether they accepted or rejected God's plan for them. For the good angels, this action was one of love uniting them forever with the all-lovable God. For the demons, the action was one of rejection. Pride coupled with envy was the sin which ensnared Satan and his legions. In a word, the devils desired to be like God. They did not wish to have a divine nature, for they realized that this was impossible for them. What they wanted was the complete happiness that God had offered to them, but without being dependent upon God for its attainment. They wanted heaven, but not at the price of being servants of God. As a result of pride, Satan and his cohorts held in envious contempt all those who had remained faithful to God and had been enriched by His blessings.¹

The demons, as we have said, were not given a second chance. They could not plead ignorance of the malice of what they had done or a misinterpretation of the rôle Divine Providence had chosen for them. Their knowledge clearly embraced the full meaning of their action and stamped their refusal with indelible deliberateness. They made their decision and it was irrevocable. Having rejected God's plan, they must for all eternity pay the penalty of their action in the infernal regions of Hell. Henceforward, Satan and his followers would live a life of hatred for their Creator. This hatred would finally boil over into the Garden of Eden. Satan, jealous as he was of humanity did not rest until he had infected our first parents with the contagion of sin.

ANGELS AND THE NATIVITY

During the centuries which marked man's long passage from Eden to Bethlehem, nations and epochs crumbled into history. Through all this time man was a creature "aided by angels, hindered by devils, destined for heaven, in peril of hell."² Finally in the fullness of time God took compassion upon the utter misery

¹ Although it is not a matter of Faith, many theologians hold that one of the reasons for Lucifer's refusal to serve God was the knowledge that one day Almighty God would become man. How inferior humanity was to the angelic nature! Satan would never subject himself to serve one who was man, even though that man were at the same time God.

² *Theology and Sanity*, F. J. Sheed, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1946, p. 8.

of men and sent His only Son into the world as its Saviour. *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.*

The birth of the Divine Infant was in appearance a humble one, and yet in reality all creation worshipped at His crib. A cave provided His shelter and a star announced His coming. The plant kingdom provided straw for His rude cradle. An ass and an ox paid the homage of brute animals. And how well humanity was represented. There was Mary, the purest of virgins; Joseph the model of obedience; the shepherds, simple, humble, and docile to the will of God. Finally there were the angels, so exalted in the hierarchy of perfection. Their presence was also needed at the Christmas scene in order that creation's tribute to the Lord of the universe might be complete.

Another reason for the fittingness of angelic witness to the Nativity stems from the circumstances surrounding the sin of our first parents. Satan, who had been perhaps the greatest of the angels, was instrumental in bringing about the fall of man. His influence in the Garden of Eden might be explained by quoting the simple adage, "misery loves company." Not satisfied with his own ruin, he was permitted by God to attempt the ruin of humanity. And what a tragic victory he won! The prize offered to Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit was the fool's gold of an empty dream which the demons knew to be impossible. Satan had sinned in trying to be as God. Why should not man be induced to do in like manner. *Genesis* recounts for us Satan's taunt:

"... your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as Gods" (Gen. 3:5).

Since it had been an angel who had lied to man in tempting him to become as God, was it not fitting that by the message of an angel man should learn the staggering truth that God had become Man? A fallen angel had sounded man's death knell of sin and the loss of Grace, why should not the heralding of a faithful angel ring out the joyous message of new life and the promise of salvation?

In the Garden of Eden the Demon enticed our first parents to betray God's friendship and to become subjects of the Kingdom of Darkness. Henceforth men, following the example of Satan would bellow the theme, "I will not serve." Pride would urge them to seek an independence from God that could only terminate in slavery. Envy would henceforth impel them to hatred of all who remained faithful to Divine Commands.

At Bethlehem the angels were again present as models, but this time the world was given an opportunity to see the other side of the coin. Angelic spirits who by their nature far surpassed humanity now came to adore and pay homage to the God made Man. The faithful angels saw no stumbling block in the mystery of humanity exalted to divinity. Rather they bowed in reverence to this act of Divine wisdom and omnipotence and filled the skies with their hymns of praise. There was no envy of man but only rejoicing that earth had at last received its promised Redeemer. An angel had been for Adam a protagonist to evil and a messenger of wrath. The angels of Bethlehem were for Adam's offspring models of humility and charity and messengers of love and peace.

The joyous message of Christmas could have been committed to none better than the angels. Ever since God had chosen the Israelites as His favored people, He had made known His will to them in various manners. Oftentimes He had spoken to them through the patriarchs and prophets. Men had pondered longingly over the wondrous descriptions of Messianic days. But now when the event was at hand, God decreed that the most significant announcement in the history of creation should be proclaimed by more than a prophet or sage. Heaven itself would make known that the fullness of time had come and would tell the world that, "This day there is born to you a Saviour who is Christ the Lord."

The Christmas tableau itself gives still further evidence to justify the presence of the angels at the Nativity. The circumstances which surrounded the birth of Our Divine Lord might at first glance seem a little disappointing. A manger was a poor throne for the King of kings. Ignorant shepherds were odd companions for Incarnate Wisdom. The tender love of Mary and the silent strength of Joseph lent a certain warmth to the crib scene, but even they did not give it any mark of the divine. It was the presence of the angels which added to the Christmas picture a touch of celestial majesty and splendor. Angels were created to show forth the glory of God and to sing a never-ending canticle of praise before the face of the Most High. At Bethlehem, the angels were merely fulfilling their office. They had come to sing a lullaby of Glory to the Divine Infant. The angels who formed the choir of the first Christmas night were but serving at the court of Him who was their King.

If the King of Angels was present at Bethlehem, so also was their Queen. Mary, considered as a mere human being, was in-

ferior to any of the angelic host. In the order of Grace, however, she far surpassed them. Mary was God's most perfect jewel intended by Him from all eternity to be the most resplendent of His creatures. No greater privilege could ever be bestowed upon anyone than to be the Mother of the Son of God. For the singular rôle which Mary was to play in the redemption of mankind, Almighty God prepared her well. The endless riches of divine grace were allowed to flow into her soul and to reach a degree of perfection never before or since attained by a mere creature. In the very words of an angel, Mary was "full of grace." Our Blessed Lady was to recoup the losses sustained in the Garden of Eden. Satan had spoken to Eve and the demons witnessed the birth of death. Gabriel had spoken to the New Eve and now at Bethlehem the angels witnessed the birth of Eternal Life. Well might the Hosts of Heaven pay homage to Mary. Nature had made her less than the angels, but by the grace of God she was their queen.

Yet reverence for the Most Holy Mother and the Divine Child was not the only concern of the heavenly messengers on the first Christmas night. They were also exemplifying another special task committed to them from on High. God knew that man in his journey on earth would find it difficult to remain on the path of virtue. Divine Providence therefore, provided that heavenly guardians and protectors should be assigned to men. It would be the work of the angels to guide their charges along the narrow road that leads to God. We see this commission characterized in a striking way at the Nativity. Having been instructed by angels as to where they might find their Savior, the shepherds were immediately brought into the presence of God Himself.

MEN AND ANGELS

There is one final reason which may be given for the angelic appearance at the Nativity. By a comparison between the angels' appreciation of the Incarnation and that of man, God's boundless love for the human race is vividly brought into focus.

The brilliance of angelic intelligence quickly grasped the significance of the Mystery of the Incarnate Word. The angels perceived the paradox of an Infant who had been born in time and yet was eternal; of a Babe who was helpless in His Mother's arms and yet possessed Divine Omnipotence. They understood that only love could explain why the Son of God had become the

Son of Man. The shabbiness of the surroundings were no scandal to the angels for they knew that this humble beginning was a fitting introduction to the life of a Suffering Messiah. They appreciated the infinite value of all the actions of this new-born High Priest whose holocaust would one day expiate for all the sins of men. The angels also foresaw that only acceptance of Christ would provide man with the key to unlock the chains of Satan's slavery. And how well the angels must have appreciated the beauty and richness of the doctrines of the Incarnate Word, for even from the manger the Christ Child taught eloquently of humility, love, and obedience. The angels also knew the need of rendering service to the God-Man. At Bethlehem as in the solitude of the desert and in the Garden of Gethsemane, they ministered to Him.

And what of the love of these faithful angels? The angelic will was always in perfect accord with the Will of God for the angels loved what God loved. God the Father cherished His Only-Begotten Son with a perfect and eternal love. Angelic love for the Incarnate Word could never attain to this divine quality, yet it reached a degree of intensity by which it became a shadow, however faint, of the Paternal love of God the Father. The union of love between Christ and the angels was pure and perfect and unending.

But the angels were merely the witnesses to the Incarnation. Man alone was the recipient of this infinite act of divine mercy. Nevertheless, man's appreciation of the mystery of the God made Man was far less exalted than that of heaven's hosts. Many men found no room in their homes or their hearts for Him who was their Redeemer. Even the loyalty of many who accepted Christ was often weak and wavering. One day they would sing hosannas of praise and a few days later clamor for crucifixion. Men knew all too well the ruin which resulted from loss of God yet they foolishly cast aside as worthless Him alone who could bring true happiness. Man would even go so far as to evaluate the Lord of creation at thirty pieces of silver.

Human love for the Divine Savior was equally as tarnished as human knowledge concerning Him. Even the chosen ones who had pledged their lives in defense of the Master saw their loyalty grow cold at the foot of the cross. And the crowning point of man's indifference toward Christ was the misunderstanding of His doctrine and the disregard of His laws. We need cite but two examples. Our Blessed Lord promised that He would give His

own Body and Blood as spiritual nourishment. Men replied:

"This saying is hard and who can hear it!" (John 6:61).

Even at the Last Supper when a new doctrine of love overflowed from the fullness of His Sacred Heart, dissention over rank broke out among the most intimate friends of the Redeemer.

Equal to angelic knowledge and love of the Incarnate Word was man's misunderstanding, indifference, and neglect. Yet Christ the Savior did not come to the angels, but chose rather to dwell among men. One reason alone can explain such a choice, Love.

"God so loved the world, as to give His Only-Begotten Son" (John 3:15).

In pointing out to us the Divine love which brought about the First Christmas, the angels also remind us that infinite love demands infinite gratitude. Man is invited, as it were, to join with the Hosts of heaven in an everlasting hymn of Glory to the Most High.

THE ANGELS' MESSAGE

Today as on the night when a heavenly brilliance rent the darkness which cloaked Bethlehem's hills, angels are an inseparable part of the Christmas scene. St. Luke has given them a place of prominence and succeeding generations should do no less. Each reading of the Gospel's account of the Nativity should add new freshness and vitality to the angelic message. The celestial choir tells us over and over again, "A Saviour is born into the world."

The Spirits of Christmas lead us to Christ, they show forth His majesty and splendor, yet humbly tell us of God's great love for men. They act as our models in accepting and treasuring the incomparable Mystery of the Incarnation. They encourage us in our devotion to the Queen of angels and of men. They remind us of our unending debt of gratitude to the Infant who is God.

On each feast of the Nativity the angelic choir is present once again to lead men to the crib. In the closing verses of St. Luke's narrative we read the reward of those who pay heed to heaven's messengers.

"... they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger. And seeing, they understood of the word that had been spoken concerning the Child. . . . And [they] returned glorifying and praising God."