

ANGELIC JOY

Gerard Austin, O.P.

UNDER DIVINE PROVIDENCE angels have been for man both messengers of doom and messengers of joy. It was an agent of darkness who approached Eve and urged her, and, through her Adam, to the sin of disobedience. It was an angel of light who encouraged Mary, "Fear not, Mary," in announcing the joyful news of the Incarnation.

The angelic messenger of joy—and he is a messenger of joy both in that he announces God's joy and that he himself shares in that joy—is also an ambassador of love, for joy is an effect of love. It is through love, and through love alone, that joy comes into the life of the creature. Hence, it is not surprising that God's angelic messengers of joy had an important role to play in that work of love *par excellence*, the Incarnation of Our Divine Lord. It was an angel of God who stood before Our Lady and announced to her the words which generation upon generation had awaited with expectation: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; and therefore the Holy One to be born shall be called the Son of God."

Again, when Zachary entered the holy place to make the offering at the altar of incense, it had been an angel (and the very same one) who had appeared to him and announced that his wife, Elizabeth, would bring forth a child—the precursor of the Messiah. The angel had said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to thee and to bring thee this good news."³

Finally, the angels were present on the night of Our Saviour's birth. St. Luke relates that it was an angel who announced to the shepherds that "there has been born to you today in the town of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." Then, as if to show that not merely one angel was sharing in the drama, St. Luke narrates that "suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among men of good will'."

These angelic apparitions naturally somewhat startled the recipients. Yet they apprehended full well the reality of the angels and knew that this was Yahweh's chief mode of communication with the Chosen People. St. Thomas writes that "it was not without reason that Christ's birth was made known by means of angels to the shepherds, who, being Jews, were accustomed to frequent apparitions of the angels."¹

This attitude, however, is far from being the modern point of view. Indeed, modern man experiences a feeling of sympathy for the little child who is filled with awe upon hearing the story of the Christmas Angels, and a feeling of disgust for the adult who is thus filling a delicate, unformed mind with medieval jetsam. The Christmas Story in itself is bad enough, but to introduce angels into it makes it preposterous.

The modern view toward the angelic world ranges from slight skepticism to outright denial; yet whatever its expression be, the cause is the same—man's reluctance, conscious or unconscious, to admit that he is not supreme among intellectual beings. Still, it is certain Catholic doctrine that man has an intellectual big-brother, that angels do truly exist. Merely a superficial glance at Sacred Scripture will confirm this, for as St. Gregory the Great has said, almost every page of Scripture testifies to their existence.² From the very first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, the angels are frequently mentioned. In the Book of Tobias, for example, an angel is a leading figure. Likewise in the New Testament, angels are repeatedly mentioned in the Gospels, in the Acts, in the Apocalypse, and in many of the Epistles. In view of this Scriptural evidence, the Church has defined that the existence of the angels is indeed something real.³ Furthermore she declares that the angels are created;⁴ therefore they are part of the created universe just as man is.

Man, once he has realized that he has an intellectual companion, has always displayed a fascination for learning more about him, and this is a healthy thing. First, because it is good nourishment for man's humility, for in comparison to the elevated and tremendous powers of the angel, man is definitely second-rate. Secondly, because by increasing his knowledge of the angel, man learns much about God Himself. The angel is the closest image of God, for the angel is a purely intellectual being, completely spiritual, and "God is spirit."

Man, on the contrary, besides his spiritual side, his soul, has a body. Even when the soul is separated from the body after death it is not something complete. There will always be a note of transiency about the arrangement, until once again the body and soul are united

on the last day. But the angel was created with just one side to the coin; he is a purely spiritual creature. This doesn't mean, however, that he is something vague, a lightsome cloud. An angel is as much a real person as man, for he, too, is an intellectual creature. In Scripture the angels are depicted as real moral persons. St. Peter compares the moral action of men and angels. Our Lord Himself has said that there is rejoicing among the angels of heaven at the conversion of a sinner.

In one of his encyclicals, the late Pope Pius XII expressed concern over the fact that many people today are denying the personal character of the angels.⁵ Yet perhaps the most familiar and the most personal of all the angels is the guardian angel. The words of the Psalmist, "He hath given His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways," apply to every individual man. In some cases, God has even allowed His saints to be physically aware of the presence of their guardian angels. One recent saint, St. Gemma Galgani (died in 1903), saw her angel constantly. But whether this extraordinary gift is granted or not, each guardian angel is nonetheless truly present to his charge. St. Jerome has said, "Great is the dignity of souls, for each one to have an angel deputed to guard it from its birth."⁶ The guardian angel is man's life-long companion, and his tireless efforts are in one direction—to bring his charge safely home to heaven.

Besides these angels deputed over individuals, there are also guardian angels who have been entrusted with the care of countries, cities, etc. For example, it is considered most probable that every parish has its own special guardian angel. Hence, a vast multitude of the celestial spirits are employed in the service of guarding man and of acting as messengers from God to man.

Following the doctrine of Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Celestial Hierarchies*, it is commonly accepted that there are nine choirs of celestial spirits, ranging from the highest choir who stand next to the throne of God and sing especially to the Holiness of God, down to the ninth choir, who are directly in contact with visible and earthly things. All of these angels (using the word "angel" in its common, general sense, to include all the celestial spirits) certainly comprise a vast multitude. In the Book of Daniel it is written, "Thousands of thousands ministered to him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before him." Our Lord asked St. Peter, "Dost thou suppose that I cannot entreat my Father, and he will even now furnish me with more than twelve legions of angels?" Their exact number is impossible to determine. It is best to say with St. Augustine that the number of the angels simply isn't known by us.

The angels have been grouped traditionally under two general headings: the *assistantes* and the *ministrantes*, i.e., the angels in attendance and the ministering angels. The former are those who stand at the throne of God in heaven, offering up to Him a perpetual chorus of angelic praise. The ministering angels, on the other hand, while still enjoying the vision of God, leave their dwelling place in heaven to take part in the governing of the world and the guidance of men. At the time of the birth of Our Divine Lord both groups were vital participants in this mystery of salvation. Each had a role in the drama on that first Christmas night, and a striking characteristic of each was the note of joy. Some served as messengers of joy, bringing God's "good news of great joy which shall be to all the people," while all shared themselves in the joy of God's great act of love.

The Fathers of the Church speak of the angels in attendance as leaving their place in heaven and preparing the path for God Who had deigned to come upon earth. St. Hilary has said, "When (Christ) comes down to assume humanity, a heavenly entourage accompanies Him. . . . For, although He came entirely in the form of a slave, nonetheless He acted in the strength of His Father's majesty, and that is why the heavens bow down when the Power and Honor of the heavenly beings (that is, the Son of God) comes down to earth." They do not discontinue their function of offering a continuous hymn of praise to God, but only change their location. They recognize in the person of a newly born babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, the same majestic God at Whose throne they sing. Origen extravagantly put it: "The angels say among themselves, 'If He has put on mortal flesh, how can we remain doing nothing? Come, angels, let us all descend from heaven.' That is why there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising and glorifying God when Christ was born. Everything is filled with angels."⁷

The ministering angels, besides announcing God's message of joy to mankind, were also filled themselves with a spirit of joy at the Nativity, and this was especially true of the angels who were entrusted with the care of the nations, that is, the Gentiles or pagan nations. The time which preceded the coming of Our Lord had witnessed a progressive increase of the hold of the demons over mankind. Idolatry and devil worship had taken an ever firmer grip on the Gentiles. Even the Jews, the Chosen of God, had fallen deep into sin—but nevertheless, they were still the Elect, and it was over the pagan nations that the power of the demons had especially triumphed. The angels of the nations were practically helpless against the situation. "Before the birth of Christ," Origen said, "these angels

could be of little use to those entrusted to them and their attempts were not followed by success."⁸ But God in His mercy brought relief; God became incarnate. According to Eusebius: "Since none . . . could bring a remedy against the evils, and the activity of the demons continued to increase day by day, the Saviour Himself came to men as their Physician and helped His angels in their work for the salvation of men."⁹

The resultant joy of the angels of the nations was so tremendous because the revelation of Our Lord was even far greater than that for which they had hoped. St. John Chrysostom wrote: "God had said He would save His people Israel, but had said nothing about the nations. The angels knew that the nations were called, but could not imagine that they would be called to the same end and would be seated upon the throne of God." It is no wonder then, as Eusebius put it, "When He was seen by His own angels, who were first set up over the nations, they immediately recognized their Lord coming to their aid and went to Him joyously, to minister to Him."

Thus, man's big-brother, the angel, did not sit idly by when the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity came down to earth to save fallen mankind. He was vitally interested. He was concerned both because this was his God Who had descended, and because the object of this Divine condescension was his fellow creature, and in some cases, his personal charge. The angels in attendance accompanied their God to earth where a joyous welcome on the part of the ministering angels awaited the Saviour. This dual aspect of the role of the angels in the first Christmas scene constitutes a synthesis of the angelology of the Nativity.¹⁰

The angels, upon seeing Infinite Goodness descend upon miserable mankind, could not restrain their praises, and bursting with joy, filled the universe with their angelic hymn:

"Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among men of good will."

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 36, a. 5

² Hom. 34 in Evang.

³ e.g. Fourth Lateran Council, Denz. 428

⁴ *idem*

⁵ *Humani Generis*, no. 26

⁶ ML 26, 130 B

⁷ Hom. in Ez., 1, 7

⁸ Hom. in Luc., 12

⁹ *Dem. Ev.*, 4, 10

¹⁰ Jean Danielou, *The Angels and Their Mission*, p. 33