

## **ANGELS (1)**

**Adapted by J.F.M.H. from a talk on Angels (2.5.1903) by Fr. M. Clothier O.S.B**

In His Wisdom God created all that exists or has ever existed. Besides what we can observe and measure, Our Loving Father created spiritual beings that we know as Angels. Creatures, but pure spirits without any flesh or physical form. These Heavenly beings were created by God for His Glory and to enjoy His Bliss. We know that before they had the perfect vision of God they (like men) had their own trial to undergo. It has been traditionally claimed that this trial involved an invitation to believe in God's supreme Love, especially in the Incarnation of the Second Person. This proposal was rejected by Lucifer, and a company of angels who sided with him, in an act of rebellious pride, akin to a jealous and egocentric desire to possess Divine prerogatives. These angels fell from grace and were banished to become Satan and his demonic host. The loyal angels, with St. Michael at their head, were then granted their reward for faith and obedience, and they opposed Satan in his struggle to dominate and destroy. The battle goes on. Whilst it is the tradition to class angels into nine groups or choirs, and to allocate special functions to them, the Church has always upheld the belief that each angel is a spiritual being, entirely different from any other angel; and in no way identical to other angels in that rank or choir. Whilst the word 'angel' denotes a bearer of God's message to man, this restricted function is only a part of, and not the primary work of the angelic hosts. Their first work, as we note in the Preface of the Mass, is to form the Celestial Choir, which in the Heavenly Liturgy cries constantly Holy, Holy, Holy. It was the view of St. Thomas Aquinas that since the angels are created to reflect and enjoy the Glory of God, and since that Glory is necessarily infinite, so too their number must likewise be infinite. And so there is presented to our mind the unspeakably beautiful prospect of a Heavenly Company, of truly incalculable splendour and magnitude, presided over by Our Blessed Lady, Queen of Angels.

The modern tendency amongst Christians (including Catholics) to dismiss angels is both unsound and unscriptural. It should be remembered that God is pure spirit and it is far more logical for Him to create pure spirits than to create that undreamed of combination of spirit and matter which is human nature. The Scriptures are so full of references to angels that doubts about their existence suggests lamentable ignorance. The second point is simple enough. The Holy Spirit speaks to all men of good will whether they have heard the gospel or not. So we find, (as have so many priests and pastors), that devout Hindus and Muslims too have a strong belief in angels, and guardian spirits whose work is to defend and protect man from the forces of evil. We may now consider angels in their relationship to, and work for, mankind. At the outset we must banish several illusions that destroy or distort our understanding of them. First, popular mediaeval illustrations sometimes tend to reduce angels to little cherubs; and the sentimental ideas involved revolt the modern mind. Angels are definitely not childish or feeble hangovers of the pre-scientific mind. Second, it is, alas tempting to see angels as part of some vast impersonal throng all obliged idly to strum harps in perpetuity. This too must go, and go completely if we are to grasp this mystery. Thirdly, we must abandon all notions of angels as mere adjustments of human beings: angels are not simply girls (or boys) with feathers. Fourthly, it is always unwise to consider angels as so holy and so remote and so blissful as to be barely relevant to or even interested in the hard daily struggle for survival of us poor mortals.

For a proper appreciation, for the right view of angels, the important text of (Exodus 23:20) should be considered. We see that God's angel is most holy since God's name is in Him. He must be both respected and obeyed. He is not to be trifled with for he is powerful. Not only does he protect and strengthen, he encourages and leads: and those who oppose him are exterminated. Here we see angels not as messengers but as allies, fellow workers and friends endowed with special power by God on our behalf. Whilst strong, they are also tender and compassionate as we note from (Gen. 21:17). Whilst, then, angels are awe inspiring and majestic, powerful and strong, we must remember that they are still servants, (Hebrews 1:14) and we may call upon their help with confidence: since they are each endowed with an angelic intellect far superior to ours, their knowledge and ability to help - if we let them - is assured. In the struggle against evil the three Archangels, Ss. Michael, Gabriel and Raphael have certain special works to carry out for us, which their names describe. St. Michael, (who is like God), fights for us, St. Raphael, (Healer of God), dresses our wounds, St. Gabriel, (Strength of God) helps us in our times of failure and weakness. Prayer group meetings and healing services could benefit from a prayer to these three great allies and supporters of us in our work. Many texts in both the Old and New Testament refer to angels. We see angels protecting, warning, fighting, counselling and comforting. We observe their Heavenly beauty, their share in the Divine Liturgy (Isaiah). In the New Testament Christ reminds the Apostles of the majestic dignity of the angels of each human, however insignificant that person may seem to be. In the book of Daniel the angel Gabriel interprets visions and scriptural passages. And we observe the Archangel St. Raphael as an exorcist in the Book of Tobit. The mention of this last Old Testament work brings us to that special work of the angels: as guardians of each human soul. At the moment of conception each human being is granted an angel as their companion (who can never leave them) until death and judgement. This angel cannot overrule (our) free will: we can still

make life hard for ourselves. But the angel guardian never ceases to pray for us, to do all in their angelic power to guard and help us. And the angel never ceases to love us. Many of the Saints have had close and intimate friendships with their angel sometimes being granted to see and speak to them. And many prayerful people speak of knowing the name of their angel. Pregnant mothers should realise they have two beautiful angels at their side: sometimes both angels reveal their names, it seems so concerned are the guardian angels for the well being of their charges that they even bring them Holy Communion when they cannot get to Church or see a priest. Many well attested cases of this are mentioned in modern textbooks and biographies. Angels warn us of danger, if we heed them, just as St. Joseph was forewarned to flee to Egypt. Many Saints have testified to the work of their angel. Padre Pio is an outstanding example. A slight objection may be dealt with here. With so much angelic help – (Ps. 90) angels do carry us - why do disasters occur and why do we so often feel alone and trapped? First God the Father invites us to share in His Son's Passion. Christ fell into the hands of wicked men. Second we can, through self-will, make life hell for ourselves. Third we may so ignore our angel that it is impossible for us to be guarded and helped. Fourthly, what may seem to be disasters and failures may in truth be great blessings and part of God's will for us. In all this, let us look at the beautiful meditation on our angel guardian in the Book of Tobit, where the young Tobias is accompanied through distant lands by the angel Raphael.

So far I have spoken only of good angels. I do not wish to say much about evil ones, except to warn that they do exist and they do try to lead us away from God. We feel hatred and resentments and envy rise in our hearts at times: we are assailed by cynicism, criticism, bitterness, spite and self-pity, despondency and fear. We even notice it in others. Dispel them at once in the Holy Name of Jesus. Many people whom priests and doctors have to deal with are in fact tormented by evil spirits and can be helped by repentance, prayers and blessing. I am not speaking here of true possession which is, thank God, less frequent. It is possible as St. Paul tells us, to be deceived by wicked spirits who can disguise themselves as angels of light. Invoke the Names of Jesus and Mary so as to prove their true identity. In this final part, I wish to say something about angels and our modern day experience. Since we are living through times of particular trial and difficulty it appears that the angels are being allowed by God to come to our aid and to show themselves to us in dramatic ways. The number of recent cases is so great and the witnesses are so sensible and down-to-earth that we cannot dismiss this as mere fantasy or hysteria. Or consider the quite amazing account by the children of Fatima of the angel who teaches them to pray before Our Lady comes to them. Think too of the experience of the priest offering Mass for the aborted child, and seeing the child's angel kneeling, with the child, by the Altar. I could go on almost indefinitely to cite modern instances - whole books have been written and Sir Alister Hardy is still at work in Oxford. Padre Pio's teaching must be considered, along with that of St. John Vianney, as authoritative in the Catholic Church. Others, who are not Catholic, testify with equal firmness to angels. Dr. Moody's 'Life after Life', collects many cases of angelic presence as the soul is led towards judgement. A vision of Leo XIII starts our modern era: Prayer to St. Michael is his immediate reaction. It is right to consider this great Pope's mystical experience as the preparation for this modern trial of the Church. He saw the coming challenge of Satan and his reign of sin, of his corruption of the Church. 100,000 priests left in the 60's. He saw that the angels were the key to our victory. The children of Fatima bring us the next part of the teaching about our modern age and stress the fundamental work of Our Lady. A full discussion is beyond our brief here and we must simply note that a year before Our Lady came to appear to the children the Angel Guardian of Portugal appeared three times to the children. Apart from Our Lady's teaching, the angel's teaching was profound and extensive especially about prayer and the Holy Eucharist. Padre Pio must surely be mentioned briefly since he developed a special devotion to the angels, especially his own Guardian Angel. He was favoured with many miraculous graces involving Angels and it was he who asked his friends and spiritual children to send him their guardian angel when he himself could not be with them or speak to them. In conclusion, we are special to the angels, as they are special to us. They admire us for two particular gifts: the ability to suffer with and for Jesus and the Holy Eucharist. We should share our gifts with them, and be certain of their protective presence at our side.