

SAINT MICHAEL
and the
HOLY ANGELS

Their Relations with the Visible World

By
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Translated from the French by
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PART ONE: THE HOLY ANGELS

CHAPTER 1:

EXISTENCE OF THE ANGELS. – THEIR NAME. – THEIR CREATION. – THEIR NATURE. – THEIR QUALITIES.

*O Lord my God... Who makest thy angels spirits.
– Psalms 103:1, 4 [104:1, 4]*

The existence of the angels is a truth reason shows possible, to whose certainty mankind's faith attests, and which is confirmed by revelation.

Here, we shall say nothing of the proofs from authority; they will present themselves in great number throughout this study.

Reason demonstrates without difficulty that our visible world, by its imperfect nature, does not have nor can have within itself the reason for its existence, nor the principle of the laws which govern it. They must be sought elsewhere, for, as St. Paul says, knowledge of the visible world leads us to knowledge of the invisible.¹

The most scholarly observation of divine laws proclaims this axiom: There is no leap in nature, nor any rupture in the chain of beings. All creatures visible to our eyes build on each other, are on a continuum, and follow one after another. Degree by degree, everything reaches its apex in man. Spirit and matter, man himself is the merging together of two worlds. By his body, he is on the highest rung of the ladder of material beings, and by his soul, he is on the lowest rung of the ladder of spiritual beings. A being's perfection, in fact, is calculated according to its more or less complete resemblance to God. Now, the purely material creature is less perfect than the creature that is simultaneously material and spiritual. In turn, the latter is less perfect than the purely

spiritual creature. Admirable harmony! Man, by his nature, unites two worlds: the world of matter and the world of the spirits. And these pure spirits are, with respect to man, what man is with respect to purely material creatures: they link man to God as man himself links matter to spirit.

The word “angel” signifies “messenger” and “envoy”; it is not an appellation of nature, but of office, taken from the ministry they exercise. As all the heavenly spirits are notifiers of divine thoughts, the name of angel is common to them. They are especially and par excellence honored with the name of angels, St. Denis says, for the revelation of secrets above us is made through their intervention.²

At what moment did God create the angels? Did He create the invisible and intelligible world inhabited by Spirits before the visible and material world? A number of Greek and Latin Church Fathers thought so: Origen, St. Basil, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, St. Clement, St. Ambrose, St. Hilary, and St. Jerome. “Our universe,” the last one said, “is not yet six thousand years old. But beforehand, how many eternities of time, from the beginnings of ages, must there have been during which the Angels, the Thrones, the Dominations, and the other Virtues would have served God and subsisted without any vicissitude or measure of time.” However, theologians in general, including St. Augustine and St. Thomas, think that God, as a perfect laborer making a work worthy of Himself, created the angels on the first day. Moses says so implicitly: “In the beginning God created heaven” (Gn 1:1), meaning heaven and all those who dwell therein.

The angels, these firstborn of God, are spirits, that is to say creatures who are incorporeal, invisible, incorruptible, spiritual, and endowed with an intellect and a will.

The angels thus have no bodies, nor have they been created to be united with bodies. They are therefore incapable of exercising any act of sensitive or vegetative life, such as seeing corporally, hearing, eating, and the like.

From the air or from any other already existing matter, however, they can form bodies and give them a shape and an accidental form. The

Archangel Raphael said to Tobias, “For when I was with you, I was there by the will of God.... I seemed indeed to eat and drink with you: but I use an invisible meat and drink” (Tb 12:18-19).

One must not believe, however, that these corporeal forms are only imaginary visions. An imaginary vision is only in the imagination of the one who sees it; it eludes others. Scripture often speaks of angels who appear in sensible forms, seen equally by everyone. The angels who come to save Lot are seen not only by this just man, but also by his entire family and the inhabitants of Sodom.

It is necessary then to put aside any material or coarse ideas that our senses give us, and which the representations of painters and sculptors, and even the overly literal interpretation of Holy Scriptures would seem to confirm.

It is thus necessary to understand in a figurative sense the wings of which the Prophets speak: They signify the rapidity with which these spirits go from one place to another to fulfill God’s orders. These gracious forms, these youthful bodies, and these ravishing faces are the expressions of the spiritual beauty and immortal youth which they enjoy in their beatitude.³

It is also necessary to understand in a mystical sense what the Holy Books tell us of the golden vessels and censers in which they offer to God our prayers, the harmonies of voices and instruments, and the melodious symphonies by which they praise *Him that liveth forever and ever*.

From the incorporeality of their nature, it follows that the angels are incorruptible. Exempt from languor and illness, they do not experience the need for food or rest, nor the weaknesses of childhood, nor the infirmities and debilitations of old age. They are endowed with beauty, intelligence, agility, and strength incomprehensible to man.

God being infinite beauty and the source of all beauty, the more a being resembles Him, the more it is beautiful. Of all material beings, the body of man is the most beautiful because it reflects to a greater degree the beauty of the Creator. The soul is more beautiful than the body because it is the more perfect image of eternal beauty. In turn, and for the same reason, the angel is more beautiful than the human soul.

Moreover, humans have an instinct for this beauty, for to indicate the most perfect degree of sensible beauty, they say, “Beautiful like an angel.” When St. Stephen was brought before the council of Jews, his face became so bright and so august that it appeared, the sacred historian says, “as if it had been the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15).

“As beautifully and magnificently adorned as men might be,” St. Francis de Sales says,

they are nothing compared to the angels; their luster has no shine, and they are not worthy of comparison in their presence. Thus, one sees in Holy Scripture that whenever angels have appeared to men, that the latter fell on their faces, incapable of bearing the splendor and radiance of angelic beauty. The Most Holy Virgin herself, so highly distinguished above all pure creatures, and so specially favored above all the angels, Cherubim and Seraphim, was nevertheless amazed at the sight of the angel St. Gabriel when he came to speak to her of the most-high and sacred mystery of the Incarnation.⁴

This beauty is so radiant, in the opinion of St. Anselm, that if a single angel were to make himself visible in all his glory, his light would efface as many suns, if they existed, as there are stars in the firmament.

In some places the Savior calls the blessed spirits “angels of light,” an expression clearly indicating that the knowledge of the angels is far superior to all the riches of human science. Who will speak of the scope of the angelic intellect? “It does not acquire,” St. Thomas says, “intelligible truth from the variety of composite objects;... it understands the truth of intelligible objects not discursively, but by simple intuition.”⁵ Its intellectual power is always active,⁶ in such a way that the angel currently knows all it can know naturally.⁷ It knows it all entirely, as a whole and in its details, in its principle and in its final consequences. “So therefore, no falsehood, error, or deception can exist of itself in the mind of any angel.”⁸

From these intellects, heaven and earth have hidden nothing hidden in the natural order; and since they are confirmed in grace, they know

most truths of the supernatural order. We say “most,” for the Angelic Doctor further states that until the day of Judgment, they will receive new communications concerning the governing of the world and particularly about the salvation of the predestined.

From the incorporeality of the angels comes their agility. In man, the soul’s movement is hindered by the organs. For the angels, no obstacle delays them. The rapidity of their movements is such that it is almost equivalent to being omnipresent. In the blink of an eye they can be in one place, and in another blink of an eye in another place, without any lapse in time. Their subtlety is such that the opaqueness of bodies is less to them than a diaphanous veil is to the rays of the sun.

The holy hosts of heavenly natures receive from the divine liberality, at the moment of their creation, more than the natures that exist simply, or that have an irrational life, or even those who, like us, are endowed with reason. Today, confirmed in grace, in possession of the beatific vision, these pure spirits tend towards but one goal: “It is,” St. Denis says, [as paraphrased by Church historian Fr. René François Rohrbacher,]

continual love towards God and divine things, love inspired by God and consummated through union; it is... the absolute and irrevocable flight from what is contrary to this love; it is the knowledge of things in the reality of their being, the vision and knowledge of sacred truth; it is divine participation, as much as possible, in the unique perfection of Him Who is supremely one; it is enjoyment of the intuition, which intellectually nourishes and deifies whoever contemplates it.⁹

Their innocence has never been sullied by the least stain; the intensity of their love for God and the zeal for His glory have never suffered any alteration. Immersed night and day in the ocean of divine love and in transports of joy, they repeat the eternal canticle. Like the twenty-four elders of the Apocalypse, they throw their crowns at the foot of the throne of God, saying, “Thou art worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honour and power” (Rv 4:11).

They are the adornment of the heavens. The angels, St. Anselm says,

are the living stars of the higher heaven, the lilies of the inner paradise, the rose-trees planted by the silent-flowing waters of Siloe, with their roots immovably fixed in Thee [God]. O River of peace, O Breath of the garden of delights, O only Wisdom ranging round about the circling bourne of heaven; by Thee they shine, and burn, and glow in perfect wisdom, in virginal chastity, and in the ardours of a deathless love.¹⁰

On the day when it will be given us to see them in Heaven face to face, we shall enter into a rapture inexpressible even for St. Paul, who was a witness to it. It will be, according to St. Thomas, the recompense due to the mortification of the senses and to the angelic life that we led here below, in the hope of enjoying the company of the angels.