



Articles on Catholic Theology and Teachings - Part 2 - Angels



Articles on Catholic Theology and Teachings - Part 2 - Angels

Thrones were set up and the Ancient One took his throne...His throne was flames of fire, with wheels of burning fire. A surging stream of fire flowed out from where he sat; Thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads attended him. –Daniel 7:9-10

Nearly all people have heard of angels or are at least familiar with pictures of them in popular culture. Yet, few perhaps, actually understand the nature of these creatures and their relationship with humans. Most have seen the paintings of the Renaissance Masters, which depict angels (especially cherubim) as babies with wings. Of course the masters wished to equate the innocence of the angels with the innocence of newborn children. Unfortunately, this popular image had led to confusion and misunderstandings about the most mysterious of God's creatures.

What exactly is an angel?

The word "angel" means messenger. Truly, this reflects the office of the angels and their relationship with humans. As such, it should be realized that the word "angel" does not properly describe their nature; it only describes what they do in relationship to us. Angels are more properly referred to as "spirits", for this is what they are. An angel is an incorporeal spirit of great power and intelligence. They are at the very pinnacle of the order of God's creation. Their spiritual nature is closest to the image of God, and thus they have great power and intellect (although not necessarily charity).

It is important to realize that an angel is not a dead human; in other words we do not become angels when we die and pass on to heaven. Angels are as different from humans as animals are from us. Humans are endowed with sentience, conscience and a measure of intellect which divides us from the animals. In a similar manner, angels are endowed with a power and intellect not proper to man. In a sense, man is a composite creation which blends the nature of the animal (corporeality, instinct, passions) with the nature of the angels (free will, intellect, conscience, sentience and rationality). Thus the angels are not humans, and we can never become one.

We really aren't alone in the Universe

Some astronomers and UFO buffs spend their life searching for other intelligent life in the universe. Although such a search is interesting and exciting, they are probably not aware (or don't believe) that non-human intelligent life has already been discovered and was known to primal man. Angels, of course, are the intelligent life that we know exist by the testimony of the prophets and the Catholic Church. Unfortunately,

**THE ANSWERS YOU SEEK
NEVER COME WHEN THE
MIND IS BUSY, THEY COME
WHEN THE MIND IS STILL.**

Scripture only mentions angels a few times and thus we know little about them. When they choose to communicate with humans it is always by the will of God, and they serve as messengers from God. Angels can manifest themselves in corporeal form when they wish to communicate with us.

The nature of the Angels

St. Thomas Aquinas speculated on the nature of the angels from the vantage point of Scholastic philosophy. Aquinas used a synthesis of philosophy and Scripture (called Scholasticism) to speculate on the nature, powers and ordering of the angels.

He believed that angels had three primary roles given to them by God. Their first role was to worship God. The blessed angels of heaven, which were not corrupted by Satan in the beginning of time, are able to gaze on the revealed nature of God and contemplate the mystery of the Trinity. In this way, the formidable intellect of the angels allows them to dwell on the infinite glory and goodness of God. As the psalmist records, "Adore Him, all you His angels" (Ps 96:7). This is the bliss of heaven; a bliss which sharpens the mind and brings eternal tranquility and charity.

The second major role of the angels is to implement the will of God. God uses the angels to order creation, implement the laws of the physical world and aid in the spiritual deliverance of man. The psalms records, "Bless the Lord, all ye His angels: you that are mighty in strength and execute His word, harkening to the voice of his orders" (Ps 102:20). There are many occasions in Scripture which record the implementation of God's will in the physical world by the angels (Exo 14:19, Mt 13:49, 1 Chron 21). Additionally, they also petition God with prayers on our behalf (Tob 12:12, Mt 18:10). Aquinas also believed that God assigns a guardian angel to each person. On our behalf, the angel prays for us and protects us from the evil angels (Mt 18:10). God's use of the angels to implement his will is appropriate to a good God who values a familial relationship of charity between angels and men.

Finally, angels serve as messengers from God. Scripture records that the prophets received messages from God through angels. Indeed, the Virgin Mary received the good news of salvation from the angel Gabriel. Many of the prophets such as Ezekiel, Daniel, Abraham, and Isaiah received prophecies from the angels (Ezekiel 1:4, Daniel 7:16, Genesis 22:11, Isaiah 6:2).



Ordering of the Angels

Aquinas believed that the angels were not equal in power and intellect. Indeed, based on the readings of St. Paul's letter to the Colossians and to the Ephesians (Eph 1:21 and Col 1:16) St. Aquinas surmised that the angels can be divided into nine choirs (groups). Each choir has a distinct power and duty that sets it apart from the others.

The first and most powerful of the angelic choirs is the Seraphim. The prophet Isaiah described the Seraphim in a prophetic vision:

"I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft. 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!' they cried one to the other. 'All his earth is filled with his glory!' At the sound of the cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke" (Isaiah 6:2).

The rich imagery of Isaiah reveals that the Seraphim are closest to the throne of God. This means that they perceive God in the richest way possible for a created being and thus they have an unmatched intellect, will and love. The Seraphim's only task is to worship God in perpetual adoration. Seraphim are distinct from the other choirs of angels in that they burn with an intense ardor of charity. It is said that the charity of the Seraphim burns like white heat in a flame. As such, the Seraphim would appear to a man as a terrible lord of power and might; but the fear of the Seraphim would not come from fear of the angel, rather it would come from the comparison between the purity of the angelic being and the sin in our own souls.

The second choir of angels are the Cherubim. Cherubim are the angels which are often depicted as babies with wings in Christian art. Indeed, the good angelic Cherubim have an innocence that surpasses a human infant. As the choir with the second highest nature among the angels, Cherubim have the fullness and excess of knowledge. This perfection of knowledge, according to Dionysius, comes from the perfect vision of God, the full reception of the divine light, contemplation in God of the beauty of the divine order and their willingness to share it with all others. However, the high nature of this choir of angels does not guarantee their moral goodness. For as Aquinas notes, Satan the source of evil and prince of darkness is a member of the choir of Cherubim (Ezekiel 28:14).

The third choir of angels are the Thrones. These angels are grouped with the Seraphim and the Cherubim in the first order of angels. Thrones are the lowest choir of the first order. Yet, "they are raised up so as to be the familiar recipients of God in themselves, in the sense of knowing immediately the types of things in Himself" (Summa Theologica Q. 108 A.6 P.1). The Thrones are said to be the way by which God accomplishes his judgments (St. Gregory).

The second order of angels is composed of the choirs of the Dominations, Virtues and Powers. This order of angels is charged with governing and ordering the laws of the created universe. The Dominations, which is the choir of angels at the preeminence of the order, are given the duty of appointing those things which are to be done by the Virtues and Powers. The choir of Virtues are charged with giving the power with which to accomplish the ordering of Nature. Finally, the choir of Powers are given the duty to order out how to execute what has been commanded. The choir of Powers direct the lower choirs on how to order creation.

The last order of angels is most familiar to man. This order is comprised of the Principalities, Archangels and Angels. Principalities are the leaders of the last order, and direct the actual implementation of God's will. Archangels and angels actually carry out and execute what is to be done. This is why angels (such as Gabriel and Raphael) are the choir sent to communicate with man.

Goodness of the Angels

Moral goodness is not something that is dependent on the nature of a created being. The nature of a creature is the innate powers and potential given to a being by God. Because free will is a necessary part of the nature of man and angel, there exists the possibility of sin. Angels can, and have, sinned. Indeed, the original creation of God was perfect and moral in every possible way. Unfortunately, Satan (for reasons we can only speculate on) a good Cherubim, decided to selfishly seek and increase his own glory and power beyond the limits set by God. When he refused to submit to the will of God he committed the first of all sins: the sin of pride. When Satan sinned in pride, he convinced many other angels to follow him into submission and evil. For this sin, he was expelled from heaven forever and was denied the immediate vision of God. The good angels who resisted Satan's temptations were admitted into the immediate vision of God and became firmly rooted in virtue. For this reason, the angels who resisted the first sin are no longer capable of sinning; they have made a permanent and indelible choice to submit to the love of God. The fallen angels, or devils as we now call them, are likewise permanently rooted in sin. It is not possible for a devil to repent of his sins.

This fact partially explains why belief in angels is a primary dogma of Catholic faith. Without belief in angels, there is no possible explanation for the existence of evil in the good creation of God.
