

Homily on “Angels” -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

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Question #1: What is an angel?

Answer: The name “angel” means “messenger.” This word chiefly defines their service to God – specifically on behalf of the human race. Angels occupy the first and highest place in the whole order of created being. They are pure spirits (fleshless, without bodies), like God – but they are not as perfect as He is. They reveal things of God to human beings, protect us from harm, and inspire us to do good. The pages of the Scripture make clear to us that mankind knew of the existence of angels since its first days in Paradise. The Old Testament records appearances of angels: at the entrance to Paradise, to Abraham, Nahor, Jacob, Esau, Isaiah, Ezekiel and other prophets. The books of Job and the Psalms make references to angels as well. In the Gospels, angels appear to Zacharias, the Theotokos, Joseph the betrothed, the shepherds and the Magi; they ministered to Christ after His temptation, and one strengthened Him in Gethsemane; they informed the myrrh-bearing women at His resurrection and told the apostles of His second coming at the ascension. And in the remainder of the New Testament, they appeared to Peter, Cornelius, Paul and John the Theologian.

Question #2: When were angels created?

Answer: In the Creed, we recite, “I believe in one God ... Creator of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible.” The invisible world of the angels was created by God, and created before our visible world. The Lord explained to Job, “When the stars were made, all Thy angels praised Me with a loud voice.” (Job 38: 7). The Holy Fathers understood the word “heaven” in the first words of Genesis (“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”) to mean the invisible heaven, or the dwelling place of the powers on high. Saints such as Ambrose and Jerome, Gregory the Great and Anastasios of Sinai taught that God created the angels long before He created our visible world, and that angels already stood before the face of the Creator and served Him. Saint Gregory the Theologian explains this: “Since for the goodness of God it was not enough to be occupied only with the contemplation of Himself, it was needful that good should extend further and further, so that the number of those who have received grace might be as many as possible ... therefore, God created first of all the angelic heavenly powers ... and as much as these first creatures were pleasing to Him, He devised another world, material and visible ...” In his Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, Saint John of Damascus echoes these thoughts of Saint Gregory.

Question #3: What is the nature of angels?

Answer: By their nature, angels are active spirits which have intelligence, will and knowledge. They serve God, fulfill His providential will, and give glory to Him. They are fleshless spirits, which belong to the invisible world; as such, they cannot be seen by our bodily eyes. Saint John of Damascus instructs us: “Angels do not appear

exactly as they are to the righteous and those to whom God wills them to appear. On the contrary, they appear under a different form so as to be seen by those who behold them.” In the book of Tobit, the angel who travelled with Tobit and his son told them about himself: “All these days I merely appeared to you and did not eat or drink, but you were seeing a vision” (Tobit 12:19). While angels surpass men by their spiritual powers, they are – as created beings – limited. Being bodiless, they are less dependent on space and time than we are, but they are not everywhere present as God is. Immortality is an attribute of angels, as is clearly testified to in the Scriptures, where we read that they cannot die (Luke 20:36). But their immortality is not a divine immortality -- something self-existing and unconditional, but it depends (like the immortality of human souls) on the will and mercy of God. Angels’ minds are more elevated than ours; their might and power surpasses all earthly governments and authorities (II Peter 2:10-11). The nature of angels is higher than the nature of human beings, as the Psalmist tells us that man is “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8: 5). In spite of their exalted nature, they do not know the Essence of God (I Cor. 2:11); they do not know the future (Mark 13:32); they do not completely understand the mystery of the Redemption (I Peter 1:12); they do not know all human thoughts (III Kings 8:39); and of themselves, they cannot perform miracles (Psalms 71:19).

Question #4: How many are the angelic hosts?

Answer: The Scripture presents the angelic world as extraordinarily large. When the Prophet Daniel saw a vision of the Ancient of Days, it was revealed to him that “thousand thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him” (Daniel 7:10). Saint Luke records that “a multitude of the heavenly host” praised the coming to earth of the Son of God at the Nativity (Luke 2:13). Saint Cyril of Jerusalem explains, “Reckon how many are the Roman nation; reckon how many the barbarian tribes now living, and how many have died within the last hundred years; reckon how many nations have been buried during the last thousand years; reckon all from Adam to this day. Great indeed is the multitude, but yet it is little, for the angels are many more. They are the ninety-nine sheep, and mankind is the single one (Matt. 18:12). The earth is but a point in the midst of the one heaven ... must not the heaven of heavens contain unimaginable numbers? ... ‘thousand thousands’ and ‘ten thousand times ten thousand’... the multitude is only so great because the Prophet could not express more than these.”

Question #5: What are the ranks of angels?

Answer: Guided by the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the Church Fathers, the Orthodox Church holds that there are various hierarchical degrees of the heavenly powers. Based on the work The Heavenly Hierarchy, attributed to Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, the angelic world is understood to be divided into nine choirs or ranks, and these nine into three hierarchies – with three ranks in each.

In the first hierarchy are those closest to God: the Seraphim, the Cherubim, and the Thrones. In the second, middle hierarchy are: the Powers, the Dominions, and the Authorities. And finally, in the third hierarchy: the Principalities, the Archangels, and the Angels, those who are closest to us human beings. We find this numbering of the nine ranks of angels in the Apostolic Constitutions, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory Dialogos, St. John of Damascus and others. In various books of the Bible, we find the individual names of these ranks: Genesis, the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, I Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Jude.

Question #6: Who are the angels named in the Scriptures?

Answer: In the Bible, some of the angels are identified for us by name. “Michael” (which means ‘Who is like God’) is found in Daniel, Jude and Revelation. “Gabriel” (‘Man of God’) is mentioned in Daniel and Luke. “Raphael” (‘Help of God’) is introduced in Tobit. “Uriel” (‘Fire of God’) is found in III Esdras. So also is “Salathiel” (‘Prayer to God’) mentioned in III Esdras. Apart from this, Tradition ascribes names to two other angels, “Jegudiel” (‘praise of God’) and “Barachiel” (‘Blessing of God’). In the second book of Esdras, there is mention of yet another angel “Jeremiel” (‘Height of God’), but interpreting the context, this angel is the same as the one named “Uriel.”

Question #7: What is the ministry of angels?

Answer: It is evident from Scripture that angels were ordained by God to be the most perfect reflections of His grandeur and glory, participating in His blessedness. If, in the words of David the Psalmist, the visible heavens declare the glory of God, how much more the spiritual heavens? Saint Gregory the Theologian calls the angels the “reflections of the perfect Light” or secondary lights. Not only do angels hymn the glory of God; they serve Him in the works of His providence in our visible world. Angels are “appointed for the governance of elements and the heavens, the world and everything that is in it” (Athenagoras). Some saints hold that special angels are placed over different aspects of the kingdom of nature; this view is based on the Book of Revelation, where angels are said to be in charge of certain earthly elements (waters, earth, winds, fire). In the Book of Daniel, there are angels to whom God has entrusted the care of the fate of peoples and kingdoms of the earth. Finally, the Church believes that every human being has his or her own guardian angel, if we have not turned them away by an impious life. Our Lord and Savior has said, “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones, for I say unto you, that their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). Even though God created all angels good, some of them did not remain faithful to God and they sinned. These bad angels were cast into hell and are known as devils. They try to harm us by tempting us to sin. We can resist their temptations by praying and fasting and doing good deeds. God will always help us to fight the snares of the devil

if we ask Him. He will send our guardian angel to assist us in the struggle. These good angels, who remained faithful to God, entered into the eternal bliss of Heaven, where they see and love and adore the Living God.

The role of angels in salvation history is indeed significant. In the Old Testament, they brought the word and will of God to men. Even in the New Testament, they appear to Zacharias, Joseph, the Theotokos the shepherds, and the Magi, and announce the Good News on behalf of God. But their role is subordinate to that of Our Lord.

Once the Father's voice announced, "This is My beloved Son ...", the Scripture tells us "the angels ministered unto Jesus" and that they serve as guardians for us humans. Yes their role is significant, but as St. Paul teaches the Colossians, it pales in comparison to that of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be all glory, honor and worship with His Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

