

HCSC Summer Bible Series 2019 *"Angels & Demons"*

Some Basics on the Angels and Some Attitudes and Practices to Avoid Regarding Them

Scripture consistently affirms the existence of the Angels. The Catechism of the Catholic Church has much to say on angels, and is perhaps a good place to start in setting a foundation for proper and balanced understanding of them. Here are some keynote teachings:



- Angels are persons, though spiritual and non-corporeal. As purely spiritual creatures angels have intelligence and will: they are personal and immortal creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendor of their glory bears witness
- St. Augustine says: "'Angel' is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is 'spirit'; if you seek the name of their office, it is 'angel'.
- With their whole beings the angels are servants and messengers of God. Because they "always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven" they are the "mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word" (Mt 18:10; Ps 1
- Angels have been present since creation and active throughout the history of salvation, announcing and serving the accomplishment of the divine plan: they closed the earthly paradise; protected Lot; saved Hagar and her child; stayed Abraham's hand; communicated the law by their ministry; led the People of God; announced births and callings; and assisted the prophets, just to cite a few examples (Gen 3:24; 19; 21:17; 22:11; Acts 7:53; Ex 23:20-23; Judge 13; 6:11-24; Isa 6:6; 1 Kings 19:5). At a pivotal moment the angel Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus himself. When God brought forth Jesus into the world he says: 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" (Heb. 1:6) And thus their declaration "Glory to God in the highest!" resounded. (Lk 2:14). They protect Jesus in his infancy, serve him in the desert, strengthen him in his agony in the garden and proclaim the Good News of His Resurrection. (Lk 2:8-14; Mk 16:5-7) They will be present at Christ's return, which they will announce and serve at his judgment. (Acts 1:10-11; Mt 13:41; 24:31; Lk 12:8-9)
- The whole life of the Church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of angels....In her liturgy, the Church joins with the angels to adore the thrice-holy God....From infancy to death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and

intercession. “Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life.” Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God. (CCC #s 328-336 selected)

The words “protector” and “shepherd” are significant and can help to correct a tendency in modern times to sentimentalize the role of the angels and to drift from the Biblical data regarding them.

Tradition assigns nine choirs (ranks) of Angels in groups of three:

- **The Supreme Hierarchy** (Third Heavens)
 - Seraphim – The “burning ones” who minister at the Throne in heaven
 - Cherubim – They bear the throne
 - Thrones - Their name suggests they minister at the Throne
- **The Middle Hierarchy** (Second Heavens)
 - Dominations – Rule in the heavenly domains?
 - Virtues – maintain order there?
 - Powers – administer the various powers of the cosmos?
- **The Lower Hierarchy** (First Heavens and other Earthly realms)
 - Principalities – oversee earthly princes and kingdoms ?
 - Archangels – Oversee the angels on earth
 - Angels – assigned to people, organizations, nations and cultures

Here therefore it may be good to propose a few corrective ideas to balance the sentimental notions we may have. I do not say that sentiment is *per se* wrong, but it needs to be balanced by deep respect for the angels.

1. **Angels have no bodies**, they are spiritual beings. And though they are spoken of as having wings, hands, many eyes, faces, etc., these are said by way of analogy, or in terms of visions granted so as to reveal some aspect of their spiritual capacity, e.g. swift movement, the capacity to see comprehensively, etc. But of themselves, as pure spirit angels cannot be seen or touched unless God grants a kind of vision to the soul of man.
2. **Angels are not human** and never have been human.
3. **Human beings never become angels** or “earn wings.”
4. **Angels are persons**, but persons of pure spirit.
5. **Hence they have no “sexual distinctions.”** Now we have to envision them somehow, so it is not wrong that we portray them with masculine or feminine qualities but it is important to remember that they transcend any such distinction.
6. **Biblically, angels are not the rather fluffy** and charming creatures that modern portraits often depict. In the Bible angels are depicted as awesome and powerful agents of God. Many times the appearance of an angel struck fear in the one who saw them (*cf* Judg 6:22; Lk 1:11; Lk 1:29; Lk 2:9; Acts 10:3; Rev. 22:8). Angels are often described in the Bible in warlike terms: they are call a host (the biblical word for army), they wage war on God’s behalf and that of his people (e.g. Ex 14:19; Ex 33:2; Nm 22:23; Ps 35:5; Is 37:36; Rev 12:7). While they are said to have wings (e.g. Ex

25:20; 1 Kings 6:24; inter al) recall that they do not have physical bodies so the wings are an image of their swiftness. They are also mentioned at times as being like fire (Ex. 3:2; Rev 10:1).

7. **And as for those cute little “cherubs”** we have in our art, those cute baby-faced angels with wings and no body? Well read about the real Cherubim in Ezekiel 10. They are fearsome, awesome creatures, powerful and swift servants of God and more than capable of putting God’s enemies to flight.

And this is my main point, angels are not the sentimental syrupy and cute creatures we have often recast them to be. They are awesome, wonderful, and powerful servants of God. They are his messengers and they manifest God’s glory. They bear forth the power and majesty of God and are immensely to be respected. They are surely also our helpers and, by God’s command act on our behalf.

A practice to be avoided is the practice of some to “name” their Guardian Angel or to ask that the name of the angel be revealed. Regarding this practice, a document written in 2001 by the Congregation for Divine Worship entitled Directory On Popular Piety in the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines says, “The practice of assigning names to the holy angels should be discouraged, except in the cases of Gabriel Raphael and Michael, whose names are contained in Holy Scripture.” (# 127)

While the Congregation does not offer reasons for discouraging the practice, I would like to offer a couple.

First, there is the understanding of what a name is. For most of us in the modern Western world, a name is simply a sound we go by. But in the ancient, Biblical world, and even in many places today, a name has a far deeper meaning. A name describes something of the essence of the person. This helps explain the ancient practice of the Jews to name the child on the eighth day. The delay gave the parents some time to observe something of the essence of the child, and then, noting it, they would name the child. Indeed most Biblical names are deeply meaningful, and descriptive.

But it is presumptive to think that we can know enough of the essence of a particular angel, in order to be able to assign a name. Hence, assigning a name seems inappropriate.

The second reason is that assigning a name indicates some superiority over the one named. Thus, in the case of children, parents, who are superior over their children, rightly name them. However, in the case of angels, they are superior to us. And, even though we often speak of them as serving us, they do this on account of their superior power and as guardians. Thus, God commands us to heed their voice (*cf* Ex 23:20-21)

So naming an angel does seem problematic, and to be discouraged. As for the name being revealed to a person by God or the Angel, let me respectfully offer that this is not likely the case, since it seems unlikely that an Angel, or the Holy Spirit, would act contrary to the directive of the Church, herself graced to speak for Christ.

What then is our proper reaction to the great gift of the angels? Sentimental thought may have its place, but what God especially commands of us toward our angel is obedience. Read what God said in the Book of Exodus:

Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. Give heed to him and hearken to his voice, do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. (Ex 23:21)

So our fundamental task is to hear and heed the voice of our angel. How, you might ask do we hear the voice of our Guardian Angel? I would suggest to you that we most hear the voice of our angel in our conscience. Deep down, we hear God's voice, we know what is true and what is false. In terms of basic right and wrong, we know what we are doing. I am convinced that our conscience interacts with our Guardian Angel.

We like to try and rationalize what we do, explain away bad behavior, make excuses. But in the end, deep down inside, we know what we are doing and whether or not it is wrong. I am sure it is our angel who testifies to the truth in us and informs our conscience.

God's command is clear: listen to and heed this voice. Respect this angel God has given you not so much with sentimental odes, but with sober obedience.

