

HCSC Summer Bible Series 2019

Angels and Demons

The Mystical Role of the Angels in Baptism

In recent weeks I have been teaching series at the Institute of Catholic Culture on the mission of the angels. Angels are ministering spirits mystically present and active throughout creation, in the events of Scripture, in the liturgy, and in our lives. Over the next few days my posts will summarize the talks I presented. The fundamental source for these reflections is Jean Cardinal Danielou's book The Angels and Their Mission: According to the Fathers of the Church. The references to the Fathers in my posts are fully footnoted in his book, but some of the scriptural references are my own additions.

In today's post we ponder the role of the angels in evangelization and baptism.

Preparation for Baptism and the Role of the Angels – Prior to baptism itself, there is of course the need for souls to be gathered to Christ. Even in the baptism of an infant, the child must first be drawn to Christ through parents, the parish, and others. In a wider sense, the gospel needs to go forth to all the nations:

Go, therefore, unto all the nations and make disciples of them, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have taught you (Matt 28:19-20).

The Fathers of the Church envisioned that just as the apostles were sent visibly to all nations, so too the angels are sent invisibly to prepare the many for the gospel and to gather the faithful into the Church. Indeed, Scripture says,

And He will send out the angels to gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mk 13:27).

While some see this text only in relation to the end of the world, others see it as a reference to the age of the Church wherein God is sending apostles and angels to gather in the full number of the elect.

And thus:

- Eusebius remarks that the mission of the angels to draw souls into the Church and unto baptism is also a battle against idolatry and the demons who hold souls captive.
- The Sacramentary of Gelasius has a prayer for catechumens begging that the Lord vouchsafe to send His holy angels to preserve His servants and lead them to the grace of baptism.
- Origen records this prayer: "Come, angel. Receive him who has been converted from his former error and the doctrines of demons ... Receive him as a careful physician; warm and heal him ... Receive him and give him the baptism of second birth."

So, the angels perform a preparatory role, working invisibly alongside the apostles, evangelists, missionaries, parents, and catechists. It is consoling to know that we are not alone in this work of winning souls!

The Presence of the Angels in the Liturgy of Baptism

There is a hint at the role of angels in baptism in a passage from John's Gospel that prefigures the healing power of baptism. It is the passage about the paralyzed man by the sheep pools at Bethesda. It was said that an angel stirred the waters there every so often and that the first one into the water after that would be healed. Jesus asks the man if he wants to be healed. "*Sir,*" *the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am on my way, someone else goes in before me"* (John 5:7).

Thus, in some mystical sense, the angels brought a blessing to those waters to bring healing. In baptism, it is the Lord Jesus, our great High Priest who baptizes; it is He who makes the water holy, uniting it to the water that flowed from His pierced side. But as in all things, He ministers His graces and blessings through His angels. Scripture says of the angels,

Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? (Heb 1:14)

Thus, angels are present and active at our baptism.

- Tertullian speaks of the role of angels in baptism: "Cleansed in the water by the action of an angel, we are prepared for the Holy Spirit. Thus, an angel is set in charge of baptism."
- Origen says, "At the time that the Sacrament of Faith was administered to you, there were present heavenly powers, the ministration of the angels."
- Ambrose says, "After Baptism you began to advance [out of the font]. The angels watched, they saw you draw near, and they suddenly beheld the splendor of your state ... Thus, they asked, *Who is this coming up from the desert shining white?* (see Song of Songs 8:5) The angels are lost in admiration! Do you want to know how great their admiration is? Listen to the Apostle Peter as he tells us that we have been given what the angels longed to look upon" (see 1 Peter 1:12).

It is indeed a beautiful insight by Ambrose that the angels should marvel at the transformation and beauty of our soul at baptism. Would that we could see it as well!

In tomorrow's post we will examine the role of the angels in the Mass.

Below is a video of my first presentation, which was on the angels and the Incarnation.

<https://vimeo.com/307181201>