

HCSC Summer Bible Series 2019 “Angels and Demons”

The Angels and Our Death – Day 4

Scriptural and Liturgical Roots – We read in Scripture that the Lord *shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other* (Matt 24:31). While this text most likely refers to the Last Judgment, it nevertheless emphasizes the role of the angels in gathering us to the Lord. In one of Jesus’ parables, we read of the poor man Lazarus and how the angels escorted him after he died:

The time came when the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. (Luke 16:22).

We also read in Scripture of the role of St. Michael the Archangel at the death of Moses:

But even the archangel Michael, when he disputed with the devil over the body of Moses, did not presume to bring a slanderous judgment against him, but said, “The Lord rebuke you!” (Jude 1:9)

The Church sees an even broader role for Michael and the angels at the death of each of us. The offertory prayer of the Requiem Mass in the Extraordinary Form implores that “Michael, the standard-bearer, may lead us forward into the Holy Light, promised of old to Abraham and his seed.” Further, the *In Paradisum* of the Funeral Mass says,

May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs receive you at your arrival and lead you to the holy city Jerusalem. May choirs of angels receive you and with Lazarus, who once was poor, may you have eternal rest.

The *In Paradisum* is indeed a beautiful chant with beautiful teaching. At the bottom of this post is a link to a recording, sung in Latin. There are also English translations that fit well with the melody.

Thus, we see the biblical roots of the role of the angels at our death. We turn now to the insights of the Fathers of the early Church.

As we know from Scripture, encountering an angel can be disconcerting. In most cases, the first words from angels are “Do not be afraid.” Some of the Fathers speak to this experience:

- Tertullian says, “When by force of death the soul is snatched from the weight of the flesh that closed it in, it trembles with excitement to see the face of an angel, the summoner of souls, realizing that its eternal abode has been prepared.”
- St. Ephrem imagines the confusion of a man when he sees the heavenly powers just after death: “When the armies of the Lord show themselves and when the divine commanders bid him to leave the body behind, he shakes and trembles at the unaccustomed sight of these figures.”

On the other hand, angels also have a consoling effect for the faithful at the moment of death, keeping demons at bay:

- St. Gregory the Great says, “The hymns of the angels fill the soul with so divine a joy, that it does not notice the sufferings of death. And during its voyage toward heaven, the angels scatter the demons who try to bar the soul’s advance.”
- St. Aloysius Gonzaga (a Church Father, though not an ancient one, living from 1568–1591) taught that when the soul leaves the body, it is accompanied and consoled by its guardian angel so that the soul can present itself confidently before the judgment seat of God.

The angels escort us upward toward Heaven and God’s judgment seat:

- St. John Chrysostom says, “If we need a guide in passing from one [earthly] city to another, how much more so will the soul need someone to point the way when she breaks the bonds of the flesh and passes on to the future life.”
- St. Ephrem sees the angels “taking up the soul ... and carrying it through the upper air.”
- St. Gregory notes that the angels of paradise are asked by the lower angels to permit the soul to enter there.

Strangely, there is little mention of the presence of angels while we are at the judgment itself. Perhaps it is because this is a personal matter, just between our soul and the Lord. It seems likely that each of us will need some purgation. St. Paul speaks of a kind of fire that will both purify and refine us:

Each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If what he has built survives, he will receive a reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as if through the flames (1 Cor 3:13-15).

As to this purgation, one ancient source (“The Apocalypse of Paul”) speaks of a man lifted up to a mystical vision of a river of fire; he asks an angel what it might be. The angel tells him that if anyone is impure yet repentant, he is led forward, first to adore God, and then by command of the Lord handed over to Michael and other angels, who “baptize” him in the river of fire and lead him to the City of God. At this point, it would seem that the guardian angel intercedes before God and seeks help among the people on earth to pray for the soul in its care. After the purifications have been completed, the guardian angel leads the soul into Heaven.

The angels in Heaven reserve special attention for virgins and martyrs:

- Eusebius says that virgins will not walk toward the King, they will be carried by the angels.
- Of the martyrs, Origen says that the angels look at them with wonder and greet them as conquerors. The angels sing, “Who is this coming from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength?” (Isaiah 63:1)
- St John Chrysostom says, “The martyrs go up to Heaven surrounded and preceded by the angels as an escort. When they arrive in Heaven all the holy powers from on high run forward

and stand before them, trying to see their wounds. They receive them with joy and embrace them. Then they form an immense procession to lead them to the King of Heaven ... taking part in mystical songs ... leading them into the Holy of Holies.”

Surely, every soul is greeted with joy by the angels and saints, and they are caught up into the great movement and “dance” of love between the members of the Trinity. The Eastern Church calls this movement and experience of love the *perichoresis*.

To summarize, here are the traditions articulated by the ancient Fathers about angels:

- The angels help our soul escape the sufferings of death.
- Our guardian angel accompanies our soul and assures it of a peaceful journey.
- Our guardian angel defends us against the demons, who want to stop our journey.
- Our guardian angel leads us to the judgment seat of Christ.
- Our guardian angel stands along the way of the river of fire and there intercedes as our soul is purified.
- Our guardian angel bids the angels of the gates of Heaven to open them.
- The angels of the gates of Heaven welcome our soul.
- All the angels welcome us with joy.
- The angels reserve special honor and joy for virgins and martyrs.

What happens to our guardian angel after we die? There is no doctrine, but there is a general consensus:

- If a soul enters communion with God, it joins its angel in praising the one and triune God for all eternity.
- If the soul goes to Hell, its angel can only praise God’s divine justice and holiness.
- It is not clear whether our guardian angel takes up other souls or duties after we die. However, given the vast number of them (myriad), it seems unlikely. Perhaps in the case of a soul that departs to Hell (where the angel surely cannot go), its guardian angel is assigned to a new soul, but this is pure speculation.

This is how the angels care for us at the hour of our death.

<https://youtu.be/Hg43i3Nsl9g>