

ANGELS AND DEVILS

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I have been asked to write a few words about the angels. Now I can well imagine the rush of questions that flood your mind the moment you hear any mention of angels. Do such beings exist? Who are they? What are they like? Where do they come from? What do they do? But be patient. Those are the very questions I will try to answer for you.

DO THEY EXIST?

Firstly are there any angels? There was a time, of course, when people believed that angels stood with flaming swords at the gates of the Garden of Eden, when our first parents, Adam and Eve, were banished from Paradise. But that's surely a little out of date, you may say. Today the angels are banished. Men don't believe in them any more.

Yet just a minute. What men think, or don't think, is not very important in this matter. What is important are the reasons for the opinions they adopt. And there are absolutely no reasons for refusing to believe in the existence of angels. It is true that angels are invisible beings. But God Himself is an invisible Being, and that is no argument against His existence. Not the man who believes in angels is deceived, but those people are deceived by their senses who think only visible and material things exist.

There is every reason to believe that the order in creation sweeps through from blind matter to living vegetation, sensitive animal life, on to rational man, half-material and half-spiritual and on yet again to pure disembodied intelligent and spiritual beings called angels.

Why suppose—and it is only supposition—that we human beings are the only intelligent creatures in the universe—that created intelligence suddenly stops with the feeble triumph of man? Our intelligence is fearfully limited and stammering. Where is perfect mind, pure intelligence unfettered by matter? Is it absent from creation? There is no known reason why intelligence should need a material chemical body. Disembodied intelligence is likelier than not.

REVEALED TRUTH.

But, whatever our speculations, the question of the existence of angels is settled for all who believe in the Bible. We know by divine revelation that God did create spiritual beings, endowed with intelligence and freewill. The Old Testament tells us, in the Book of Daniel, that thousands upon thousands of angels minister in the name of God, and that “ten thousand times a hundred thousand stand before Him.

In the New Testament we read that angels announced to the shepherds the birth of Christ in Bethlehem; that they ministered to Him at the time of His temptation in the desert; that they strengthened Him during His sufferings in the Garden of Gethsemane; and that they appeared at His tomb on the morning of the resurrection to declare the glad news, “He is not here. He is risen as He said.”

Of Our Lord's own direct teaching, we know that the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed as to whether angels existed, and that Jesus supported the Pharisees who believed in them, not the Sadducees who denied them. He declared that the angels rejoice over sinners who repent. He forbade the giving of bad example to little children, warning us that “their angels” are as present to God as to them, and that they will not view with indifference the scandalous corruption of innocent souls. And He further predicted that the angels will accompany Him on that Last Day, when He comes to judge the living and the dead.

It is impossible, then, to reject belief in the angels, without rejecting belief in the Old and New Testaments, and in the authority of Jesus Christ Himself.

WHAT IS AN ANGEL?

But granted that angels exist, we are led to the question, “What is an angel?” The reply must be that an angel is a

created spiritual essence. Being created, angels are as dependent upon God for their existence as any other creatures. They have only a borrowed and limited perfection. But they are more perfect than human beings. Man was made, according to Holy Scripture, “a little lower than the angels.” Angels are purely spiritual beings, intermediate between the Supreme Spirit, God, and those spirits immersed in material bodies which are known as human souls.

Like our own souls, angels are immortal, intelligent, and endowed with freewill, but adapted to a higher plane or dimension than ours. The Bible mentions nine orders or companies of them, the Cherubs, Seraphs, Thrones, Dominations, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Archangels and Angels. And to four of the Archangels names are given, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Lucifer, who fell into sin and made himself into a devil, of whom we shall say more in a moment.

What is an angel like? That we cannot imagine. We inferior beings think in terms of ourselves, and cannot help imagining a bodily appearance for all other persons. It is almost as useless for us to ask what an angel *is* like as it is for a man who has never had the gift of sight to ask what colour is like. Angels are purely spiritual beings. They have no material bodies—no inside and outside, no arms, no legs, nothing that could fall out, or come loose, or be cut off. Pictures of them, like Christmas-card angels, are only symbolic. They are represented in human form merely to show that they are persons; and they are given wings to symbolize lightness and swiftness.

ANGELIC HISTORY.

With the history of the angels I have no space to deal at any length, though it makes a fascinating story. Like all history, of course, it had a beginning. There was a time when no angels existed. The Bible tells us that they were certainly created before man. They may have been created before anything of this universe existed at all, though St. Thomas Aquinas gave it as his opinion that they were created at the same time as the initial stages of the material world around us. But he himself would not have called that more than a conjecture.

We are on surer ground when we come to a discussion of their duties, for Holy Scripture indicates many interests assigned to them. First and foremost comes the supreme duty of all creatures, the adoration and worship of God for His infinite perfection in Himself. Then, we are told, the angels are agents of God's Providence in the control of the whole of lesser creation. Often they are employed as messengers between God and man. To each human being an angel is assigned as a particular friend and guardian. The angels, too, are described in Holy Scripture as offering our prayers before the Throne of God; as bearing the souls of the departed to their place of rest; and as witnesses of the conduct of men that they may later be witnesses also at our judgement—please God, to plead in our favour at that critical moment.

Such, briefly, and in general, is Christian teaching about the angels, and about their place in God's plan of creation. But I have promised to go a little more deeply into the question of the angels who rebelled against God and made themselves into devils.

BELIEF IN THE DEVIL

Now I am well aware that good angels are much more likely to be popular than bad angels or devils. And as people are prone to deny the existence of what they would not like to be true, so unbelief in the devil is very widespread today. People say that it's a little out of date, in these enlightened days, to talk of the devil. It is not really out of date. It is only that people are more ignorant of the truth. Science, of course, does not even pretend that it can disprove the existence of devils. And, as a matter of fact, it is no more difficult to believe that evil spirits exist than that evil men exist. If you can have a wicked spirit in a body, you can have a wicked spirit without a body. And observant people know that evil spirits are as active as ever. There is very definite evidence of an organized kingdom of spiritual evil.

In his book, “The Problem of Pain,” Mr. C. S. Lewis, at present Professor of English Literature in Oxford University, anticipates the objections of Unbelievers by writing as follows: “Do you really mean, at this time of day, to re-introduce our old friend the devil, hoofs and horns and all?” Well, what the time of day has to do with it, I don't know. And I'm not particular about the hoofs and horns. But in other respects my answer is “Yes. I do.” I don't claim to know anything about his personal appearance. If anybody really wants to know him better, I'd say to that person, “Don't worry. If you really

want to, you will. Whether you'll like it when you do is another question."

ACTUAL EVIDENCE.

But let us turn to actual evidence. Are there devils, quite apart from all our likes and dislikes? Both divine revelation and human experience insist that there are. Satan and his horde of evil spirits are terrible realities.

In the New Testament we read of the temptation of Christ by the devil; and Jesus Himself spoke again and again of the reality of the devil. He declared that He saw Satan "falling like lightning from heaven." He spoke of Satan as "the evil one"; attributed to Satan's influence many of the mental and bodily diseases of men; warned St. Peter, "Satan has desired to have you to sift you like wheat"; told the Pharisees, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you will do. He was a murderer from the beginning," and He warned us all that Satan would engage in the sowing of tares and cockle as fast as we ourselves try to sow the good seed of Christian virtue and holiness.

The doctrine of the Apostles was the same as that of their Master. St. Peter exclaimed to Ananias, "Why hath Satan entered thy heart to lie?"; whilst St. Paul speaks of the wiles and snares of the devil, telling us that our wrestling is with evil spirits, rulers of the world of darkness.

HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

But let us leave this teaching of Holy Scripture, and turn to the realm of our own experience. Take the world as it is today. It is incredibly beautiful, but bits of it are very ugly. And experience certainly suggests that much of the evil in it comes from outside us. It has been fashionable to think of the devils as personifications of man's own evil nature rather than as independent evil personalities. But there is no justification for believing men to be so evil. They are not wholly responsible for the terrible story of selfishness, pride, lust, covetousness and cruelty which history unfolds. The more we study history, the more we are shaken in any idea that men alone could be responsible for all the physical and moral disasters that have come upon the human race.

In our own days we have seen nations moving towards situations in which wars, which the peoples themselves do not want, have become unavoidable. And these wars have brought with them outbreaks of cold-blooded monstrous cruelty, which seem so obviously fiendish. Men did not seem to be themselves. There was a malignancy at work which was not human. And, particularly when we detect a diabolical hatred of religion, and of all to do with God, we recognize the influence of demonic forces. All points to an evil power at work in the world which is not that of God, and which instigates and abets wickedness in men, or which uses their stupidity for its own purposes.

But apart from world disasters, there are innumerable individual cases of devil-possession, well authenticated, in which the facts are beyond doubt. And spiritual remedies have availed to deliver these poor people from their affliction, where doctors could do nothing.

For that matter, we all have our own temptations. Evil suggestions enter our minds. We may never have thought of such things before, and may hate having such thoughts. But they come, all the same; and are very hard to drive away. They come from outside us, just as suggestions put into our minds by other people. If good impulses come from God, why not evil impulses from evil spirits? Remember that evil is the result of an evil will, just as good is the fruit of a good will. There cannot be impersonal evil any more than impersonal good. Behind much of the evil of the world, suggesting it, influencing it, directing it, disguising it, there is the personality of the devil, and of his fellow evil spirits.

WHY CREATE DEVILS?

I know the question that these thoughts provoke in your minds. Why on earth did God create the devils? The answer is that He did not—at least, not as devils. He created them as angels, good, and entrancingly lovely, of their very nature.

But, being endowed with intelligence and freewill, they themselves had to use their power of choice in the right way rather than in the wrong way. Trial is inevitable for all free beings, even for angels. And Scripture tells us that some of the angels used their power of choice in opposition to God's Holy Will. We are told that Lucifer, intoxicated as it were by his

own perfections, said within himself, "I will be like unto the Most High." How he could think that, or what was the occasion of it, we do not know. But we are told that there was war in heaven, that the good angels led by Michael the Archangel hurled Lucifer and his supporters from heaven, and that "God spared not the angels who fell." Lucifer became Satan, the Adversary; and his followers devils, or slanderers, and destroyers.

Fundamentally, the choice was one of life with God, or life without God. The angels who fell chose life without God, and found themselves condemned eternally to hell.

Unfortunately, as it might seem to us, their condemnation to hell did not make it impossible for them to vent their hatred of God upon mankind, tempting men to share in their revolt. And we must say something of their efforts to dislocate God's plan of love and peace and happiness for us.

TEMPTATIONS.

The devil, and his horde of evil spirits, seek ever to dishonour God and injure humanity by labouring to corrupt human souls.

From the very beginning of the human race, Satan has wanted to make men rush, like the Gadarene swine, to their own destruction. "By the envy of the devil," Holy Scripture tells us, "death entered into the world." And St. Peter warns us, "Your adversary the devil goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." The explanation of such animosity against us is not far to seek. A being who is evil uses even good powers for evil. Having fallen, the wicked want others to fall.

That the devil does tempt us is an essential teaching of the Christian religion. We do not say that all our temptations come from him. There is no need to make the devil responsible for sins which are purely the product of our own selfish passions. Why should he bother providing evil when he sees us looking for it ourselves? But, all the same, Satan works with unspeakable cunning in a thousand ways, directly and indirectly, for the ruin of our souls.

THE DEVIL'S METHODS.

He waits for circumstances in which he knows we will be weak. He enters into the current of our evil inclinations, into the smiling appeal of seductive pleasures. He inspires others with thoughts that work for our loss also. He makes use of appropriate external circumstances, bad company, suggestive books, all kinds of superstitions—anything to occasion temptations. People take up spiritualism, and begin playing with spirits, only to find evil spirits taking possession of them. And with the wisdom of an archangel, Satan makes people believe that his way is the way of their real selves—that they are really doing what they want to do, and that they are not doing the devil's will at all.

Holy Scripture tells us that the devil can disguise himself as an angel of light. We are not always conscious of his activity, by any means. His influence is often like that of a poison gas, breathed in imperceptibly with the air.

NOT ALL-POWERFUL!

It is a consolation to know, however, that the power of the devil is not unlimited. He is not a rival god, omnipresent and omnipotent. Ever he is a creature, with the limitations of a creature. He cannot work miracles, real ones; even though he can do wonders beyond merely human powers. Moreover, his influence has been greatly restricted by the birth of Christ into this world; and the waters of baptism still further diminish his power over Christian souls. Nor can he do us any moral and spiritual harm except by our own will and deliberate consent. But there is no room for presumption on our part. Our will is weak, as we know only too well; and it ever remains true that the devil is stronger and cleverer than we.

Do not imagine from all this, however, that there is anything like a one-sided struggle between human beings and evil spirits. Always keep in mind that the good angels are far from looking on passively and with indifference to all the issues at stake.

What is happening is a tremendous conflict of spiritual forces, good and evil angels perpetually at war, until the final victory of God. And we are accounted worthy to take part in a struggle which brings us into communion with the whole

world of good spirits, and their interests. Moreover, Holy Scripture testifies to the fact that each one of us has a good angel as friend, protector, and guardian, preserving us from evil, inspiring noble thoughts and generous desires, and doing all possible to counteract the efforts of our spiritual enemies.

OUR GUARDIAN ANGELS.

Speaking of children, Jesus said, “Their angels always see the face of My Father in heaven.” And there is no reason whatever why angels, appointed to guard little children, should desert their charges in later years when temptations have become stronger and more dangerous.

We all have guardian angels, spiritual beings who are ever active on our behalf without our seeing them, agents of God’s love and mercy, and of His care for us. And don’t think that your guardian angel is not deeply interested in you, and in all you do, or in all that happens to you. Our guardian angels are not cold, clammy, impersonal creatures. They have a profound understanding of us, and most generous dispositions of will towards us. The angel who consoled Our Lord during His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane was capable of indescribable sympathy. The joyous song of the angels at Our Lord’s birth shows their ability to share in our human happiness. Our guardian angels must be willing to help us. And equally they are able to do so.

You will not find in the Bible anything pretty or effeminate about the angels. Our heavenly guardians are holy, and strong, and terrible; holy, because God is Holy; strong with the strength God gives them to order the circumstances of our lives in ways we could not foresee; terrible to the enemies of our soul, even as it will be a terrible thing for those enemies to fall into the hands of the Living God.

SUPERSTITIOUS UNBELIEVERS.

People who have drifted from the Christian religion believe none of these things. They have given themselves up to materialism, slamming shut the door against the spiritual world, and declaiming loudly that talk of guardian angels is but a childish fantasy, like believing in ghosts or in Santa Claus; that science has debunked such doctrines; and that no intelligent person today believes in them. They are not telling the truth. The march of modern science cannot touch the question of spiritual personalities. They are beyond the range of sense-perception. And tens of thousands of intelligent persons do believe in their guardian angels. Meantime those who deny the existence of devils and angels feel the need of inventing thousands of both classes for themselves, and speak of their “squander-bugs” and “litter-bugs” and “gremlins”; and they carry mascots and charms and other lucky tokens which they imagine to have some protecting influence over them. Or they give themselves up to astrology, and invoke the stars and planets! They should be the last in the world to speak of make-believe. And their opinions afford no reason for hesitancy in dragging out our guardian angels in public, and openly professing our belief in them, and reliance upon them.

Let us remember sensibly that man stands neither at the bottom, nor at the top of creation. He may be superior to stones, and vegetables and animals. But amongst intelligent creatures he stands on the lowest rung of the ladder. He has been made a little lower than the angels. He has a less perfect grade of intelligence than theirs. And he needs their help.

To think otherwise is to be disarmed for the spiritual struggle; it is to insult Christ Our Lord who, as God, knows our condition in this world, and our need of the assistance our guardian angels can render us; and it is to depart from the Christian tradition maintained unflinchingly through all the ages by the Eastern and Western Churches alike.

A VITAL DOCTRINE.

As a matter of fact, this Christian teaching about the angels is of vital importance for our spiritual lives. We all tend to narrow down religion to this small planet and its petty interests. It is almost second nature for us to live by our senses only, and to behave as if God’s creation stopped short with the material and human world. To say that the world was “made for man” only too easily yields place to the poor and quite erroneous notion that man was made for this material world, and for nothing beyond it.

But the doctrine of the angels widens our horizon, and invites us to lift up our eyes and our hearts. It bids us rise above the earthly tumults and miseries which so easily obsess us. It tells us that religion, at its full span, goes beyond all merely temporal and passing interests, beyond even our own self-love; and that the soul of religion is essentially the worship and adoration of God—that primary duty of both angels and men.

CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGES.

Our belief in the angels should, indeed, be a source of immense consolation to us. We are not entombed in a closed world, from which there will never be any possibility of escape. The stone of the sepulchre in which materialists say we are buried is rolled away. Our knowledge of the angels assures us that we are a part, and only a very small imperfect part, of a great and varied company of spirits filling the universe, and making it the living organ of God's praise. Yet, whilst the angels are intelligences with powers of which we can scarcely conceive, the assurance of Holy Scripture that we are made "a little lower than the angels" is given us, not so much as a motive of humility, but as an encouragement and consolation. We are made immeasurably higher than any other beings on the face of the earth. Our souls are of the spirit-world. We have affiliations and responsibilities beyond the farthest reaches of the material universe. And it is the greatest of our privileges that with the angels, and all the company of heaven, we praise and magnify God's Holy Name. How good it is for us sometimes to think of the unknown splendours and mighty inhabitants of that supernatural world which enfolds and penetrates us, trying to breathe the same bracing air!

SPIRIT OF THE CHURCH.

All these things the Church does her utmost to keep before us in her incomparable liturgy. In the Mass and the Divine Office she bids us celebrate the Feasts of St. Michael, of St. Gabriel, and of St. Raphael, the glorious Archangels whose names have been revealed to us in the pages of Holy Scripture. In her Litany of the Saints she appeals to "all holy Angels and Archangels," to "all holy orders of blessed spirits," to intercede with God on our behalf. Aware that we are called to take part in that immense conflict of good and evil spirits ranging from heaven to hell, she prays after Mass, in words familiar to every Catholic, "Blessed Michael the Archangel, defend us in the hour of conflict. Be our safeguard against the wickedness and the snares of the devil. May God restrain him, we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, thrust Satan down to hell, and with him the other wicked spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls." Nor does she forget those good spirits appointed to watch over us and protect us. In the Mass for the Feast of the Guardian Angels she prays, "O God Who, in Thine unspeakable providence, dost vouchsafe to send Thy holy angels to keep watch over us: grant to us Thy suppliants that we may always be shielded by their protection, and may rejoice in their company in eternity. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen." But if we are to be in the company of the angels for all eternity surely we should try to be familiar with them now, and seek their help, not arriving in their midst as complete strangers to them, never having known them, never having loved them, never having blended our voices with theirs and theirs with our own in the praise and worship of God.

THREEFOLD DUTY

If angels are appointed by God to care for us, we must have some reciprocal duties towards them. And St. Bernard sums up our duties by declaring that we owe them reverence for their presence, love for their interest in us, and confidence in their protection. They are present to us, whether we are thinking of them or not. If people say they do not believe in the existence of the angels, that makes no difference to the existence of angels. They go on existing, and go on caring even for the incredulous so long as those incredulous people still live on in this world, And they save many a soul whom we, blind and impatient as we are, might believe to have been lost forever. But we, who are not incredulous, who do believe in the angels, should try to be more mindful of their presence than we are. For theirs is not a passive presence. They never weary in their efforts to enlighten us, to warn us, to move us to sorrow for sin, and to hunger for God. And we would be more aware of their influence upon our minds and hearts if only we adverted to their presence more than we do.

We would be more grateful to them, and more ready to invoke their further aid with a trust and confidence which would banish many of our fears, and fill us with consolation whatever the afflictions and trials we might have to endure.

All that I have said may seem to require of us a good deal of childlike simplicity. But if so, it is demanding no more of us than Christ Himself declared to be absolutely necessary for our salvation. He never suggests that it is necessarily the most efficient, intelligent, or most self-sufficient person who is most pleasing to God, or most fit for eternal life. That is one of the foolish illusions of the natural man. With Our Lord, the thing that counts is a sense of total dependence on God. He tells us that we must all become as little children. The typical Christian for Him would be the small helpless child at the baptismal font, not the learned and possibly vain-glorious philosopher or theologian. His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor our ways His. Far better to go lame and blind into heaven than to be very capable and clear-sighted and sure of yourself—and end up on the rubbish-heap! “I give Thee thanks, Father,” He once said, “because Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to little ones.” We must all become as little children; not childish, of course, but childlike. And if, as Our Lord declared, our Angels always see the face of Our Father in heaven, then to think of our Angels, and to love them, and to rely upon them, asking their protection and prayers, must be of the greatest assistance towards our own attaining some day to that same everlasting and beatific Vision of God.

Nihil obstat:

D.P. MURPHY,
Censor Deputatus.

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