

The Angels

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Ministers of God and Companions of the Church

The Pre-Servant must think rightly about the angels for three reasons.

First, Scripture assumes that we know them. The Bible opens with the cherub at Eden's gate and closes with the angel of Revelation, and across the sixty-six books in between the ministry of angels is woven as a steady thread. A servant who cannot speak of angels is a servant who cannot teach the whole counsel of God.

Second, the life of the Church cannot be understood apart from them. The Divine Liturgy names them by rank; our hymns address them by name; the feasts of Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Suriel, and the Four Incorporeal Creatures are woven into the Coptic calendar; every sanctuary is furnished with the Cherubim above the ark of the altar. A pre-servant who does not know this will not be able to explain the church to the children who sit in her pews.

Third, the world is suffering a strange re-paganization in which angels are turned into sentimental mascots or occult intermediaries. The Church's sober and scriptural teaching is the medicine for this fever.

The aim of this lesson is not merely informational. As the Church prays in the Liturgy of St. Gregory, "Those who are in this place, conform them to Your angels" — that is, make us like them. To study the angels rightly is to be shown, in a living icon, what obedience, praise, service, and courage look like when they are perfected. We study them so that we may imitate them.

What the Scriptures Say About the Angels

The foundation of our teaching is not popular imagination but the written Word. The Scriptures speak of the angels plainly, often, and without embarrassment. They are creatures — not eternal, not divine, not to be worshipped — and yet they are mighty, bright, holy, and close to God.

"Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire." Psalm 104:4

The word itself — ἄγγελος in Greek, malak in Hebrew — means simply "messenger." The name describes an office rather than a nature; it tells us not what they are in themselves but what they are in relation to us and to God. St. Augustine observes this clearly: angel, he says, is the name of the ministry, not of the essence. Their essence is spirit; their office is messenger.

"Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" Hebrews 1:14

Every word in that verse deserves attention. They are ministering — they serve. They are spirits — bodiless. They are sent — they do not come on their own errands. And the ones to whom they are sent are precisely those who will inherit salvation. The angel is therefore the Church's friend by divine appointment.

The Nature of the Angels

The angels are created beings. They are not co-eternal with God. St. Gregory Nazianzen, preaching on the Nativity, teaches that God “first conceived the Heavenly and Angelic Powers. And this conception was a work fulfilled by His Word, and perfected by His Spirit” (Oration 38, “On the Theophany,” IX). Gathering what Scripture and the Fathers say of their nature, the Church has always confessed the angels to be intelligent spirits: rational minds who know and love God, not impersonal forces; possessed of free will, as their own history proves, since it was by this freedom that Satan and his host fell; incorporeal, having no bodies as we do, though they can, by divine power, take visible form to appear to men; and immortal, not because deathlessness belongs to their nature as it belongs to God's, but because it is a gift of His grace. Each of these truths repays meditation.

Intelligent: the angels know; they are rational minds, not impersonal forces.

Endued with free will: they have chosen; and it was by this choice that the fall of Satan and his host became possible.

Incorporeal: they have no bodies in the sense that we do; they are pure spirits, though they can, by divine power, take form to appear to men.

Serving God: their life is leitourgia, the liturgy of adoration and obedience.

Immortal by grace: they cannot die, yet their deathlessness is a gift, not a property of their essence.

Because they have no bodies, the angels do not occupy space and are not bound by it as we are. They are not limited by distance, roads, buildings, or time the way physical creatures are; their movement is better compared to the movement of a thought than to travel through space. In this same immediate way, the angels carry out the will of God: the moment He commands, they are there; the moment He asks, they respond.

On the question of whether the good angels can still sin, St. Augustine's own judgment, given in his commentary on Genesis, is the Church's anchor: “there is in the holy angels that nature which cannot sin” (De Genesi ad Litteram, Book XI). Because they chose God with the whole depth of a free and rational nature, and because they now behold Him without any veil between, the angels who remained faithful rest in Him without wavering; their freedom was not destroyed by this, but perfected, in the same way that a will fixed wholly on the good is more free, not less.

Instant and unquestioning obedience

This immediacy of the angels is not simply a curiosity of their nature; it is a moral example. Scripture repeatedly shows the angels obeying God's word the instant it is given, without hesitation, without

complaint, and without demanding an explanation of commands that might, in human terms, seem difficult or severe.

When Sodom and Gomorrah had given themselves over entirely to sin, Abraham interceded before God, questioning whether the city might be spared. God, who does not err, sent two angels to Sodom — one work to rescue Lot, another to execute judgment on the city (Genesis 19). In the days of Hezekiah, “the angel of the LORD went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand” in a single night, delivering God’s people (2 Kings 19:35). An angel struck down the firstborn of Egypt in a night, in the great deliverance of Exodus. And when Herod accepted the praise of the crowd as though he were a god, “immediately an angel of the LORD struck him, because he did not give glory to God” (Acts 12:23).

These same angels also deliver mercy with the same instancy. The angel who announced to Zacharias that his son would prepare the way of the Lord acted immediately and joyfully — but when Zacharias doubted, the angel just as immediately sealed his mouth in silence until the child was born (Luke 1:11-20).

The lesson for the servant is not that God delights in severity, but that the angels model a total, unhesitating yielding to the will of God, whether that will is experienced as comfort or as correction. When we pray “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we are asking to do the will of God the way it is done in heaven — immediately, without grumbling, without doubt. In this the angels are given to us as an example to imitate.

The Multitude of the Heavenly Host

Scripture does not number the angels; it overwhelms us with their multitude. Daniel sees before the Ancient of Days a scene that staggers the imagination.

“A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.” Daniel 7:10

The Epistle to the Hebrews takes up the same image and lays it upon every Christian assembly — we have come, the Apostle writes, “to an innumerable company of angels” (Hebrews 12:22). The liturgical tradition of the Church inherits this vision directly. In the anaphora attributed to St. Gregory the Theologian the priest lifts his voice and prays: “Thousands of thousands stand before You, and ten thousand times ten thousand offer You service.” What Daniel saw in **prophecy**, the Church sees in every Liturgy; what the seer of Revelation heard on Patmos, the deacon chants at the altar.

King David gives us their character as well as their number:

“Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word.” — Psalm 103:20

We are not taught how many they are; we are taught that they are many, and that our reckoning fails before their number. The practical effect of this doctrine is humility. The servant who remembers the

innumerable host will not be tempted to overrate his own presence in the church hall; he will know that the work of salvation is being carried by a company far greater than the roster of his own teachers.

Praise: The Highest Form of Prayer

The angels are not only obedient and numerous; they are, above all, worshippers. Their example is worth pausing over, because it teaches the servant something about the nature of prayer itself.

The Christian tradition recognizes several distinct kinds of prayer. There is supplication, in which we bring our requests before God. There is thanksgiving, in which we give thanks for what we have received. There is simple conversation with God, a two-way exchange in which we remain present as ourselves. There is intercession, in which our attention moves further from ourselves toward the needs of others. And there is praise, in which the one praying is no longer occupied with self or need at all, but only with the greatness and beauty of God Himself.

St. Paul commends the first two when he writes, “in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6) — these are good, necessary, and the most common forms of prayer among believers. But praise, in which nothing is asked and nothing is sought except to behold God as He is, holds a place of special honor, because it asks for nothing but is content simply to know Him and declare what it sees.

This is the work of the angels above all others, and it finds its fullest expression in the Cherubim. In the anaphora of the Liturgy of St. Basil the Church prays: “You are He around whom stand the Cherubim full of eyes, and the Seraphim with six wings, praising continuously.” To be full of eyes is not merely to see everything; it is to have one's whole attention fixed, undistracted, on God alone. Ezekiel's vision of the Cherubim (Ezekiel 1, 10) presents them as wholly given over to beholding the divine glory, missing nothing. Because they know Him so fully, they can do nothing else but declare, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of Your glory” (Isaiah 6:3). Knowledge of God, carried to its fullness, issues necessarily in praise — one cannot be amazed by what one has not first come to know.

The Angelic Hierarchy

The Church has received, chiefly from St. Dionysius the Areopagite and after him from St. Gregory the Theologian, a teaching that the heavenly host is arranged in nine orders, gathered in three triads. This is not a human speculation imposed upon the Scriptures; it is a reading drawn from them. Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and 10, Colossians 1:16, Ephesians 1:21, Romans 8:38, and 1 Thessalonians 4:16 together name each of the nine ranks, and the Liturgy gathers them together in a single confession: “Before whom stand the angels, the archangels, the principalities, the authorities, the thrones, the dominions, and the powers.”

Triad	Orders	Office
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Highest — nearest to God	Seraphim, Thrones	Cherubim,	The orders of immediate adoration — the ceaseless Sanctus, the fiery love, the knowledge of the divine mysteries.
Middle — governors of the created order	Dominions, Powers	Virtues,	The orders that administer the providence of God over creation and restrain the rebellious spirits.
Nearest to man	Principalities, Archangels, Angels		The orders that watch over nations, deliver the messages of God to men, and are assigned as guardians to the faithful.

The pattern is instructive: the higher the order, the closer to God; the lower the order, the closer to us. This means that the angels who are our familiar companions are not lesser in dignity, but nearer in office — they are the ones sent forth, carrying our prayers up and bringing the Lord's messages down.

Each order has its particular character:

The Seraphim, whose name means “the burning ones,” are wholly consumed with the love of God; Isaiah sees them with six wings and hears them cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The Cherubim, full of eyes, behold the glory of God without ceasing, missing no part of it. The Thrones bear the majesty of God as a living seat of His glory. Scripture describes this highest order as fire-like: “For our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29); “His throne was a flame of fire” (Daniel 7:9); “Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flaming fire” (Psalm 104:4). To be nearest to God is to be, in a sense, set ablaze by His presence.

The Dominions direct the good order of the other angels, granting prudent governance and wise management to the ranks below them. The Virtues (also called Authorities) work miracles and impart the grace of miracle-working to those found worthy. The Powers hold authority over the demonic realm, restraining evil spirits and repelling the temptations they bring, and they help the faithful who struggle with sin to cast out evil thoughts.

The Principalities direct the lower angels and are entrusted with the oversight of nations, kingdoms, and peoples. The Archangels are the heralds of good news; they receive the prophecies and understanding of God's will from the higher orders and announce them to the lowest order. The Angels, nearest of all to man, announce the lesser mysteries and intentions of God, teach the faithful to live righteously, and are appointed as guardians over each of us who believe.

The Ministry of the Angels: Messengers of God

If the name of the angels is messenger, then their chief office is to carry the Word of God. The pages of Scripture are full of their errands. An angel closes the gate of Eden. Three angels dine with Abraham at the oaks of Mamre and announce the birth of Isaac. An angel stays Abraham's hand on Mount Moriah. An angel goes before the camp of Israel in the wilderness. An angel feeds and strengthens Elijah under

the juniper tree when he is in despair after Jezebel's threats (1 Kings 19:5-7). Gabriel stands by Daniel to explain the vision. Gabriel comes to Zacharias in the temple to announce the birth of John the Forerunner, and comes again to the Virgin at Nazareth, to Elizabeth, to Joseph the Righteous, and to Tobias — bringing, in each case, good news that prepares the way of salvation. An angel speaks to the shepherds at Bethlehem and lets loose the multitude of the heavenly host in the Gloria. Angels minister to our Lord after the temptation. An angel strengthens Him in Gethsemane. An angel rolls away the stone. Angels speak to the myrrh-bearers. Two men in white stand by the disciples at the Ascension. An angel opens the prison doors for the Apostles. An angel directs Philip toward the Ethiopian eunuch. An angel appears to Cornelius. An angel stands by Paul in the storm. Angels open and close the whole of the Apocalypse.

This is not a scattered collection of ornamental incidents; it is a consistent testimony that God speaks to man by the mediation of His servants, and that every epoch of salvation history has its angelic attendants. It also teaches that the angel is the minister of the Word, never a rival to it — every angelic message points to Christ, never to itself.

“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” — Galatians 1:8

The Church therefore receives no new revelation on the word of an angel. The canon is closed, and the true angels of God are content to point always to the Son. This same ministry of the word extends into the life of the Church: in the Book of Revelation, God sends messages through angels to seven churches, each carrying a word of correction, rebuke, or encouragement, aimed always at the growth of the people's faith. This is the pattern of angelic ministry in every age — to protect and strengthen the faith of God's people through the Word rightly delivered.

The Ministry of the Angels: Guardians of the Faithful

A second great office of the angels is guardianship. The Lord Himself, when warning His disciples against despising the little ones, spoke a sentence that the Church has treasured above every private revelation:

“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.” — Matthew 18:10

From this word, and from the testimony of Acts 12 — where the disciples, hearing that Peter is at the gate, say “It is his angel” — the Church has confessed that every soul has a guardian angel from birth, even though this has never been settled by dogmatic definition; it is, rather, the constant mind of the Church. St. Jerome expresses this common conviction memorably: “How great the dignity of the soul, since each one has from his birth an angel commissioned to guard it” (Commentary on Matthew, Book II, on 18:10). Not every Father framed the teaching the same way: St. Basil, in his Homily on Psalm 43, held the narrower view that this privilege belongs especially to Christians rather than to every soul without exception — a reminder that this particular point, while widely held, was not stated with

perfect uniformity across the Fathers. This guardianship falls, fittingly, to the order nearest to man in the ninefold hierarchy already described — the order called simply “Angels” — so that the rank nearest to us in the heavenly host is also nearest to us in office.

“The Angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.” — Psalm 34:7

“For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” — Psalm 91:11-12

Scripture and the life of the saints supply this teaching with vivid illustration. At the pool of Bethesda, the sick waited every year for an angel to stir the water, trusting in the healing power God worked through it (John 5:1-4). Lot is drawn out of Sodom by the hand of angels. Daniel is preserved in the lions' den because his angel shuts their mouths. When Elisha's servant Gehazi saw the city of Dothan surrounded by an enemy army and was afraid, Elisha told him, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them,” and prayed that the servant's eyes be opened — and Gehazi saw the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15-17). The Patriarch Jacob, blessing the sons of Joseph, speaks of “the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil” (Genesis 48:16) — a fitting testimony from a man whose life had been marked by betrayal, slavery, imprisonment, and long years of being forgotten before he rose to stand at Pharaoh's right hand. Joseph could look back over that entire history and recognize the constant, quiet protection of an angel at his side.

The guardianship of angels is both protective and formative — they do not merely shield the faithful from harm but form them toward virtue, precisely as a guardian is charged with the whole well-being of the one entrusted to their care. This is why the Church, in her daily prayers, concludes by asking: “Surround us by Your holy angels, that, by their camp, we may be guarded and guided.” And because we who study the angels are called also to resemble them, this same work of guarding becomes our own responsibility toward those weaker than ourselves — most immediately, our own children. In the commandment given to parents at baptism, the Church charges them to guard their children from unsuitable places and influences. To guard the young in this way is itself an angelic work, and it belongs to every servant.

Angels as Warriors

The angels are also warriors, and this office belongs particularly to Michael, the archangel who leads the armies of heaven against the dragon and his angels (Revelation 12:7). The traditional icon of Michael standing over the defeated devil expresses this truth, but Scripture and tradition also show him and the angelic host contending against armies and nations, not merely against the devil alone. It is for this reason that the Church commemorates the Archangel Michael on the twelfth day of every Coptic month.

This same warrior ministry protects what is holy. In the Liturgy, an angel of the sacrifice attends the altar from the moment of the offering, guarding the sanctity of what is being consecrated until it is presented before God.

The account of Elisha and Gehazi, already mentioned above, belongs equally to this theme: the servant saw only the visible army surrounding them, but Elisha, aware of the greater and unseen reality, could say with confidence, “those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:16). The Book of Judith gives the same confidence: “As the Lord lives, His angel has been my keeper” (Judith 13:20).

For the servant, the lesson is one of steadiness rather than fear. Every believer has a guardian angel who stands ready to contend on their behalf, particularly in the moment of temptation. The Christian who is tempted toward sin, or afraid before it, is not fighting alone; the same host that fought for Elisha and for Judith surrounds every soul that fears the Lord.

The Angels in the Divine Liturgy

The sharpest lesson in angelology is not found in a book but in the Liturgy. When the veil of the sanctuary is drawn and the deacon cries “Stand in awe,” the Church is reminded that she does not stand alone before the altar. The anaphora lifts the congregation to the scene of Isaiah's vision; the Sanctus is the Cherubic and Seraphic hymn, and the congregation is invited to join its voice to theirs — “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.” The censer is offered for the living and the departed, and in the fraction of the Liturgy of St. Basil the priest prays that the sacrifice may ascend “upon Your rational altar in heaven” by the hand of the angel of the sacrifice.

Every part of the Eucharistic building witnesses to this. The Cherubim are carved above the ark of the altar; the curtain of the sanctuary recalls the cherubic embroidery on the tabernacle curtain (Exodus 26:31); the icon of the Archangel Michael stands in every Coptic church because Michael is the prince of the heavenly host and the guardian of the Church. On the twelfth day of every Coptic month the Church commemorates the Archangel Michael, and on the twenty-second day the Archangel Gabriel; the Feast of the Four Incorporeal Creatures is kept on Hatour 8, and the whole host is named together in the Doxology of the Angels sung at the Midnight Praise.

A servant who prepares children for their first confession and communion, or who stands at the pulpit to preach, does well to remember this architecture. The church building is a theology in stone and wood; it teaches the faithful that the Liturgy on earth is the Liturgy in heaven, and that they have come up, in Christ, to an innumerable company of angels.

The Archangels Named in Scripture and Tradition

Scripture names two archangels directly. Michael is named in the Book of Daniel as the great prince who stands for the people of God (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1), in the Epistle of Jude as the one who disputed with the devil about the body of Moses (Jude 9), and in the Apocalypse as the leader of the

angelic army that casts down the dragon (Revelation 12:7). His name means “Who is like God?” — a cry of warfare against every idolatry.

Gabriel is named as the angel of the Annunciation — to Daniel (Daniel 8:16; 9:21), to Zacharias (Luke 1:19), and to the Theotokos (Luke 1:26). His name means “God is my strength.” The Church sings of him as the minister of the Incarnation, for it was by his voice that the consent of Mary sounded in the world.

The Book of Tobit names Raphael, “the medicine of God,” who walks with Tobias and heals the eyes of Tobit (Tobit 12:15). The Coptic tradition, reading the vision of the seven angels who stand before the throne (Revelation 8:2) together with Tobit 12:15, also names Suriel, Sedakiel, Sarathiel, and Ananiel; and the Four Incorporeal Creatures who surround the throne in Ezekiel and the Apocalypse — the Living Creatures with the faces of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle — are commemorated together as the chief witnesses of the Lamb.

The Fallen Angels

The Church confesses with equal firmness that there are fallen angels. They are not eternal enemies of God — for there is no dualism in Christian theology — but creatures who, having been made good, abused the freedom given them and fell irretrievably from grace. Our Lord speaks of them plainly:

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” — Luke 10:18

St. Peter writes of “the angels who sinned,” whom God “cast down to hell and delivered into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment” (2 Peter 2:4), and St. Jude speaks of “the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode” (Jude 6). The Apocalypse names “the great dragon, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan,” and his angels (Revelation 12:9).

Three truths safeguard the believer here. First, the devil is a creature — mighty, but made; fearful, but defeated. Second, his fall is final — unlike man, the fallen angel is not offered a path of repentance, for he sinned with the whole depth of his nature and without the mitigation of ignorance or weakness. Third, his power is permitted, not sovereign; he can tempt but cannot compel, he can accuse but cannot condemn, he can rage but cannot win. In the Liturgy, the priest breathes upon the water at Baptism and prays, “Every adverse power, every assault of the devil, be trampled under the feet of Your servant,” and the child comes up out of the font clothed with Christ. This is the father’s weapon and the servant’s confidence.

How the Servant Teaches the Angels to the Faithful

Knowing these things, the servant has a simple and sober catechesis to give.

We teach children that they are not alone — that a good angel walks with them by the gift of God, and that they may speak to God with the confidence of a child whose hand is held.

We teach that angels are creatures, not gods; we venerate them as we venerate the saints, but we worship God alone. We do not make angels into deities, and we do not make them into mascots.

We teach that angels are messengers of God — therefore we listen for their message in the Word of God read and preached, and we do not chase after private visions or sensational encounters. The true angel preaches Christ.

We teach that every Divine Liturgy is a meeting with the angels — and we prepare the children to sing the Thrice-Holy with reverence, knowing whose song they are joining.

We teach that the devil is real but defeated — we do not minimize him, lest we be caught off guard, and we do not magnify him, lest we forget the victory of the Cross.

We teach the names of the Archangels and the feasts of the Church — so that the catechumen grows up feeling at home in the household of heaven.

The true mark of the spiritual child is that he feels comfortable in the company of the saints and the angels — they are his family. This is the sort of formation the servant is called to give.



Review Questions

1. Angels are messengers of God, True or False? (A: True)
2. Which angels are the closest to God? (A: The Thrones, Cherubim and seraphim, these are the ones that are closest to God. They stand in closest proximity to God.)
3. What do the Dominions dominate over? (A: The Dominions dominate the rest of the angels. They send down power for prudent governing and wise management to authorities.)
4. What do the Principalities do? (A: The Principalities direct the lower angels. They are entrusted with the management of the universe and the keeping of all the kingdoms and principedoms, of lands and all peoples, races and nations.)
5. What are the roles of the Archangels? (A: The Archangels are the heralds of good news, they reveal prophecies, knowledge, and understanding of God's will which they receive from the higher orders of angels and announce to the lower order.)
6. What do the rest of the Angels do? (The Angels are the lowest of all the orders and the closest to man. They announce the lesser mysteries and intentions of God and teach people to live virtuously and righteous before God.)
7. Why is The Cherubim full of eyes? (A: Their eyes are focused, not on us, but on God. Full of eyes, looking at God! They are soaking in everything! Looking at Him, not missing a single detail.)