

THE HOLY ANGELS OF GOD

BY THE REV. M. J. WATSON, S.J.

"Bless the Lord, all ye His Angels you that are mighty in strength, and execute His word, hearkening to the voice of His orders."—Psalm cii. 2.

A STRIKING feature of the history of the human race, as set forth for our instruction and contemplation in the Bible, is the kindly dealing of Angels with men. We read that the holy spirits, appearing in visible forms on certain important occasions, made known how the Creator's Will was to be carried into effect for man's benefit in time and eternity. As those sublime intelligences are to be our companions in bliss and glory throughout the endless years of our life in heaven, it is assuredly fitting that here on earth we should try to know and love beings so worthy of esteem for their peerless perfection and of gratitude and affection for the many benefits they confer on man.

Angels are the most noble and beautiful creations of God's wisdom and power; they are princes of heaven, and the brightest images of Divine excellence. Not imprisoned, as men are, in corruptible bodies, they are all pure spirits, like God Himself, and are endowed with surpassing natural and supernatural gifts. Man, in his nature, is inferior to them in every way; he is made, the Scripture declares, "less than the Angels"; but when, after death, we are delivered from the bonds of corruption, we shall share in their privileges and their glory.

In the beginning, the Angels did not see God face to face; that Beatific Vision was to be the reward of their obedience and humility. That their love of God might be tested, they were subjected to a trial. As is generally believed the Son of God, in His future Incarnation as man, was proposed to them as the object of their adoration. No doubt, God the Son, considered merely in His human nature, with a body formed of the dust of the earth, was inferior to the Angels, who were spirits; but that human nature, by reason of its union with the Divinity, was worthy of their profound veneration and worship. Lucifer, one of the chief Angels, seeing his own excellence, was puffed up with pride, and refused to obey; but Michael and the spirits faithful to God, preserved by reverence and truth in true humility, fought against the rebels and cast them into the prison "which was prepared for the devil and his angels." "I saw," said Our Lord Jesus Christ, "Satan like lightning falling from heaven."

God's Holy Angels, as the reward of their fidelity, were admitted to gaze upon their Creator with unclouded knowledge. Standing in His presence and inflamed with perfect love, they are clothed with surpassing splendour, and thrill with complete and eternal happiness, which is ever fresh and new. Most worthy are those glorious beings of our reverence, Being spirits, we cannot see them with our eyes of flesh, but when, by Divine permission, they make themselves visible to men, they always appear under a noble and gracious form, as if their beauty, incapable of being wholly concealed, breaks through the external appearance they assume. Thus, the Bible tells us that the Angel Raphael showed himself to Tobias as "a beautiful young man." King Nabuchodonosor saw an Angel whose majestic and dazzling loveliness could belong to none, he thought, but the Son of God. When the prophet Daniel stood one day by the great river Tigris, he beheld an Angel who was apparelled in snow-white linen, girt with cincture of finest gold: "his body was like the chrysolite, and his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as a burning lamp; and his arms and all downward, even to the feet, like in appearance to glittering brass, and the voice of his word like the voice of a multitude" (Dan. x. 4, 8). Consternation seized the prophet, and his strength ebbing away, he fell on the earth and held his face close to the ground. The Angel gently raised him to his feet and gave him strength to hear a message from God regarding the coming of the promised Messiah.

Each human being has an Angel to stand ever by his side and help him to resist temptation and win the Kingdom of Heaven. How much we owe our Guardian Angels! They preserve us from many unknown dangers to soul and body. They defend us against the demons. They breathe holy thoughts into our soul; they prompt us to deeds, even heroic deeds, of virtue, in the Divine service, and they fling their mighty strength around us when we are dying and so save us from the last attacks of our spiritual foes. Full of zeal and jealous are they for God's honour, for the interest of those committed to their care, and for the innocence of the young. "Beware," says Our Saviour, "of giving scandal to those little ones; for their Angels always behold the face of My Father who is in heaven." St. Bernard tells us that we owe our Angels profound respect for their presence, and confidence in their love and power to protect us, as well as gratitude for the great benefits which they confer. The heavenly spirits look upon themselves as our elder brothers;

nay, to speak in our human way, they are passionate lovers of all whom God has charged them to guard. St. Paul says: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent to minister for them who shall receive the inheritance of salvation?" (Heb. i. 14). And in the 90th Psalm, the Holy Ghost declares: "No evil shall approach unto thee, neither shall the scourge come nigh thy dwelling. For He hath given His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways: in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest haply thou dash thy foot against a stone." Through this angelic guardianship, "thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk; the lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under foot." Thus do they watch over each individual soul, even if that soul is in a state of sin, and they act as protectors to hamlets, cities and kingdoms. In the Book of Exodus (xiii. 21) we see how, in the desert, an Angel of God went before the people to show the way by day in a pillar of cloud, and by night in a pillar of fire, that he might be the guide of their journey at both times. We may, indeed, say that this earth of ours is full of innumerable spirits to defend all who are specially dear to God. When an army, with horses and chariots, beset the city of Samaria to slay the prophet Eliseus, and the prophet's servant cried out in terror, Eliseus prayed: "Lord, open his eyes that he may see." And the Lord opened the eyes of the servant and he saw, and behold the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Eliseus. And the prophet said: "Fear not, for, as thou seest, there are more with us than with them " (4 Kings, chap. vi.). Also, when Sennacherib, the King of the Assyrians, marched with a mighty army against Jerusalem, an Angel of the Lord protected the city, and entering in the night into the Assyrian camp, slew one hundred and eighty-five thousand men; and Sennacherib departed and returned to his own land. This event is graphically described by the poet:—

For the angel of death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed on the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers wax'd deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved and for ever grew still.
And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broken in the temples of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, smote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord.

The prophet Zachary represents the Angels as declaring: "We have walked through the earth, and behold all the earth is inhabited and at rest" (i. II). Thus, by day and by night, there are countless angelic guardians that fill this world of ours and keep watch both when we wake and when we sleep. In the works of Cardinal Newman a beautiful passage dwells upon this fact of the Angels' unresting watchfulness in their ministry among men and of their unceasing operations in the sphere of nature and of grace. The passage referred to is here quoted in full:-

When we survey Almighty God surrounded by His Holy Angels, His thousand-thousands of ministering spirits, and ten thousand times ten thousand standing before Him, the idea of His awful majesty rises before us more powerfully and impressively; we begin to see how little we are, how altogether mean and worthless in ourselves, and how high He is and fearful.

The very lowest of His Angels is indefinitely above us in this our present state; how high then must be the Lord of Angels! The very Seraphim hide their faces before His glory while they praise Him; how shamefaced, then, should sinners be when they come into His presence! Thus, whenever we look abroad, we are reminded of those most gracious and holy beings, the servants of the Holiest, who deign to minister to the heirs of salvation. Every breath of air and ray of light and heat, every beautiful prospect is, as it were, the skirts of their garments, the waving of the robes of those whose faces see God in heaven, and I put it to anyone whether it is not as philosophical, and as full of intellectual enjoyment, to refer the movements of the natural world to them as to attempt to explain them by certain theories of science, useful as these theories certainly are for particular purposes, and capable (in subordination to that higher view) of a religious application.

Suppose an inquirer into Nature, when examining a flower, or a herb, or a pebble, or a ray of light, which he treats as something beneath him in the scale of existence, suddenly discovered that he was in the presence of some powerful being, who was hidden behind the visible things he was inspecting, who, though concealing his wise hand, was giving them their beauty, grace, and perfection, as being God's instrument for the purpose, nay, whose robe and ornament those wondrous objects were which he was so eager to analyse, what would be his thoughts? Should we but

accidentally show a rudeness of manner towards our fellowman, tread on the hem of his garment, or brush roughly against him, are we not vexed, not as if we had hurt him, but from the fear we have of having been disrespectful? David had watched the awful pestilence three days, not with curious eyes, but doubtless with indescribable terror and remorse; but when at length he lifted up his eyes, and saw the Angel of the Lord (who caused the pestilence) stand between the earth and the heavens, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem, then David and the elders who were clothed in sackcloth fell upon their faces. The mysterious, irresistible pestilence became still more fearful when its cause was known. And what is true of the painful is true, on the other hand, of the pleasant and attractive operations of Nature. When, then, we walk abroad and meditate in the field at eventide, how much has every herb and flower in it to surprise and overwhelm us? For, even did we know as much about them as the wisest of men, yet there are those around us, though unseen, to whom our greatest knowledge is as ignorance; and when we converse on the subjects of Nature, scientifically repeating the names of plants and earths, and describing their properties, we should do so religiously, as in the hearing of the great servants of God, with the sort of diffidence which we always feel when speaking before the learned and wise of our own mortal race, as poor beginners in intellectual knowledge as well as in moral attainments.

—"Parochial Sermons," Vol. II., Sermon 29.

The Angelic Spirits are divided into Nine Choirs, mentioned in Holy Scripture. 1. The Seraphim, whose distinguishing characteristic is burning love for God. 2. The Cherubim, who possess a wondrous knowledge of God and of His infinite beauty. 3. The Thrones, the representatives of God's Majesty. 4. The Dominations: they teach that the true way to hold rule or dominion and to reign is to serve God, and so possess true liberty, or freedom from passion and sin, and from the slavery of the devil. 5. The Virtues, who represent God's Might, and impart strength and fortitude in the Divine service. 6. The Powers: they restrain the malice, craft, and power of the demons, lead men to obey all lawful authority for God's sake. 7. The Principalities, the guardians of provinces, kingdoms, and peoples. 8. The Archangels, the captains of the heavenly armies, are sent by the Most High as His messengers to men. 9. The Angels: from this, the lowest Choir, the Guardians of individual human beings are taken, although it may be that Guardian Angels are appointed, also, from the higher Choirs.

We read in the Apocalypse (i. 4, iv. 5) of seven spirits who stand always before the Throne of God. The three mighty Angels, whose names are given in the Bible, belong to this glorious company—St. Michael ("Who is like God?"), the conqueror of Lucifer; St. Gabriel ("the Strength of God"), the ambassador of the Incarnation; and St. Raphael, endowed with the power to heal all infirmity and the ravages of sin, whose name signifies "the Medicine of God." Some say that the Angel who slew the host of Sennacherib, was St. Uriel ("the Strong Companion"), but his name is not mentioned in the Bible.

Volumes have been written on the Holy Angels, full of most interesting matter; but even the slight and imperfect sketch in this pamphlet may serve to show how worthy of serious attention is devotion to those Heavenly Princes, and how we ought to take to heart the advice of Pope St. Leo the Great, "Confirmate amicitias cum sanctis angelis"—"Make friendships with the Holy Angels." Certainly, no earthly friends can vie with them in goodness, in power, and in love for men. Therefore, all through life we should regard them as our most faithful friends, and invoke their help daily in prosperity and affliction.

NOTE.—An easy way to practice devotion to these Nine Choirs is, on Sunday to honour (by asking their prayers) the Seraphim, the Cherubim, and the Thrones; on Monday, the Holy Dominations; on Tuesday, the Holy Virtues; on Wednesday, the Holy Powers; on Thursday, the Holy Principalities; on Friday, the Archangels; and, on Saturday, the Choir of Angels.

It is extraordinary what great benefits to body, mind and soul are obtained by sincere and persevering devotion to those Most Glorious Heavenly Princes.

APPENDIX

ST. PETER AND HIS GUARDIAN ANGEL.

(Acts of the Apostles, Chapter xii.)

And at the same time Herod the king stretched forth his hands, to afflict some of the Church. And he killed James

the brother of John with the sword. And seeing that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to take up Peter also. Now it was in the days of the azymes. And when he had apprehended him, he cast him into prison, delivering him to four files of soldiers to be kept, intending after the Pasch to bring him forth to the people. Peter, therefore, was kept in prison. But prayer was made without ceasing by the Church unto God for him.

And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And behold an Angel of the Lord stood by him: and a light shined in the room: and he striking Peter on the side raised him up, saying: Arise quickly. And the chains fell off from his hands. And the Angel said to him: Gird thyself, and put on thy sandals. And he did so. And he said to him: Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And going out he followed him, and he knew not that it was true which was done by the Angel: but thought he saw a vision. And passing through the first and the second ward, they came to the iron gate that leadeth to the city, which of itself opened to them. And going out, they passed on through one street: and immediately the Angel departed from him. And Peter coming to himself, said: Now I know in very deed that the Lord hath sent His Angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

And considering, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, who was surnamed Mark, where many were gathered together and praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, whose name was Rhode. And as soon as she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for joy, but running in she told that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her: Thou art mad. But she affirmed that it was so. Then said they it is his Angel. But Peter continued knocking. And when they had opened they saw him, and were astonished. But he, beckoning to them with his hand to hold their peace, told how the Lord had brought him out of prison and he said: Tell these things to James and to the brethren. And going out he went into another place.

Now when day was come there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not; having examined the keepers, he commanded they should be put to death: and going down from Judea to Cesarea, he abode there. And he was angry with the Tyrians and the Sidonians. But they with one accord came to him, and having gained Blastus, who was the king's chamberlain, they desired peace, because their countries were nourished by him. And upon a day appointed, Herod being arrayed in kingly apparel, sat in the judgment-seat, and made an oration to them. And the people made acclamation, saying: It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And forthwith an Angel of the Lord struck him, because he had not given the honour to God: and being eaten up by worms, he gave up the ghost. But the word of the Lord increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, having fulfilled their ministry, taking with them John, who was surnamed Mark.

ST. MICHAEL.

"There was a great battle in heaven; Michael and his Angels fought with the Dragon, and the Dragon fought and his Angels: and they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven."—Apoc. xii. 7, 8.

St. Michael, who is the guardian and patron of the Church, is considered to be the first of all the Angels in glory, and the most exalted of the Seraphim. He is called an Archangel when he acts as a messenger from God to men. The Lord has given him the office of defending the soul at death, conducting it to judgment, and leading it, if found pure enough, to the Kingdom of the Blessed.

The feast of St. Michael and all Angels is observed on September 29th, every year. A similar Feast, called the Apparition of St. Michael, falls on the 8th May. The Divine Office and Mass of the two Feasts are substantially the same.

SHORT PRAYERS.

Most glorious Prince, Michael the Archangel, be mindful of us: pray for us always, both here and everywhere, to the Son of God.

St. Michael, Archangel, defend us in the day of battle that we may not be lost in the dreadful judgment.

100 days' Indulgence.

(Leo XIII, 19th Aug., 1893.)

St. Michael, intercede for us that we may die a good death. Amen.

NOVENA TO ST. MICHAEL.

The Novena may be made at any time of the year, and with any form of prayers sanctioned by competent ecclesiastical authority.

300 days, each day.

Plenary, once during Novena.

(Pius IX, Nov. 26th, 1876.)

PRAYER TO ST. MICHAEL.

(From the prayers ordered by Pope Leo XIII to be said after Mass.)

Blessed Michael, Archangel, defend us in the hour of conflict; be our safeguard against the wickedness and 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. Amen.

ST. GABRIEL AND ST. RAPHAEL NOVENA.

A Novena to either of the Archangels may be made at any time of the year with any form of prayer sanctioned by competent ecclesiastical authority.

300 days, each day.

Plenary, once during the Novena.

(Pius IX, November 26th, 1876.)

PRAYER TO ST. RAPHAEL.

O Glorious Archangel, St. Raphael, great Prince of the heavenly court, illustrious for thy gifts of wisdom and grace, guide of those who journey by land or sea, consoler of the afflicted, and refuge of sinners; I beg thee to assist me in all my needs and in all the sufferings of this life, as once thou didst help the young Tobias on his travels. And because thou art the medicine of God, I humbly pray thee to heal the many infirmities of my soul, and the ills which afflict my body, if it be for my greater good. I specially ask of thee an angelic purity which may fit me to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

100 days' Indulgence, once a day.

(Leo XIII, June 21st, 1890.)

THE ANGEL GUARDIAN.

"He hath given His Angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways."—Psalm xc.

"Reverence your Angel Guardian," says St. Bernard, "on account of his presence. Never do anything in his sight that you would be ashamed of before an honourable man. Be grateful for the care he has of you. Have confidence in him, love him, and therefore turn to him and entreat his protection in all difficulties, dangers, and temptations."

The Church has appointed the 2nd October as the day to be observed in honour of the Guardian Angels. An indulgenced Novena (300 days each day, Plenary once) might be made in preparation for the Feast.

INVOCATION OF THE GUARDIAN ANGEL.

O Angel of God, whom God hath appointed to be my guardian, enlighten and protect, direct and govern me. Amen.

Angel of God, my guardian dear,

To whom His love commits me here,

Ever this day be at my side,

To light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen. 100 days' Indulgence.

Plenary on October 2nd, Feast of the Guardian Angels, if said daily, morning and evening, for a year.

Plenary, once a month.

Plenary (in articulo mortis—at the point of death) if frequently used.

(Pius VI, Brief, October 2nd, 1795; June 11th, 1796. Pius VII, May 15th, 1821.)

NOVENA TO THE GUARDIAN ANGEL.

The Novena may be made at any time, and with any form of prayer sanctioned by competent ecclesiastical authority.

300 days' Indulgence, each day.

Plenary, once during the Novena.

(Pius IX, November 26th, 1876.)

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