

# Entertaining Angels



## LESSON 1: An Introduction to Angels

**W**E KNOW THAT THERE IS MUCH more to life than meets the eye. Even in the physical order, there are components and even perhaps dimensions we cannot perceive with our bodily senses. Scientists reason their way to physical phenomena, sketching outlines and apparent effects when they don't have the instruments to see what's there. No one has seen a black hole, for example, yet astronomers and physicists tell us that such phenomena — or something quite like them — must exist. The universe doesn't make sense otherwise.

When it comes to our knowledge of angels, we are in a similar position. Since ancient times, great philosophers have reasoned their way to the existence of angels. Plato and Aristotle did so without the help of divine revelation. In the modern era, so did Isaiah Berlin and Mortimer Adler. Most of the world religions presume the existence of pure spirits, superhuman or semi-divine, that are actively involved in human activity, for good or for ill. The universe doesn't seem to make sense without them.

Every Sunday, Roman Catholics (like many other Christians) stand to profess our faith in God who created “all things visible and invisible.” We confess our sins

the presence of “all the angels and saints.” We hear Scripture readings that tell stories of angelic interventions in history. We sing hymns about angels — from “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name” to “On Eagle's Wings” — and we sing hymns that we have learned from angels: for example, the Gloria and the Sanctus.

Prayer is the very substance of our Christian faith. As the early Christians said: the law of prayer is the law of belief. If we were to describe a Catholic worldview based only on what we find in the prayers of the Mass and the readings of the lectionary,



we would conclude that angels are very important indeed in the everyday lives of Catholics and they should never be far from our thoughts.

We are in a better position to know about angels than Aristotle and Adler were because we proceed not merely from theory but from divine revelation. God has revealed much about angels in the pages of the Holy Bible and this in itself should signal to us their prominence in creation and their importance for our lives. God made them to be our guides and guardians, helpers and teachers. He created them to do for us all that they did for Moses, Joshua, Daniel, Jesus, and St. Peter. We shouldn't



## OLD TESTAMENT READING

*Genesis 28:10-13, 17-19*

Jacob left Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place, and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it ... Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it." And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none the gate of heaven." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel.

miss out on the help of these spirits just because we cannot see them. Nor, however, should we allow ourselves to fall into mistaken beliefs about angels when the truth has been revealed to us in Scripture.

Nowhere in the Bible, however, will you find a treatise on angels. Nowhere do the sacred authors give us the kind of systematic explanation we'd find in an encyclopedia or textbook. Rather, they assume that angels exist and that they have certain God-given characteristics and powers. Most of the books of the Bible mention the pure spirits, at least in passing; but it's up

to us to gather those scattered passages together to discern what God has revealed to us about angels.

We have great help as we do this, not only from the angels, but also from the Magisterium, the Church's teaching office. In the course of this study, we will be draw-



## POINTS TO PONDER

Jacob's vision reveals creation to have two dimensions, distinct but interrelated: the spiritual and the material; the heavenly and the earthly. Angels move freely between these two realms. Jesus confirms Jacob's vision and reveals himself to be the one who opens heaven to enable close fellowship between human beings and angels. These passages illuminate all the rest of Scripture with its frequent accounts of angelic activity.

## NEW TESTAMENT READING

*John 1:50-51*

Jesus answered [Nathanael], "Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

ing from Pope Blessed John Paul II's 1986 catechetical series on the angels and also from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and other official documents. Because of the personal predilections of the author of this study, we'll often consult the early Church Fathers as well, especially St. Augustine of Hippo. He was a profound interpreter of Scripture and a true friend of the holy angels.

However, before we look through the pages of Scripture to examine what angels do, it's good for us to know who they are and what they are. The most concise definition of "angel" is found in the supplementary glossary published with the U.S. edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. There we learn that an angel is:

*a spiritual, personal, and immortal creature, with intelligence and free*

*will, who glorifies God without ceasing and who serves God as a messenger of his saving plan.*

**Angels are *spiritual* beings. They have no material component.** Sometimes, for the benefit of human beings, angels will take on human form (See Tobit 5:4-6) or other quite intimidating forms (See Daniel 10:5 and following). But such appearances are temporary, and they are not essential to the angels' being. They assume these forms for a purpose, and they put them aside when the purpose is fulfilled, as we might put on a hat to go outside on a winter's day but take it off when we're back indoors.

**Human beings are composite** — composed of a material body and a spiritual soul. Angels are pure spirits.

God made purely spiritual beings as a superior expression of his likeness. Blessed John Paul II explained: "God who is absolutely perfect Spirit, is reflected especially in spiritual beings which *by nature*, that is *by reason of their spirituality*, are nearer to him than material creatures, and which constitute as it were the closest 'circle' to the Creator. Sacred Scripture offers abundant explicit evidence of this maximum closeness to God of the angels, who are spoken of figuratively as the 'throne' of God, as his 'legions,' his 'heavens'" (Pope John Paul II, General Audience, July 9, 1986).

**Angels are God-like in a pre-eminent way because they are pure spirits.** Like

all things in creation, they teach us something about the Creator. Yet they are unlike God because they are creatures, while he is the Creator; they are limited, while he is infinite and omnipotent; they have a beginning in time, while he is eternal.

**Angels are personal beings.** Each angel is an individual person created by God. An angel is not a mere mechanism for the accomplishment of God's will. An angel is not a mere metaphor for God's command. Though God may create an individual angel to exemplify or define a certain virtue or message, that angel is still far greater than a mere definition. God's word, unlike human words, is profoundly efficacious. "Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host! ... Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created" (Psalm 148:2-5). Angels are a very *personalized* expression of God's love.

**As persons, angels have intelligence and free will.** As Blessed John Paul put it: "the angels are called ... to know the truth and to love the good which they know in truth in a more full and perfect way than is possible to man" (General Audience, July 23, 1986). Their intelligence is vast. It is not limited, like human intelligence, to the data gathered through bodily senses. They know things in a more essential and direct way. And, because they know more, they act more freely.

They see the good with stark clarity and make their choice for or against it. (We'll

consider the angels' freedom and testing at greater length in a later lesson.)

We have a tendency to use the word *angel* as a generic term for all the pure spirits created by God. The Bible, however, uses

many different terms for spiritual beings, including *cherubim* (Genesis 3:24), *seraphim* (Isaiah 6:2), *archangels* (Jude 9) *thrones, dominions, and principalities* (Colossians 1:16).

<p>CHERUBIM <i>Genesis 3:24</i></p>	<p>He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.</p>
<p>SERAPHIM <i>Isaiah 6:2</i></p>	<p>Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.</p>
<p>ARCHANGELS <i>Jude 9</i></p>	<p>But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."</p>
<p>THRONES, DOMINIONS &amp; PRINCIPALITIES <i>Colossians 1:16</i></p>	<p>For in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.</p>

The word angel comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means "messenger." It is a commonplace term. A mail carrier could be categorized as *angelos*. It's simply the job that some of the pure spirits do. It's the task God has entrusted to them. Angels delivered the Law to Moses (Acts 7:53, Galatians 3:19). An archangel announced

to Mary that she would bear the Messiah (Luke 1:26).

St. Augustine makes an important distinction: "*Angel' is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is 'spirit'; if you seek the name of their office, it is 'angel': from what they are,*

‘spirit,’ from what they do, ‘angel’” (On the Psalms 103.1.15; See CCC 329).

Angels would be the spirits most familiar to human beings, since they bear God’s

messages to humanity. Other spirits are “seen” only by the prophets in extraordinary visions of heaven. Thus, it is natural, if imprecise, for us to call all spirits “angels” when we speak colloquially.



## VOICES OF THE SAINTS

*Pope St. Clement of Rome (First Century)*

*“Let us consider the whole multitude of his angels, how they stand ever ready to minister to his will. For the Scripture says: Ten thousand times ten thousand stood around him, and thousands of thousands ministered to him (see Daniel 7:10), and cried, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6:3). And let us, therefore, conscientiously gathering together in harmony, cry to him earnestly, as with one mouth, that we may be made partakers of his great and glorious promises. For [the Scripture] says, “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9; Isaiah 64:4).*

—FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS 34

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How are angels like God? How do they differ from God? How can our knowledge about angels lead us to a greater knowledge of God?



5. How does Jesus illuminate our reading of Jacob's story? What does he clarify? How does Jesus himself "complete the picture" of what Jacob sees in his dream?

6. Consider the placement of God in Jacob's story. What does it tell us about God's relationship to the angels? about the angels' relationship to humanity? about God's relationship to humanity?



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### CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

✠ CCC 327-330 to learn more about the characteristics of angels.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Without opening your Bible, jot down all the scriptural stories you can recall that involve angels. How do these stories relate to the Church's doctrine on angelic nature? Does the doctrine help you to understand what God has revealed in Scripture?
2. Jacob's revelation led to certain actions. How should what we know about angels change the way we live? Knowing that angels are "persons," for example, should we discern any obligations to them, as we would have obligations to human persons?



## ROME TO HOME

*We cannot conclude our catechesis on God, Creator of the world, without devoting adequate attention to a precise item of divine Revelation: the creation of purely spiritual beings which Sacred Scripture calls "angels." This creation appears clearly in the Creeds, especially in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things (that is, entia or beings) seen and unseen." We know that man enjoys a unique position within the sphere of creation: by his body he belongs to the visible world, while by his spiritual soul which vivifies the body, he is as it were on the boundary between the visible and invisible creation. To the latter, according to the Creed which the Church professes in the light of Revelation, belong other beings, purely spiritual, therefore not proper to the visible world even though present and working therein. They constitute a world apart.*

— POPE BLESSED JOHN PAUL II,  
General Audience, July 9, 1986

## NOTES: