

Homily for the Feast of the Blessed Guardian Angels 1998

The angels teach us humility. For while man is “the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake” (*GS* 24.3), we humans are not the only creatures that God has created to share in his own blessed life. God's plan of sheer goodness includes other persons, whose perfections and number especially reveal the mighty splendor of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I refer of course to those spiritual beings whom the Church today venerates as the holy angels.

In the order of creation, the angel ranks above the human creature. At the same time, the angels remind us of our dignity as persons and of the high vocation that we share with the them. "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness, freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life." This vocation is already fully realized in the countless hosts of blessed spirits who stand before God's throne, whereas here below we remain pilgrims, and need holy guardians to provide companionship along our way to God.

My very first homily was on the angels. Then, before many of you were born, I took a long time to explain the natural superiority of the angels over human beings. Afterwards, the Dominican equivalent of a Formation Director came up and gently suggested that my future preaching strike a more evangelical note. Father Farrell was of course right on the mark. It is not their superior nature that makes us eager to join our voices to "the song of the angels in heaven." Rather their fixed participation in God's very own life gives us hope that we also will reach our goal.

Aquinas (called the Angelic Doctor because of his treatment of the angels) confirms that "Though a blessed angel is not at the summit of beatitude absolutely speaking, each one is at the highest degree possible for that angel, as God has willed it" (Ia 62, 9 ad3). But God arranged things differently for us. While each individual angel already enjoys the fullness of personal being and sanctity, we poor humans are obliged to pursue, at times arduously, the good that perfects our persons, to work, at times with fear and trembling, for our salvation.

The glory of the angels reflects the glory of their Lord. As the *Catechism* makes plain, "Christ is the center of the angelic world. They are *his* angels." For this reason, the angels are always present to the incarnate Word. Put otherwise, they are the first to venerate the mysteries of Christ. The New Testament makes this clear: Angels protect the infant Christ, they comfort the sorrowful Christ; they are the first to proclaim the glorious Christ. Angels appear during every decade of the rosary: at the manger; in the garden; at the tomb. Not unlike the vocation and mission of each Christian, angels exist to praise God, to bless his Name, and to proclaim the mysteries of Christ to the whole world.

Just as the angels protected and comforted Christ, so they protect and comfort the members of Christ. They form part of the communion of the Church. Each one of us, as today's feast celebrates, enjoys the protective company of the angels. They are our Guardians, and not only ours, but the guardians of moral persons as well: of the Church of Boston, of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, even, one may safely hold, of places like St John's Seminary.

We must be precise. Because they have no bodies to be anywhere with, the angels are never in place. But they are personally present to us by their actions, by their power. Wherever the mysteries of Christ are celebrated or lived, there the angels are praising, blessing, and protecting those creatures redeemed by Christ's blood.

Aquinas taught that the angels especially gather around the Eucharist, ranked in choirs around the altar. And this theological vision makes a great deal of sense. For in the Eucharist, the Church, through the ministry of priests, celebrates the great mystery of Christ's love: "In this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner" (*DS* 1743). This sacrifice is confided to the angels: "We entreat you, almighty God, that by the hands of your holy Angel this offering may be borne to your altar in heaven in the sight of your divine majesty." Thus, the Roman Canon.

By being what they are—pure spirits—the angels situate us humans within the created order, but by their vocation as God's ministering spirits, they raise us up, helping us to become sharers in the divine life that Christ gives over in his Body and Blood.