
Angels

There are many spiritual powers, angels of the Churches in Asia, angels appointed to the people. There are angels for little children, Angels who see God daily. There are angels assisting before the majesty of Almighty God, and carrying to God the prayers of the suppliants. These angels are the eyes, or the ears, or the hands, or the feet of God. Let us not have this as an opinion, especially since it is written, "For they are ministering spirits, sent for service, for the sake of those who will inherit salvation" [Hebrews 1:14].

— St. Hilary of Poitiers.

Orthodox Christians live in what some might term as a "supernatural" world. Our society is fascinated by the ideas of ghosts, spirits and mysteries that can not be explained. One of the most interesting phenomenon of the past decades has been the rise in popularity of angels. Go to any card store, gift shop, or "New Age" bookstore, and one will be bombarded by images of angels. The existence of angels is one of the most popular beliefs in what is left of the Judeo-Christian world. We get a sense of comfort, a feeling of protection because our guardian angel is "looking out for us". We gain a feeling of comfort because in guardian angels we are never alone, there is always someone there to be with us. Angels have proved to be popular themes for movies and television and as a result, Orthodox Christians are influenced to believe that these books, television shows, and movies present the correct view of angels.

So then, what exactly is an angel, what is its relationship with God, and what is its relationship with humanity according to the Holy Orthodox Church?

What is an angel?

First of all, the word angel means "messenger" and implies service to God and to mankind.

From the first days of Adam to our own age, angels have played a major role in the human life. In the Old Testament angels served as guides and protectors to God's chosen people. The Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel saw visions of the angels in the heavenly kingdom.

The New Testament gives us much more information about the activity and roles of the angels. The two most significant moments concerning the activities of the angels were: the Archangel Gabriel announcing to the Theotokos she would bear the Messiah and the the angel who informed the Myrrh-bearing women of our Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection. Angels protected Christ while He fasted and prayed in the desert and one can read about the activity of the angels as protectors in the Acts of the Apostles [Acts 10:3-7, 27:23-24].

When it comes to defining and understanding who or what an angel is, we tend to lose sight of who created the angels. God, the "Maker of all things" [the Creed], created the angels. It is only recently that those who profess deep belief in angels tend to ignore God's role in all of this. Before the visible world was created God had created the angelic orders. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" [Genesis 1:1]. The Orthodox Church understands that the creation of the heavens includes the angelic orders. We do not know how this came about or what an angel is exactly made of; we simply accept angels as a fact of the Bible.

Are angels superior to humans?

Angels are spirits that act and move, have intellect and will, but should not be understood as supernatural because only God is "super"-natural (above nature) since He alone is not created. "Yes in Him, all created things took their being, heavenly and earthly, visible and invisible..." [Col. 1:16]. The sole purpose of the angels is to serve God as instruments of His will.

Angels surpass us in their spiritual powers but have their limitations because just like humans, angels are created beings. Even though angels can travel through vast spaces, they can not be everywhere at once. Only God is everywhere at once. Also, angels are not omniscient. Angels are the messengers and deliver only that which God reveals. They do not know, for example, when Christ will return. "But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is" [Mark 13:32-33].

What do angels do?

The Holy Orthodox Church has very concrete ideas concerning the role of angels in our lives. The Church has, from the earliest of times, divided angels into three hierarchies or as St. Dionysius the Areopagite called them, "choirs", since their whole activity is an eternal song of praise to God. The first choir is composed of the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. These three have no interaction with mankind and are totally occupied with their praise of God. The second choir is made up of the Dominions, Virtues, and Powers. These three govern space and the stars and we fall under their dominion indirectly, since our world is part of

the universe. The third choir is made up of the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Humanity is placed under their direct care; they execute God's will, functioning as our guardians, and as messengers of God.

Our guardian angel.

We are assigned at our Baptism a guardian angel by God. "Yoke unto his (her) life a radiant Angel, who shall deliver him(her) from every snare of the adversary, from encounter with evil, from the demon of the noonday" (Prayer during the Holy Sacrament of Baptism). Not only does God help to restore our fallen nature through the sacrament of Holy Baptism, He gives us a protector to aid us in fending off Satan's attempts to tempt us into corrupting that new life. A guardian angel's main function is to protect our souls from anything that may harm it, even ourselves.

The guardian angel also functions as an angel of peace, an angel of penitence, and as an angel of prayer. In our Liturgy we pray for an angel of peace to be "a faithful guide and guardian of our souls and bodies." The guardian angel acts as an angel of penitence because it encourages us to repent, to reconcile ourselves with God. It is, however, as an angel of prayer when our guardian angel is most helpful; for when we pray alone our prayers are joined by the choirs of angels, according to St. Clement of Alexandria. Prayer is our most honest expression of our faith in and our love of God. It is here that the Church-visible and the Church-

invisible are united as one and the angels aid in presenting our prayers to God.

Angels are not the highest power.

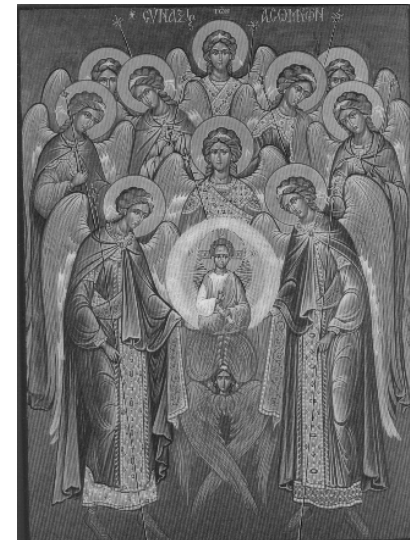
As wonderful and as helpful as angels are, though, let us not forget who is behind these wonderful creations. It is God. The same God who created humanity out of His infinite love also created the angels out of His infinite love. We understand that angels are a reflection of God's glory and exist to serve as God's messengers and yet are so much more than that. "An angel is an image of God, a manifestation of the invisible light, a burnished mirror, bright, untarnished, without spot or blemish, receiving (if it is reverent to say so), all the beauty of the absolute goodness, and (so far as may be) kindling in itself, with unalloyed radiance, the goodness of the secret silence" (St. Dionysius the Areopagite). Angels stand before God and behold the face of the Lord. The more we become properly aware of the role that angels have played in the salvation history of humanity, we become more strengthened in our capacity for good. But more importantly, we become more capable of detecting and resisting the temptations and traps that Satan will lay before us.

Angels, then, are more than mere helpers, as television and movies would have us understand. Angels are the bearers of the very name and power of God. They are the light and strength of the Lord.

— Fr. Evan Maximiuk

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