

THE ANGELS

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OCTOBER is the month which the Church has dedicated to the angels, and it is also the month in which the daily public recitation of the rosary before the Blessed Sacrament is obligatory in all churches. A coincidence? Perhaps; but a coincidence, whatever the word may mean, which is worth looking into.

Supposing our own recitation of the rosary has suffered some check, or has through our own fault become stale and wearisome like the prophet's valley of dry bones, then a consideration of the mysteries *via* the angels will perhaps breathe new life there too, as in the Mass, and prove a starting point for the quickened appreciation of our beads. For after the Mass, the rosary is the most important Catholic devotion, and if it is being neglected, then all is not well with us. The rosary has been called 'the people's liturgy'—and that is the real answer to those unfortunate people who are irritated and distressed, and whose prayer seems to be altogether disturbed by the sight of the Mass-goer who is fingering his beads instead of turning the pages of the missal. In the sight of the angels the one who is saying the rosary may well be closer to the heart of the liturgy. Missionary priests tell us that it is the rosary which keeps the Mass and the faith alive in districts which are seldom visited by a priest. There are moving stories, too, of concentration camps during the civil war in Spain, where priests who were deprived of the Mass found their consolation and strength in the common recitation, or even chanting, of the rosary.

This devotion is infinitely adaptable, and inexhaustible in its possibilities as an aid to prayer. The rosary changes with our needs and intentions, with the spiritual weather, one might say, for it can be said in a spirit of praise, or contrition, or intercession, according to the need and the inspiration of the moment. Each mystery begins with God the Father, in his Son's prayer; it is looked at together with Mary—that is what the repeated *Aves* imply—who in turn sinks our thoughts in the Blessed Trinity with the doxology that ends each decade. The angels are plunged

in the contemplation of the Blessed Trinity. At this very moment, now, they are adoring God's will as it is shown in the mysteries we are trying to consider; but they see them in the light of God's face, and in the measure of eternity, while we see them only as through a glass, darkly, and according to our earthbound sense of time. They enjoy as an eternal present the events of our Lord's life that we see as the successive happenings of a short span of time nearly two thousand years ago. While man painfully reflects, reconstructs, co-ordinates—and then forgets, the angel sees immediately and for ever. We could have no better allies than the angels in our devotion of the rosary, whether we use our imagination or say it in some simpler way.

The rosary is such a personal matter that other people's instructions on the mysteries are seldom useful. One might write a detailed account of the part the angels played in every event of our Lord's life, for all the angels were for ever round the God Incarnate: but the only thing that really helps is to try what might be called an angel rosary for oneself, either meditating on their rôle, or asking them in a general and simple way to offer our praise to God, or praise him for us, as they did when he came to earth, and as they do now in heaven. Some of the mysteries are connected with one special angel: the opening one of each group, the Annunciation, the Agony in the garden, the Resurrection; but all the angels are there implicitly throughout the rosary, as they are throughout the Mass, and if only we look for them we shall surely find what they want us to find—the object of their love and of ours.

Once the idea that the angels are always with us when we are praying with the voice of the Church has become firmly rooted in our minds and hearts, we shall be led to understand that they are just as much concerned to help us with our private prayer, and that, in fact, whenever we pray, we are praying with them. But now their ministry is even more hidden, and even more a matter of pure faith, though founded on the sureness of God's word.

When the Archangel Raphael revealed himself to Tobias, he disclosed that it was he who offered the prayer of Tobias to God; and not only when Tobias in captivity was actually praying with tears to God, but when he was about his chosen work of mercy which he carried on as a matter of pure faith and at the risk of his life: 'When thou didst pray with tears, and didst bury the dead,

and didst leave thy dinner, and hide the dead by day in thy house, and bury them by night, I offered thy prayer to the Lord.' (Tobias 12, 12.) All the works of a just man are prayer, and it seems from this passage that by some heavenly alchemy the angels transform our works of mercy into prayer as such and offer it to God. This is very encouraging for those of us who have to lead a largely active life and whose time is spent on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Provided only that all be done for God, the angels will do the rest, and we may work, and thus pray peacefully, knowing that all is safe in heavenly hands. The angels will keep us, as it were, in a state of continual prayer. In the diary of a French Carmelite of our own times we find the following entry, written years before she actually entered Carmel: 'I was drawn to form a close intimacy with the angels; there was, so to speak, an alliance between us. They showed me how my life should resemble theirs, and they promised to assist me to remain in the repose of contemplation. I understood that my natural activity was to be replaced by the prompt obedience of the angels. We rejoiced together, saying over and over again: Holy, holy, holy,—who is like unto God?' She ends with this prayer which we can make our own: 'O holy angels who never keep God waiting, obtain for me this union of my will with his, that I may give him all sacrifices, big and little, immediately he asks for them. . . . I will help my neighbour as the angels do . . . who even accompany souls into purgatory and whose ministry is so hidden.' (*Mother Mary Teresa of the Angels*. By an Irish Carmelite. London, 1938.)

For the ministry of angels in the higher regions of prayer we can turn to St Bernard's 41st sermon on the Cantic of Canticles. He is explaining the meaning of the verse: 'We will make thee chains of gold inlaid with silver.' The speakers are those called the 'heavenly artificers', the companions of the Bridegroom, i.e. the angels, and they promise to make jewels for the adornment of the spouse, the soul that loves God. These chains are images and words by means of which the soul that has 'seen' God in prayer, may explain this wholly spiritual experience to its own earth- and sense-bound self, and to us who long to know more of the things of God. An example of these 'chains of gold inlaid with silver' which are wrought by the angels, would be the poems which St John of the Cross prefixes to his treatises on the mystical life, and by means of which he reduces the inexpressible things of

God to poetic symbols which may be dimly understood by the soul touched with God's grace. Indeed, all genuine mystical writing must be the result of the translating process described by St Bernard. All mystical writing is 'a raid on the inarticulate' (T. S. Eliot) made articulate by this heavenly ministry; 'They' (the heavenly artificers) 'purpose to devise certain spiritual representations, by means of which they will present to the view of the soul, whilst she is engaged in contemplation, the purest images of the Divine Wisdom, in order that she may be able to see, at least, "through a glass in a dark manner", him whom it is not yet given her to behold face to face. These things which I speak of, are altogether divine, and absolutely unintelligible except to those who have experienced them. . . . But whenever the soul, transported out of herself, is thus granted a clearer vision of the divine Majesty, yet only for a moment, and with the velocity, so to speak, of a lightning flash, there are suddenly presented to her imagination, from what source I know not, certain images of inferior objects, which admirably help and harmonize with the higher impression of the Divinity. These imaginative representations are intended, no doubt, both to temper the excessive splendour of the Light Uncreated, and to facilitate its communication; for they intercept that most pure and dazzling ray of divine truth, like clouds before the face of the sun, render it more tolerable to the soul, and more capable of being transmitted to whomsoever we please. In my opinion they are formed in our minds by the inspiration of the holy angels, just as evil imaginations are unquestionably suggested by wicked spirits. And perhaps we have here that darksome mirror through which, as you have read, the apostle gazed, and which is fashioned, so it seems, by angelic hands out of such pure and beautiful images. Thus we may ascribe to God that representation of spiritual truth which in itself is quite distinct from any phantasy of corporeal properties, whilst we attribute to the ministry of angels all the splendid imagery with which it appears surrounded and clothed. . . not only do the holy angels form within us, by suggestion, the imaginative representations referred to, but they even supply us with suitable words to express what they have enabled us to conceive; so that our ideas, dressed out in apt and becoming language, may be comprehended by our hearers with greater ease and pleasure.' (St Bernard.)