



# Maronite Monks of Adoration

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Our philosophy teacher likes to tell the story about how he was speaking to his students one day about the angels when one of them rather quizzically asked him, “Dr. Berquist, do angels really exist?” The professor replied, “They are more real than you are.”

What a pity it is to be ignorant of so important a matter! May it not be so with us. Taking the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#328-336) as our guide, let us consider the truth about the holy angels and their work in God’s plan of salvation.

The catechism begins its section on the angels by asserting that these purely spiritual beings (i.e. beings which do not have bodies) really exist. This is a truth of faith known by Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Therefore, it is certain that angels exist. (#328)

Think about this for a moment for, besides being a truth of faith, the existence of angels can be known by reason. If we consider that the beasts are bodily creatures only and that man is a creature composed of both body and spirit, it is reasonable to posit that there are other creatures that are purely spiritual. Ancient philosophers held that such creatures existed. Some used the expression that “man was on the horizon,” joining in himself the bodily existence of the beasts and the spiritual existence of what we call “the angels.” It is not unreasonable then to think that creatures exist which do not have bodies. The famous Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, with his great

philosophical mind and teaching facility, used to call angels “nobodies”—not because they do not exist or because they are unimportant, but because quite literally they have *no* bodies.

What else do we know about the angels? Looking once again at the catechism, we

learn that angels have intellect and will, that they can know and that they can love. They are persons, albeit not human persons, but *angelic* persons. They are immortal—a fact which Jesus himself teaches us when speaking about men who have attained the resurrection, saying, “for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels” (Lk 20:36). Moreover, the catechism states that angels are creatures “surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendor of their glory bears witness.” In other words, they are more real than we are! (#330)

Our Maronite tradition, following St. Ephrem, accords the angels a special name in Syriac which is hard to render exactly into English. In fact, the Syriac word is often just translated as “angels” because of the difficulty. However, the root meaning of the Syriac word is “to be awake,” and a common, more literal translation is “the watchers,” that is, those who keep watch or vigil. A

better translation might be “the wakeful ones.” The sense is that angels never sleep, they are always awake. This is true both literally and figuratively, the latter being made clear when we understand that St. Ephrem uses the image of sleep for error, sin and death. Men may need to be freed from



Illustration: Maronite Monks

the sleep of error, the sleep of sin and the sleep of death; but not “the wakeful ones.” Furthermore, we know from our own experience that being awake is more fully alive, more real than being asleep. Once again we see that the angels, “the wakeful ones,” are more real than we are!

If we were to ask what the angels do, the most common answer probably would be that they help us. Many people have a basic understanding of the “guardian” angel who protects us. Maybe others understand too that the angels intercede for us with God, that they guide us and enlighten our minds, that they help us grow in virtue and aid us in our prayer; in short, that the angels are our companions on the path to holiness. This is true enough, and the catechism speaks of “the mysterious and powerful help of angels” in the life of the Church and of each individual believer. (#334-336)

Nonetheless, the catechism reminds us that the angels belong to Christ before they belong to us. It is worth quoting the catechism at length here: “Christ is the center of the angelic world. They are *his* angels: ‘When the Son of man comes in glory, and all the angels with him...’[Mt 25:31] They belong to him because they were created *through* him and *for* him: ‘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.’[Col 1:16] They belong to him still more because he has made them messengers of his saving plan: ‘Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?’ [Heb 1:14]” The angels are Christ’s angels before they are ours. In fact, they are our angels only because they are His angels for they are the servants and messengers of Christ’s plan of salvation for us. (#331)

The catechism (#332-333) summarizes the work of the holy angels from the beginning of time as recorded in both the Old and New Testaments. To take but a sampling, do we remember from the Old Testament that an angel guarded the way into paradise after the Fall (Gn 3:24), kept Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac (Gn 22:11), guided and protected the People of God on their way to the Promised Land (Ex 23:20-23), announced to

Gideon his vocation to deliver Israel and to Manoah and his wife the birth of Samson (Judg 6:11-24;13)? Maybe we are more familiar with the New Testament, especially the work of the holy angels in the earthly life of our Lord?

During the Season of Announcements (our Maronite Advent) and the Glorious Birth of Our Lord, we commemorate in a special way four New Testament *angelic* announcements: (1) Gabriel’s announcement to Zecariah of the birth of John the Baptizer (Lk 1:11-23), (2) Gabriel’s announcement to Mary of the birth of our Lord (Lk 1:26-38), (3) the angel’s announcement to Joseph concerning Mary and the birth of our Lord (Mt 1:18-25), and (4) the angels announcement to the shepherds of the birth of our Lord (Lk 2:8-15). The catechism also reminds us of the angels who served Christ in the desert after He was tempted by Satan (e.g. Mk 1:12-13) and comforted Him in His agony at Geth-semene (Lk 22:43-44) as well as the angels who announced His glorious resurrection (e.g. Mt 28:1-7) and who will accompany Him when He comes again on the last day to judge the living and the dead (e.g. Mt 25:31-46).

Truly the angels are Christ’s angels, His messengers and ministers. What an odd state of affairs then that during the Christmas Season it is not uncommon to find angels galore, but no Christ Child. This is truly a perversion since in reality the angels cannot be separated from Christ. They are *His* angels. Moreover, the angels cannot help but point to Christ. As the catechism (#329) says: “With their whole beings the angels are servants and messengers of God.” Maybe it is part of the work of the angels that unbelievers seem to have such an affection for them? If the world has no room for Christ in its “Holiday” celebrations, its festal angel art and decorations nonetheless cry out, “Wake up! Get the message! The message is Christ!”

Let us praise God for the wonders of His creation, visible and invisible. While being attentive to the presence of the angels among us even now in this life, let us look forward to the day (as our Maronite Liturgy often urges us) when we will join them in the heavenly choirs with all the saints and sing praise to the Most Holy and Glorious Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forever. ✨

*On this holy feastday in 'Bethlehem,  
the angels\* are seized with amazement.*

*They saw the wonder and they sing the praises:  
The Son of God has taken flesh!*

*The Lord of all is laid in a manger,  
wrapped in humble bands of cloth.*

*Angels\* and mortals are in awe:  
The Son of God has taken flesh!*

*Glory to your appearance from Mary,  
O hidden One who came to save us.*

*You took a body from Mary  
and through it you redeemed us from straying.*

\*The original Syriac has “the watchers” or “the wakeful ones.”  
(Mazmooro: Maronite Divine Liturgy for Genealogy Sunday)