

Feast of Guardian Angels

‘May Angels Lead You . . .’

The existence of angels is not exactly a hot topic in most Catholic conversations today. Yet it remains a rich aspect of Catholic teaching and regarded as a truth of faith (*Catechism*, n.328). In fact, the average practising Catholic is provided with opportunities to think about angels surprisingly often.

Angels abound in Scripture. As God’s servants and messengers they are always there doing something or saying something to assist, strengthen and reassure human beings in their journey with God. For example, Hagar and her child are saved from certain death with the appearance of an angel. Abraham’s hand, poised to sacrifice his son, is stayed at the intervention of an angel. The Israelites make their way in the wilderness with angelic assistance. Prophets are assisted and special births and callings are announced by angels; Gabriel’s announcement to Mary especially comes to mind. At the birth of Jesus, a multitude of angels erupt in songs of praise. Angels ensure the safety of the infant Jesus, serve the adult Jesus in the desert, strengthen the suffering Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Angels ‘evangelise’ at the resurrection and we are told they will be present at Christ’s return in glory. (*Catechism*, nos. 331-333)

Based on the biblical testimony, the Church teaches that each of us, and the Church itself, continue to benefit from the mysterious and powerful help of angels. According to St Basil, “Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading the believer to life.” In the liturgy of the Eucharist we join in praise with the angelic host (‘Holy, holy, holy...’). The feast of Guardian Angels (October 2nd) invites attention to angels, especially in terms of God’s protection and loving care for each person.

There is a wonderful vignette in Jewish storytelling traditions (midrash) about the Bible episode known as “Jacob’s Ladder.” Fleeing his

homeland after a disastrous domestic conflict, Jacob’s journey is interrupted by a curious dream about angels:

“And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28:12).

The ever-inquisitive Rabbis ask: why does Scripture say that the angels *ascended*, before saying that they *descended*? If angels of God come down from heaven, wouldn’t we expect the text to say that they descended the ladder first, then ascended afterwards? One intriguing reply tells how the angels of God have specific assignments. Those that operate in the Land of Israel do not leave that area. So, as Jacob departed his homeland, these angels ascended to heaven first, and other angels then descended to escort him outside the Land of Israel.

Our 21st century western minds may squirm at such an explanation! However, in its own creative way it offers spiritual insight into the constancy of God’s protection. Wherever our life’s journey takes us—into new geographical areas, new experiences, new challenges—God sends us help, and not just ‘any’ help, but assistance personally tailored to our unique circumstances; and not only from angelic messengers, but from special people who enter our lives at critical moments and show us the way with their loving care and guidance. It is a comforting thought, and one based in trust in God’s providence, that as our lives change, divine assistance is attentively moving with us from beginning to end.

How beautifully this is expressed in the Catholic funeral rite where we pray for the deceased: “May the angels lead you into paradise...and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem.”

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