

## The Holy Angels - An Orthodox Perspective

Angels: Our Elder Brethren

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Boise, Idaho, USA  
August 13th 2004*

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**"Whom Christ loves, His angels love too."**

**St. Nicholai of Zica (1880-+1956)**



Icon of Archangels Michael and Gabriel

Our Holy Bible starts with this sentence: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

By Heaven is meant not an empty space beyond our space, but the living world of invisible spirits. Thus, the above sentence could be phrased in other words: In the beginning God created the invisible and the visible world, as it is said in the first article of our Creed. The Psalmist says: By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all the might of them by the Spirit of His mouth (Ps. 32:6).

In this case, according to the interpretation of the Fathers of the Church, the Father is called the Lord; the Son, the Word of the Father; and the Holy Spirit, the Breath of the Father.

The Prophet Isaiah saw seraphim's (6:2) and Ezekiel the cherubim's (10:8) with some other strange creatures around the throne of the Highest. Micaiah said to the King Ahab: I saw the Lord sitting on His throne and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right hand and on His left (I Kings 22:19).

Nehemiah said in his prayer: Thou, even Thou, art Lord alone; Thou has made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host (Neh. 9:6).

The great Daniel saw God on His throne-and a thousand thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him (Chapters 9 and 10).

St. Paul speaking of the power of Christ says: Who is this image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him. And He (Christ) is before all things, and by Him all things consist (Col. 1:15-17; cf. I Pet. 3:22).

Summing up all the names of the angelic hosts, St. Dionysius the Areopagite classifies them by their ranks-three times three equals nine: "thrones, dominions, principalities, seraphim's, cherubim's, powers, sovereignties,

archangels, and angels." All of them, however, we popularly call angels, or angelic hosts.

We read in the Book of Job, how the Lord gave answer to the complaints of that suffering man, saying: Where wast thou-when the morning stars (i.e. first created angels) sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38: 1-17).

And our sacred poet says:

Stars of the morning, so gloriously bright  
Filled with celestial splendor and light  
These that--where night never follows day--  
Raise the 'Thrice Holy' song ever and age...  
Then when the earth was first poised in mid space,  
Then, when the planets first sped on their race,  
Then, when were ended the six days employ,  
Then, all the sons of God shouted for joy.

(Joseph the Hymnographer-Translation in the English Hymnal).

Our Orthodox Church has dedicated Monday to the holy angels. Therefore, every Monday in the church services we are reminded of the holy angels with praise and prayer: "Holy Archangels and Angels, pray to God for us."

The angelic hosts were created before men. That is the first reason we call them our elder brethren.

## **The Nature of Angels**

The nature of angels is in some ways quite different from the nature of man, and in other ways similar to it. On the one hand, the differences are these: The angels are bodiless and, as such, invisible to our physical eyes. Having no body, they consequently have no bodily needs or desires and passions, no cares about food, drink, clothes or shelter. Nor do they possess the impulse and cravings for procreation. They neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt. 22:30). They have no worries about the future either, and no fear of death. For, though God created them before man, they are neither aged nor aging, but unchangingly youthful, beautiful and strong. They have no anxiety about their salvation and no struggle for immortality, being already immortal. Unlike men, they are not faltering between good and evil, being already good and holy as when God created them.

On the other hand, the angels are similar to men in that they are personalities, everyone being individually conscious of himself. Like men, they have intelligence, emotions, free will and acting capacity. And withal they bear personal names like men. Some of their names we know either from Scripture or Church Tradition. They are: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Salathiel, Barachiel, Jeremiel, Jegudiel.

Comparing men with angels, St. Paul quoted the words of an ancient prophet who spoke of God: O Lord - what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that Thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the

Angels; Thou crownest him with glory and honor, and didst set him over the works of Thy hands; Thou has put all things in subjection under his feet (Heb. 2:6-8; Ps. 8:4-6).

Indeed, God gave a tremendous dominion over His works to the first sinless Adam, before this man despised God's commandment and joined Satan, God's adversary. Before the sin, man was equal to God's angels in power, purity and beauty. But through sin man's dominance over God's works dwindled to almost nothing. Nature became disobedient to him who was disobedient to God. Disobedient to its former lord, nature yet lives in expectation. The Apostle speaks of that as follows: For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God, in order to be again obedient and happy, as in Eden. Until then the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now, being itself in the bondage of corruption, like its fallen lord (Rom. 8:19,22).

Yet, regenerated through Christ, man will again be angel-like, clothed with Christ's glory. Meanwhile, his elder brethren, the holy and unsoiled angels, are ministering to him, as physicians to the sick, toward his health and salvation. As it is written of them: Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation? (Heb. 14:14). Of this, however, more shall be spoken later.

## **The Appearances of Angels**

The appearances of angels are different purposely as to different persons and occasions.

The appearance of an angel to Moses was as follows: When Moses was a shepherd in the desert, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses" (Ex. 3:2,4). Moses saw no face and no figure but the fire, and out of the fire he heard the voice calling him and instructing him as to what to do.

The appearance to whole people of Israel, when they fled from Egypt: And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, ...and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light (Ex. 13:21).

This was not the Lord Himself but His angel. Moses confirms that: When we cried unto the Lord, He heard our voice, and sent an angel, and hath brought us forth out of Egypt (Num. 20:16). Here, as somewhere else, the angel is identified with the Lord, God. For My name is in him, says the Lord God (cf. Ex. 23:20,21).

To Gideon an angel appeared as an ordinary man, just as the Archangel Raphael appeared to Tobias. Gideon understood that it was an angel only he saw a miracle performed by his unknown visitor. Then he exclaimed: Alas, O Lord God! For I have seen an angel of the Lord face to face (Judges 6:12-23).

To the wife of Manoah, who was barren and childless, an angel appeared with the news that she would have a son, Samson by name. Recounting this event to her husband, she said: A man of God came unto me, and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible (Judges 13:6).

When the Syrians surrounded the place where the prophet Elisha lived, his frightened servant exclaimed: Alas, how shall we do? And Elisha answered: Fear not, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.

And by the prayers of Elisha, the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and then he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire around about Elisha (II Kings 6:16-17). Of course, that was the host of God's angels sent to protect the righteous man.

To the prophet Ezekiel the angel was as the appearance of fire: from his loins even downward, fire: and from his loins even upward, as appearance of brightness, as the color of amber (Ezekiel 8:2).

The great prophet Daniel saw an angel as a certain man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz. His body also was like the beryl and his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as lamps of fire, and his arms and his feet like in color to polished brass, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude. So much was Daniel frightened that he says: Therefore I was left alone ...and there remained no strength in me ...and I retained no strength (Dan. 10:8). It was Archangel Gabriel (Dan. 8:16).

The same Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, the father of St. John the Baptist. And though his appearance was not so terrifying as that which Daniel saw, yet Zacharias, when he saw him, was troubled and fear fell upon him. And the angel said unto him: Fear not, Zacharias! (Luke 1:12-13).

As to the appearance of Gabriel to the Virgin Mary at Nazareth, we presume that the appearing was in a gentle human form, unlike those terrifying forms in which the angels appeared to the prophets of old. Yet, Mary was frightened and troubled. No wonder, for not only in extraordinary appearance frightens us, but also the suddenness of it. The angel therefore encouraged the Holy Virgin by saying: Fear not, Mary! (Luke 1:29-30).

When our Lord Jesus was born, an angel appeared to the shepherds at Bethlehem. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them: Fear not (Matt. 28:3-5).

The myrrh bearing women at the sepulcher of the risen Lord saw an angel: His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers (of the tomb) did shake, and became as dead men. To the women, however, the angel said: Fear not ye! (Matt. 28:3-5).

In no other sacred book is so much written about angels as in the Book of Revelation. St. John saw a multitude around the throne of the Highest. He describes them as clad in pure and white linen, having their breasts girded with golden girdles (Rev. 15:6). Very striking is the description of one of them: I saw, says John, another mighty angel came down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire ...And he cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth (Rev. 10: 1, 3).

Clothed with a cloud! Remember what the Lord Jesus said about His Second Coming: Then, said He, shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matt. 24:30). Thus, the clouds of heaven mean multitudes of angels.

All the appearances of angels are just appearances, not pertaining to their nature; they are pure spirits, and all their power and beauty is spiritual, not material. As our sacred poet says of them: "The material and intelligent angels hast Thou created, O Lord, before the visible world; They ceaselessly cry unto Thee over there: Bless the Lord all ye works of the Lord. Sing unto Him great praises forever." (Octoechos Matins, Hymn 8, tone 3).

The angels of the Lord do not want to be worshipped. When an angel showed St. John the new Paradise in Heaven with all its marvels, St. John fell at the feet of the angel to worship him. But the angel did not allow that, saying: Do it not, for I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God (Rev. 22:8-9). Yea, we worship God alone.

## **The Activity of the Angels**

The activity of the angels is twofold: in Heaven to glorify God, and on earth to carry out God's orders concerning men. The word "angel" itself means herald or messenger. They rest not, day and night, saying: Holy, holy, Lord God Almighty which was, and is, and is to come, writes a seer (Rev. 4:8). And another writes of the ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14).

Says St. Gregory the Theologian: "Some of those intelligences are standing before the great God, and others cooperate in holding the whole world." And Damascene: "They are powerful, and ready to accomplish the will of God, and they appear anywhere and instantly, according to their subtle nature, wherever God orders them."

The first time that an angel, a cherub, is mentioned in the Bible is when Adam and Eve are ousted from the Garden of Eden (earthly Paradise). Then God placed cherubim's - and a flaming sword, which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life (Gen. 3:24).

A. We may consider the angels, in the first place, as messengers of good news. Twice there appeared an angel to Hagar, Abraham's handmaid, consoling her because her mistress, Sarah dealt harshly with her. "Behold, said the angels, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard Thine affliction (Gen. 16:7; cf. Gen. 21:17). Ishmael became the progenitor of the Ishmaelites; Arabs, who are also called Hagarenes.

Three angels appeared in the plains of Mamre with a message to childless Abraham, that he shall have a son, which indeed happened the next year (Gen. 18: 10). Thus Isaac, the progenitor of the Jews, was born.

When Abraham was ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac, according to the order of God who wanted to test his fidelity, an angel of Heaven prevented him from doing so. Said the angel: Now I know that thou fearest God (Gen. 22:12). God Himself, however, later offered His only Son Jesus Christ, to be slain like a lamb to save us (Eph. 5:2).

B. The angels of God save the men of God. In the corrupt city of

Sodom there lived a man of God, Lot. When Sodom was doomed to destruction, God sent two angels to save Lot and his family (Gen. 19:1-22).

An angel saved Jacob from the revenge of his brother Essau (Gen. 32:1). And before his death Jacob spoke of the Angel which redeemed me from all evil (Gen. 48:16).

An Angel saved the three youths in Babylon from death in the midst of the burning fiery furnace, into which they were thrown, because they renounced the worship of idols in place of the only true God (Dan. 3:12-30). Every Matins service we are reminded of this strange event by the seventh and eighth irmoi of the canons. And angel saved Daniel from the den of lions into which he was put on account of his strong faith in the one God. The lions, however, behaved as lambs. To the astonished King Darius, Daniel said: My God hath sent His angel, and hath shut the lions mouths, that they have not hurt me, forasmuch as before Him innocence was found in me (Dan. 6:16-23).

C. The angels are executors of God's judgments. We quote only a few instances: The city of Sodom was wallowing in most horrible vices (homosexuality, sodomy). The Lord sent two angels to save the only righteous man in Sodom, Lot. They came to Lot and urged him to get out of that city, for the Lord sent us to destroy it. And they razed Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes, by brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven (Gen. 19:12-25). King David, otherwise a great glorifier of God, sinned once against the Lord God, and God sent an angel with a drawn sword in his hand - and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men, until David repented and cried to God for mercy (I Chron. 21:1-17). Sennacherib, King of Assyria, beleaguered Jerusalem with a mighty army. He and his dukes blasphemed the Lord God, called King Hezekiah and his people to surrender. But after Hezekiah prostrated before God and prayed in the temple, the angel of the Lord went forth and smote in the camp of Assyrians a hundred and four scores and five thousand. King Sennacherib fled to Nineveh, where he was killed by his sons (Isaiah, chapters 36 & 37). The inspired Psalmist, knowing from history and from his own experience the part which the angels play in the life of a man or of a nation, speaks: The angel of the Lord will encamp round about them that fear Him, and will deliver them (Ps. 33:7). No evils shall come nigh thee, and no scourge shall come nigh unto thy dwelling. For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. On their hands shall they bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone (Ps. 90:10-12). Bless the Lord, he His angels, mighty in strength, that perform His word, to hear the voice of His words (Ps. 103:20).

## **The Guardian Angels**

By the above words the Psalmist confirms the common belief that angels protect and help both nations and individuals. In ancient times, Michael the Archangel was considered as the guardian angel of the people of Israel. Joshua

saw him at Jericho, and heard him saying that he was the captain of the Lord's host (Joshua 5:14-15). And to Daniel, the Archangel Gabriel spoke of the Archangel Michael, saying: At that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people (Dan. 12:1). The Apostle Jude writes of Michael the Archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses (Jude 9). As guardian of the people, he was also the guardian even of the dead body of their leader Moses.

The Fathers of the Church taught that there are guardian angels of nations, countries, churches, as well as of individuals (Rev. 2). Yea, even of elements, stars and planets. St. John of the "Ladder" testifies of his personal guardian angel: "Whenever I was longing for a greater advancement in spiritual life, the angel appeared in such a case and enlightened me."

And here is what St. Basil the Great says: "The angel will not retreat from us, unless we drive him away by our evil deeds. As the smoke drives bees away, and stench the doves, even so our stinking sin drives away from us the angel who protects our life."

Concerning the guardian angels of children, and all childlike persons, we shall hear later from the mouth of the Lord Jesus Himself.

### **Angels: Servants of Christ's Church**

The New Testament is full of angels: They were hovering around Christ as their Creator, Lover and Lord from the beginning of His Incarnation, always ready to serve Him. They worshipped Him on earth as they worshipped Him in Heaven, and they loved Him on His Cross as they love Him in His Heavenly glory, with a glowing transcendent love. With gladness and attentiveness they supported His work, that is, His Church on earth. They are doing so now, and will do so until the end of the world. When He was born in a poor stony cave, there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host praising God (Luke 2:13). After the temptation in the desert, when the devil left Him, behold, angels came and ministered unto Him (Matt. 4:11). Our genial artists were right in painting many angels around Christ, as at His baptism when the Heavens were opened unto Him, at the Transfiguration, around His Crucifixion, at the descent into Hades, at the Resurrection and at His Ascension. Whenever there appeared an archangel, or another angel, we can suppose that behind him there was a company of many angels, though invisible to human eyes. We do not think that the Archangel Gabriel was alone when he announced to the Virgin Mary the world-shaking news of the birth of Messiah; nor that the angel who appeared in Gethsemane to strengthen Christ in His agony, was without a company of many invisible angels. Wherever the King is, His soldiers are also there at hand.

Whom Christ loves, His angels love too. He loved children, and ordered His angels to be their guardians. Said He: The angels do always behold the face of my Father, which is in heaven (Matt. 18:10). He even identified Himself with little children saying: Whoso shall receive one such little child in My name receiveth Me (Matt. 18:5). He threatened terribly those who mislead, scandalize and cause children to sin. It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matt. 18:6). He also said: Suffer little children to come unto Me for of such is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:14). (This is the very foundation of Christian education, that is, to let children come unto Christ). This is the reason the angels love and

protect children. A spiritual poet says:

Angels and ministers, spirits of grace,  
Friends of the children, beholding God's face,  
Moving like thought to us through the beyond,  
Molded in beauty, and free from our bond.  
(P. Dearmer, English Hymnal)

The angels also ministered to the apostles and others of the faithful from the beginning, and throughout the history of the Church.

When the high priests put the apostles in prison, the Angel of the Lord opened the prison doors by night and brought them forth, saying: Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all of the words of this life (Acts 5:17-20; 12:7-10).

When Herod, the kinglet of Galilee, persecuted the Church, killed the apostle James, and intended to kill Peter too, then immediately the Angel of the Lord smote him-and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost (Acts 12:23).

When Philip was preaching in Samaria, an angel directed him toward Gaza to meet a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace, Queen of Ethiopia. Philip taught him of Jesus the Messiah, and baptized him. That eunuch was the first Christian of his country. Thus, the angels helped the apostles in spreading the Gospel to distant countries (Acts 8:26).

A Roman officer, Cornelius, while praying at about three o'clock on a sunny afternoon, saw in a vision an angel of God, who advised him to call Peter from Joppa. After Peter's instruction Cornelius was baptized, along with his whole household. In this case too, the angel of the Lord promoted the growth of the Church among the pagans (Acts, chapter 10). While St. Paul was sailing to Rome with 276 souls, a terrible storm threatened to engulf the ship. Fear not, Paul, thou must be brought before Caesar, and lo, God has given thee all them that sail with thee, which indeed happened (Acts 27:20-25).

### **Angels: God's Harvesters**

In His parable of the sower and the seed, the Lord Jesus explained: The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels... The Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His Kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear (Matt. 13:38-43). But before the end of the world the end of many of us will have already come. Lo, when poor Lazarus died, angels into Abraham's bosom carried his soul; and when merciless Dives died, his soul dropped into hell (Luke 16:19-23). Remember then, O man that your end is for you the end of the world. For at your death you shall be either the harvest of angels or of the wicked one. It is a good thing to trust in God's mercy, but to trust in God and to go on sinning without repentance is to mock God. Here is what our Savior says: I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth (Luke 15:10). But woe unto them that die in sins without repentance. Here is the stern warning of a great apostle: God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell ...and spared not

the old world, but saved Noah bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes (II Pet. 2:4-6). Much less will He spare those who are Christians by name, but in reality are servants of the devil in the words and deeds. Like Judas, they might sometime repent but it will be too late. For the Son of man shall come in the glory of the Father with His angels, and then He shall reward every man according to his works (Matt. 16:27).

## **The Second Coming of Christ**

Christ's second Coming will be most glorious and most dramatic. While at His first coming "a multitude" of angels appeared to the shepherds of Bethlehem, at His second coming all the holy angels shall accompany Him. Then He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (Matt. 24:31). Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father (Matt. 13:43). Thus, the angels shall be the reapers of God's harvest.

But the most striking reward Christ ever promised to the elect and righteous ones, who lived according to and suffered for His Gospel on earth, was that they shall be equal to the angels. To the sophistic Sadducees, He said: They, which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage. Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels, and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection (Luke 20:35-36). Reading these words, we are filled with awe and fear. How can we be equal to angels? Behold, it is written of the angels: God stood in the congregation of the gods, in the midst He shall stand out among gods. And a little further on: Ye are gods, and all of you the sons of the Most High (Ps. 81: 1,6). Of course, the angels are called gods, not by their divine nature but their close contact with God. How can men be equal to them? And here is what our sacred poet says of angels:

Adorned with shining beauty  
All the angels of the Pantocrator  
Approach the inexpressible glory of Christ  
Singing to Him day and night:  
Blessed art Thou, O God, forever.  
(Theophane -Matins hymn, tone 6).

How can we be equal unto the angels, the glorifiers of Christ, we, who are blaspheming Him daily by our sins? First of all, Christ speaks of those who shall be accounted worthy, and, secondly, by the love of Christ which passeth all understanding (cf Luke 20:35; Eph. 3:19; Phil. 4:7).

Let us then humble ourselves, and listen to what a seer of heavenly mysteries says: Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him (I Cor. 2:9). Here is the key to the mystery: those who love God, be they angels or human beings, are equal before God.

In this sense also we call the angels our elder brethren, honoring them and praying to them from this valley of tears:

"O Holy Archangels and Angels,

Pray to God for us sinners.!"

Source: *The Lord's Prayer A Devout Interpretation & Three Lessons of the Orthodox Church* by St. Nikolai Velimirovic, St. Paisius Orthodox Monastery, Safford, AZ. 2001, pp. 71-88.

Humbly In Christ Our Lord,

+Very Rev. Archimandrite Nektarios Serfes  
Who prays for you!

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