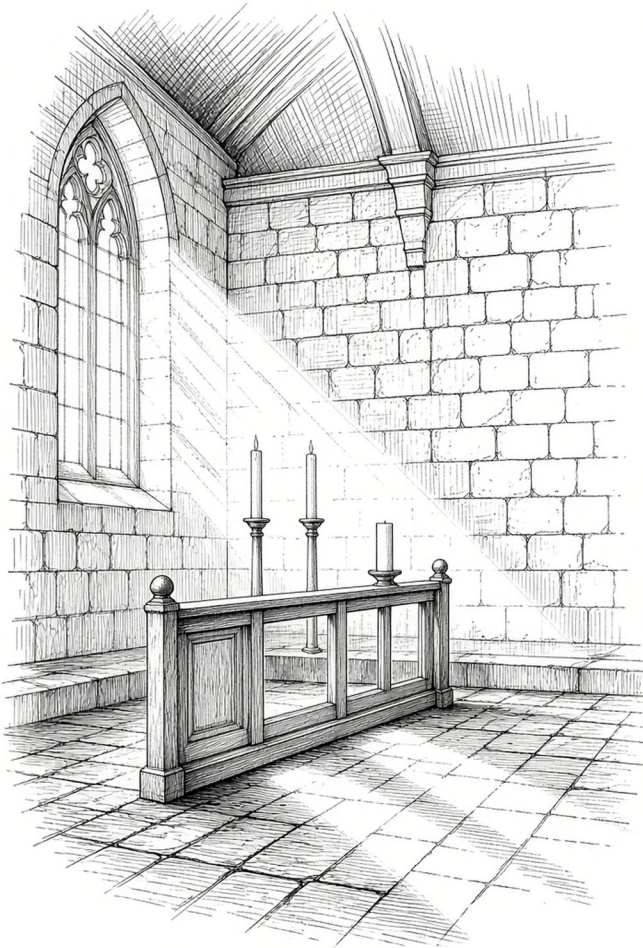




SILENT HOMILIES

The Ones Who Stand

*Angels, and the courtesy Heaven
has never taken back*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



The Ones Who Stand

*Angels, and what the Catholic Church
actually teaches about them*

Before You Begin



If someone asked after Mass what Catholics actually believe about angels, I would not start with the greetings cards. I would start with the Church's own teaching. It is quieter than the pictures, and much more interesting.

God made a world of spirits as well as a world of bodies. Some of those spirits kept faith with him and some did not. The faithful ones are not a feeling we have on a good day. They are real creatures. They have intellect and will. They don't have bodies as we do. They serve God.

Scripture is full of them and almost never describes their faces. Visitors come to Abraham's tent. A stranger walks the road with Tobias. A greeting is given in Nazareth. Men in white stand at an empty tomb. Peter's prison door opens. John, on Patmos, falls down in front of one and is told to get up, because the figure is a fellow servant.

This little book is not a field guide to the invisible. The Church doesn't publish one. I want to walk through what she actually teaches, and through a few places where that teaching became stone and prayer: a cave in Apulia, a castle in Rome, a prayer Leo XIII asked to be said after Mass. Where something is legend, I will say so.

Read it if the cards have made you shy of the doctrine. Read it if you already pray to your guardian angel and have never been told why the Church is so careful with names.

Contents

Before You Begin

1. Not the child on the card
2. A creature, not a mood
3. Nine choirs
4. Three names the Church will speak
5. Raphael on the road
6. The Angelus
7. Angels at Mass
8. The prayer after Low Mass
9. Guardian angels
10. Caves, islands and a castle
11. The ones who fell
12. Ordinary devotion

A Last Word

Sources and Further Reading

A word of thanks

Chapter 1

Not the child on the card



The word angel means messenger. That already helps. An angel is not a pet of the devout, and an angel is not a dead relative who has been promoted. The dead who love us remain human. If they are with God, they are saints. They don't become another kind of creature.

People usually say “she is an angel now” out of love, especially after someone has died. They mean the person is close to God and still cares for us. I understand that. But strictly speaking it is not what the Church teaches, and the Church's teaching is actually even more interesting. Human beings remain human. Angels are a different order of creation. You may ask the saints for their prayers. You may ask the angels for their help. They are not the same thing.

Christian art needed a way to show that these messengers were not ordinary people, so painters often gave them wings. That image has roots in Scripture. Isaiah's seraphim have six wings. Cherubim in the Old Testament are living creatures around the presence of God. Later artists also borrowed older images of victory and speed. The Church never defined wings as a doctrine about angelic bodies. What she defined is the mission. An angel is a created spirit, sent, or standing ready to be sent.

The chubby child on a cloud is a later taste. It is harmless on a biscuit tin. It is less helpful if it is the only angel you can imagine when the Preface of the Mass says that we sing with them. In Scripture, angels are more often frightening than pretty. Daniel falls down. The guards at the

tomb look like lightning. The shepherds are terrified before they are glad. Balaam's donkey sees what the prophet cannot.

A Small Reflection

At a funeral people often want the person who has died still to be near. The Church says they can be near, as members of the communion of saints. That is already a great mercy. We don't have to turn a human soul into an angel in order to keep loving them. Keeping the two distinct honours both.

A Short Prayer

Lord God, thank you for the angels who serve you. Keep us from superstition, and keep our dead in your mercy as the people they actually are. Amen.

Chapter 2

A creature, not a mood



The Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, put it as plainly as a council can. God, from the beginning of time, created both the angelic and the earthly out of nothing. Angels are not eternal. Only God is eternal. They had a beginning. They are not pieces of God that broke off. They are creatures, as we are creatures, only without bodies.

St Thomas Aquinas thought about them with great care. One of his arguments is that each angel is its own species. Among us, many people share one human nature. In his account, angels don't share a nature in that way. Each is a unique intelligence. That is theological reasoning, not a sentence from a creed. The Church teaches that angels are created spiritual beings. St Thomas went further and tried to explain how such beings might exist and know.

On his account, we learn by looking, forgetting and looking again. An angel knows by the ideas God placed in that mind at creation, and by what God still chooses to show. Angels don't guess as we do. They also don't know everything. They don't see the secret of a human heart unless it is given them. They see more than we do. They don't see as God sees.

That is why a Catholic may honour the angels without turning them into a private religion. A creature can be honoured. A creature may not be adored. At the end of the Book of Revelation, John falls down before the angel who has shown him the city. The angel says no. I am a fellow servant. Worship God. I think that sentence is still the best warning we

have when devotion starts to drift.

A Small Reflection

Even the highest angel is still a creature. Wonder is allowed. Worship belongs to God alone. If we keep that distinction, devotion to the angels stays Catholic.

A Short Prayer

Creator of things seen and unseen, keep our wonder this side of worship.

Amen.

Chapter 3

Nine choirs



Many Catholics have heard of nine choirs of angels and couldn't say where the list comes from. Scripture gives names: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, powers, principalities, archangels, angels. It does not arrange them into the complete list of nine choirs. That arrangement developed later in Christian tradition.

A Christian writer of the late fifth or early sixth century, known to history as Pseudo-Dionysius, set the names out in nine choirs, in three groups of three: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; Dominions, Virtues, Powers; Principalities, Archangels, Angels. St Gregory the Great took up the scheme. St Thomas refined it. The liturgy still sings some of these names. Nobody has to pass an examination in the order.

Seraphim, in Isaiah, cry Holy, holy, holy and touch the prophet's mouth with a coal. Cherubim, in Genesis and on the Ark, guard holy things: the way back to the garden, and the space above the mercy seat. They are not babies. Used strictly, the word angel belongs to the last choir, the ones most often sent. Michael is called an archangel in the Letter of Jude. Gabriel is sent. Raphael walks.

The Church may use these names in praise. She doesn't hand you a directory. Some modern spiritualities sell courses in working with this choir or that. The Church has never run such a course. She invokes angels in prayer. She doesn't teach techniques for controlling them. If the nine names help you pray the Preface with more attention, they have done their work.

A Small Reflection

The Church can keep an old list of names without turning it into a method. We may sing with the choirs. We are not asked to treat them as contacts we can manage.

A Short Prayer

Holy, holy, holy Lord. Let us sing with the angels. Amen.

Chapter 4

Three names the Church will speak



The Bible names three angels in a way the Latin Church has received for public devotion: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. The Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, published in 2001, is quite clear. The practice of assigning names to holy angels should be discouraged, except in the case of these three, whose names are contained in Holy Scripture. Other names come out of apocryphal books and later lists. They are not part of the Church's public cult.

That isn't rudeness to whoever else may exist. The Book of Tobit itself speaks of seven angels who stand before the Lord. The Church prefers to use the names that Scripture actually gives us.

Michael means Who is like God? He appears in Daniel as a protector of God's people. The Letter of Jude mentions him in conflict with the devil. Revelation shows him at war in heaven. Catholic tradition has long invoked him in spiritual battle, at the hour of death, and as a defender of the Church. Later people also asked his help for soldiers and for high places. That grew out of the same tradition. It isn't an extra verse of Scripture.

Gabriel means Strength of God, or God is my strength. He appears in Daniel. In Luke he speaks to Zechariah in the Temple and to Mary at Nazareth. For the Church, the Annunciation is the centre of his mission. The message of the Incarnation was carried by an angel.

Raphael means God heals. His story needs a chapter of its own.

A Small Reflection

The Church's caution about names is not meanness. Three names from Scripture are already a great deal. Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are enough for public prayer: one for the battle we can't see, one for the Incarnation, and one for ordinary human need.

A Short Prayer

St Michael, St Gabriel and St Raphael, pray for us. Amen.

Chapter 5

Raphael on the road



The Book of Tobit is part of the Catholic Bible, and it is often left unread. That is a pity. I think it is one of the most human books we have about an angel.

Tobit is a faithful Israelite living in exile. He goes blind. He has money owed to him in a distant city, so his son Tobias is sent to collect it. A companion offers to go with him. The companion looks like an ordinary man. His name, he says, is Azariah. What Tobias doesn't know yet is who this man really is. Only at the end does he say: I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord.

On the journey they catch a fish. Raphael tells Tobias to keep the heart, liver and gall. Later those parts of the fish matter. Tobias comes to the house of Sarah. She has been married seven times, and each husband has died on the wedding night. The book names the demon Asmodeus. Raphael gives instructions. There is prayer. There is a marriage. Tobias and Sarah are brought through real danger into a faithful life together. Later the gall is used to heal Tobit's eyes.

Even the dog comes with them. I like that detail, because Tobit is a very down-to-earth story. An archangel spends most of the book looking like a travelling companion who knows the way, the medicine and the family business. When he finally names himself, he tells them to praise God and not to be afraid. Then he is gone.

If you have never read Tobit, I would recommend it. Raphael doesn't arrive as a theory of healing. He arrives as help on a real journey.

A Small Reflection

I like the fact that Raphael spends most of the story looking like an ordinary travelling companion. The help of Heaven walks beside a young man who has a job to do. We notice the help first. Only afterwards do we hear the name.

A Short Prayer

St Raphael, pray for those who are travelling, sick, lonely or waiting for help. Lead them always towards God. Amen.

Chapter 6

The Angelus



The Angelus is the Church's daily memory of Gabriel's visit to Mary. The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit. Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. Between the verses we say the Hail Mary. At the end we ask to be brought to the glory of the Resurrection.

The devotion grew slowly. It did not appear in one meeting. By the thirteenth century Franciscans were encouraging people to say Hail Marys when the evening bell rang after Compline. In the first half of the fourteenth century the evening custom of three Hail Marys was widespread in Europe and was encouraged by Pope John XXII. Morning and midday prayers developed later. The church bell reminded people to stop for a moment and remember what happened at Nazareth.

The Angelus gives Catholics a simple way of remembering the Annunciation during an ordinary working day. There is nothing mysterious about morning, noon and evening. They simply divide an ordinary working day. In a world before watches and phones in every pocket, the church bell did that work for people. So the Angelus became a simple way of stopping three times during the day and remembering what happened at Nazareth.

Mary's question in Luke is not unbelief. She asks how this can be. Gabriel answers with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth later feels the child leap in her womb. And of course the Annunciation is not only about a

message. What Gabriel announces actually happens: the Word becomes flesh. That is why the Angelus ends by pointing to the Resurrection. The Word who was made flesh is the Word who rose.

A Small Reflection

The Church did not leave the Annunciation inside one feast. She put the memory of it into the middle of ordinary days. Gabriel's greeting is allowed to interrupt breakfast, work and evening.

A Short Prayer

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Amen.

Chapter 7

Angels at Mass



You do not have to go looking for angels at Mass. The words are already there. In the Preface the priest says that we join the angels and archangels, the thrones and dominions, and all the hosts of heaven, in their unending hymn. Then the Church sings Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts. That hymn comes from Isaiah. The seraphim cry it in the Temple. At Mass the Church understands earthly worship as joining heavenly worship.

In the Roman Canon the priest asks that our offering be carried by the hands of your holy Angel to your altar on high. Other Eucharistic Prayers keep the same sense in different words. There is something here that we can easily miss at Mass. We are joining a worship that is already happening.

The older form of the Confiteor named Blessed Michael the Archangel among those from whom we ask prayer. The current ordinary form says simply all the Angels and Saints. Both versions are Catholic. It is important not to quote the older line as if it were still the only wording in use.

The Byzantine liturgy makes the same point in its own way. Before the Great Entrance the Cherubic Hymn tells the congregation that they are to lay aside earthly cares and receive the King of all, escorted by the angelic hosts. East and West agree on the fact, even when the music differs. When the Church gathers at the altar, she believes Heaven is not absent.

If that is true, then noticing the angels at Mass is not an extra devotion laid on top of the Eucharist. It is simply hearing the words we already say.

A Small Reflection

What changes if we really hear the words angels and archangels at Mass? Not the furniture, and not the length of the service. What changes is the sense of who is present. We are joining a praise that did not begin when we arrived and will not end when we leave.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, when we come to Mass, help us remember that the whole Church of Heaven worships with us. Amen.

Chapter 8

The prayer after Low Mass



In 1884 Pope Leo XIII ordered certain prayers to be said after Low Mass. They are often called the Leonine Prayers. At first they were connected with the difficult situation of the Holy See after the loss of the Papal States. In 1886 he added a prayer to St Michael. For decades Catholics heard it after Mass across the world. After the liturgical reforms of the 1960s it ceased to be an obligatory prayer at the end of Mass. Many people still say it privately. Some priests still use it with the people. It remains a lawful and serious Catholic prayer.

St Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray. And do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls.

You may have heard the famous story that Leo XIII had a frightening vision after Mass: a conversation between Christ and Satan, or a terrible picture of the Church under attack. I find the history of the St Michael prayer particularly interesting here. The prayer itself is historically documented. The dramatic vision story is much harder to document. The first printed versions appear decades later, and they don't all agree. We don't need to treat every later account as history in order to pray the prayer.

The prayer itself is sober. It asks Michael to defend the Church, and it leaves the victory with God. It doesn't invite us to collect stories about

demons.

A Small Reflection

A prayer can outlive the exact circumstances in which it was first ordered. The Leonine Prayers began as a response to a crisis in Leo's time. The St Michael prayer remains because the Church still believes that evil is real, and that we are not asked to face it as if we were alone.

A Short Prayer

St Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Amen.

Chapter 9

Guardian angels



The Catechism is both strong and careful. From infancy to death, human life is surrounded by the watchful care and intercession of the angels. Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life. That last sentence is St Basil, quoted by the Catechism. The feast of the Guardian Angels is kept on 2 October.

Catholic tradition has commonly taught that God gives each person a guardian angel. The Fathers and Doctors did not all explain the details in the same way. St Thomas thought the angel was given at birth. Others spoke of baptism, or of the beginning of life in the womb. The Church has not turned every one of those explanations into a defined dogma. What she does teach is the care itself. We are not left as if the unseen world were empty.

Daniel speaks of princely spiritual beings associated with nations. Christian tradition has often understood that as suggesting angelic care that extends to peoples as well as to persons. It would be too much to say, as if it were a defined sentence, that every country has its officially named guardian. The scriptural hint is real. The exact modern claim should stay modest.

Some saints spoke of seeing or hearing their guardian angel: St Frances of Rome, St Gemma Galgani, Padre Pio among them. Those experiences belong to particular lives. They illustrate devotion. They do not create a rule that everyone must expect visions, ask the angel's name, or send the angel on errands as a technique. The traditional prayer is

enough for most of us: Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide.

Believing in a guardian angel does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It means that God does not leave us without help. Guardian angels don't make life safe in the way a locked door does. They serve God's purpose for a life, and that purpose includes the Cross. There is still a real comfort here. We are not as alone as we sometimes feel.

A Small Reflection

A child can learn the Guardian Angel prayer. An adult can keep saying it without pretending that faith is a charm against illness, accident or grief. God does not leave us without help. That is already a great deal.

A Short Prayer

*Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here,
ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.*

Chapter 10

Caves, islands and a castle



On Monte Gargano in Apulia there is a cave shrine dedicated to St Michael. It is one of the oldest Michael sanctuaries in the West. Pilgrims have gone there since late antiquity. The later story says that the archangel made the place his own: a bull hidden in the cave, a bishop's hesitation, an arrow turning back, a dedication that no human hand needed to complete. How much of that narrative is history and how much is later tradition is a fair question. The shrine itself is a fact. The dedication is a fact. The legend grew around a real devotion.

Mont-Saint-Michel, off the coast of Normandy, is another Michael sanctuary set on high ground. A bishop named Aubert is said to have been told, in the eighth century, to build there. Again the later details are thicker than the earliest evidence. What remains visible is a monastery and a village on a rock that the tide still surrounds. People went on associating Michael with high and difficult places.

Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome was Hadrian's tomb before it was a fortress. Tradition says that during a plague in 590 Pope Gregory the Great saw St Michael sheathing his sword above the building, as a sign that the pestilence would end. The bronze angel on the roof remembers that story. Whether we treat every detail as reportage or as a way the city learned to pray, the meaning is the same. Michael is invoked when a people is afraid.

I find these places interesting because they show that devotion to the angels was not only something Catholics read about. People built

churches, made pilgrimages and prayed in these places for centuries. You can visit the stone without having to accept every later detail of the legend as a documentary.

A Small Reflection

The Church can keep a legend and still allow history to ask questions. Some of the stories connected with these shrines developed much later. That does not make the shrines themselves less important. Catholics have been praying in these places for centuries. The legends help explain why people first went there.

A Short Prayer

St Michael, defend your people. Guard the Church in her high places and in her ordinary streets. Amen.

Chapter 11

The ones who fell



The Church teaches that the angels were created good. Some freely rejected God. Satan is a creature, not an equal opposite of God. Evil is not a second god. Demons are not merely symbols for bad moods. They are fallen spirits. At the same time, not every illness, depression, accident, temptation or strange event is caused by a demon. Catholic discernment exists because people are very ready to explain too much, or too little.

Scripture is sober about this. The serpent in Genesis. The testing of Job. Jesus driven into the wilderness. The Gerasene demoniac. Michael's war in Revelation. The New Testament takes the conflict seriously, and it still keeps Christ at the centre. The devil is a defeated rebel who remains dangerous.

Catholics should not become fascinated with demons. Collecting names, watching dramatic videos, or trying to diagnose spiritual attack as a kind of hobby does nobody any good. The ordinary helps of the Christian life remain the ordinary ones: Mass, Confession, Scripture, the commandments, works of mercy, and prayer. If someone is genuinely frightened that something extraordinary is happening, the proper thing is to speak with a priest and let the Church discern. This book will not give instructions for lay exorcism.

Confession is not a cure for every medical or psychological problem. Mass is not a replacement for a doctor. They are the places where a baptised person tells the truth and receives grace. That is more use than curiosity about evil.

A Small Reflection

The Church will not say that Satan is a myth. She will also not let Satan occupy the centre of attention. Christ remains Lord. The fallen angels are creatures who refused that Lordship. We do not need to know more than that in order to pray well.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ, deliver us from evil. Keep us from fear that forgets you,
and from curiosity that forgets the Cross. Amen.*

Chapter 12

Ordinary devotion



Catholic devotion to the angels is actually very simple.

You can pray the Guardian Angel prayer in the morning. You can say the St Michael prayer when the news is heavy, or after Mass if that is the custom of the place. You can pray the Angelus at noon. You can listen for the angels in the Preface instead of letting the words pass. You can read the Book of Tobit. You can keep 29 September, the feast of the Archangels, and 2 October, the feast of the Guardian Angels. You can ask for help without trying to control, summon, or name the unknown.

That is already a complete devotion. It doesn't need a course, a journal of signs, or a technique for sending angels on errands.

The angels serve God. Some are sent to help us. We meet them in Scripture and in the liturgy. We are allowed to ask their help. After that, the simplest thing is often the best: say one of the old prayers, and then go on with the day.

A Small Reflection

Ordinary devotion is easy to despise because it looks like repetition. That is how the Church usually works. A short prayer said often will take you further than a complicated system remembered once.

A Short Prayer

Lord God, thank you for the angels who serve you. Teach us to ask their help simply, and to leave the rest with you. Amen.

A Last Word



The Church's teaching about angels is actually quite modest. They are real creatures. They serve God. Some are sent to help us. We meet them in Scripture and in the liturgy. We are allowed to ask their help. We are not invited to control them, to name the unknown ones, or to build a private system around them.

A grandmother who has died remains a grandmother. An angel remains an angel. The dead may pray for us. The angels may guard us. God alone is adored.

St Michael, pray for us.

St Gabriel, pray for us.

St Raphael, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading



Catechism of the Catholic Church, nn. 328–336, on the angels, the liturgy and guardian angels.

Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, on God as creator of the angelic and earthly orders.

St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, questions 50–64, on the angels. These questions are theological reasoning, not a second catechism.

Holy Scripture: Genesis 3 and 18–19; Isaiah 6; Daniel 8–12; Tobit; Luke 1–2; Matthew 18:10 and 28; Acts 12; Jude 9; Revelation 12 and 22.

Congregation for Divine Worship, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (2001), nn. 213–217, especially n. 217 on the names Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.

The Roman Missal, Prefaces and the Roman Canon, for the Church’s public language about angels at Mass.

Catholic Encyclopedia, “Angelus”, for the gradual growth of the evening, morning and midday devotion.

On the Leonine Prayers: Leo XIII’s 1884 order of prayers after Low Mass, and the addition of the St Michael prayer in 1886. Later vision stories are treated as tradition rather than as a documented event.

Shrines: the Sanctuary of St Michael on Monte Gargano; Mont-Saint-Michel; Castel Sant’Angelo, Rome. Distinguish the fact of the shrine from later legendary detail.

A word of thanks



There is no charge for reading this booklet. If Silent Homilies has helped you, and if you wish to support the work, you may. If you simply close the book and pray, that is already enough.

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