

Angels in our Life

Having looked at the development of angelology in the Scriptures and the figure of the Angel of the Lord, we conclude this series by talking about the role of angels in the life of the Christian. Their importance can be gauged by their presence in our liturgical tradition.

First, a word of cultural clarification: the angels in the Orthodox tradition are not the angels as often portrayed in our western culture. A quick Google search of images for angels will reveal a tradition that has suffered debasement and distortion. Those angels look either like beautiful women who model for a fashion company or cute plump toddlers who might model for Pampers (try the experiment yourself: Google “angels” and check the images. How many of the modern images of angels are young females?) In the Orthodox iconographic tradition angels are always portrayed as soldiers—i.e. as adult males. They look more awesome than they do attractive or adorable. Their “official” iconographic designation is “the holy bodiless powers”. No one would imagine that they might be fashion models in their spare time.

The presence and protection of angels begin in a Christian’s life very early indeed. In fact, it begins on the very day of arrival: in the priest’s service book are prayers to be used “For a Woman on the First Day after Childbirth”. Here at St. Herman’s it has been my joy and privilege to pray with the newly-delivered mothers of the parish within the first hour or so after childbirth, either in the hospital room or at home, and so most of the babies born within the parish experience the Church’s protective prayer when they are about an hour or so old. Part of one of those prayers reads, “Grant [the mother] health and strength of body and soul, and surround her with bright and radiant angels”. Since her precious little newborn bundle is then lying within her arms, the angels surround the child as well. I usually refer to this time as the child’s “Welcome to this world prayers”. As you see, as soon as the child arrives, the angels are there to guard and protect.

The next time angels are mentioned are in the prayers of the baptismal service. In the case of those born into the Orthodox Church, this service usually takes place a few weeks after the child is born. As part of the catechumenal approach to the baptism itself, there is one final exorcism prior to the candidates’ renunciation of Satan and adherence to Christ. At the beginning of that prayer the priest prays that God will “assign to his/ her life an angel of light who shall deliver him/ her from every snare of the adversary, from encounter with evil, from the demon of the noonday, and from evil thoughts”.

This is, of course, what the Church refers to as one’s “guardian angel”, the messenger from God whose military job it is to accompany the Christian throughout life. The angel’s task is to pray for us (a thankless task!), to defend us from demonic assault, and to protect us generally from harm. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews referred to this role when he wrote of the angels in passing, “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” (*Hebrews 1:14*).

The Church seems to have received this notion of guardian angels from Second Temple Judaism generally, and from the Lord in particular. Christ said concerning the importance of His disciples that their angels always behold the face of His Father in heaven (*Matthew 18:10*)—i.e., that their guardian angels always have access to the Father’s presence. And when Peter, newly sprung from prison by the angels, stood before the door of Rhoda who was hosting a meeting of the other disciples in Jerusalem, he was refused entry. “When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gates, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. And they said to her, ‘You are out of your mind!’ But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, ‘It is his angel!’” (*Acts 12:14-15*). Who says there’s no humor in the Bible? The point is that Rhoda and the others knew that Peter had a guardian angel who (they assumed) looked and sounded like him, and that since Peter was still in jail, it must have been this angel that Rhoda heard. They knew that Peter had an angel to guard him, just like everyone else in the room.

The angels then are a part of our life in Christ. That is why they feature in the Church’s calendar and on the doors of the icon-screen of every church. All things being equal, the icons of the archangel’s Michael and Gabriel adorn the

deacons' doors. (In churches dedicated to St. Michael the archangel, I have seen his icon in the place where the church's patron is located. In that case, the deacons' doors are adorned with icons of deacons, usually Saint Stephen and Saint Lawrence.)

And of course the angels feature in the prayer rule that we pray every day. Orthodox prayer books contain prayers to God (naturally), but also include a prayer or two to the Theotokos, to one's patron saint—and to one's guardian angel. In these latter prayers we ask our angel to pray for us, to guide us, and to protect us. We also ask the angel to forgive us. I often think that this last petition is necessary and apt because the task of protecting sinners like us must be no treat. The angels are holy and we are not. Really not. Staying with us all the time must feel to them a little like baby-sitting problem children, brats prone to misbehaving, tantrums, breaking things, getting filthy, meanness, spite, and absurd posturing and boasting. Add to this our human predilection for lust in all its horrible forms (a problem happily not found in children), and one begins to see how thankless their task really is. The least we can do is to say sorry from time to time.

C. S. Lewis once pointed out that all human beings were amphibious—part spirit and part animal, just as amphibians were part land animal and part water animal. Our life in Christ therefore partakes of this amphibious nature. We have physical components to our spiritual life—things like prostrations, kissing icons, signing ourselves with the cross, taking a bath and eating bread and wine (i.e., Holy Baptism and Holy Communion), lifting up our hands and singing aloud. We also have more intangible components to our spiritual life, things such as inner vigilance, struggle against temptation, repenting with inner tears, and opening our hearts to God. The priest has his role in the former; the angels have their role in the latter. They are always with us, and their unseen influence affects everything we do.

God is the Maker of all things, both visible and invisible, both the world of trees, animals, and human beings that we can see, and the world of angels and spirits that we cannot presently see. The two worlds do not co-exist separately, like oil and water. They are interlocked and interwoven. Everything is both physical and spiritual.

Consistent with this, there is a Jewish tradition that every blade of grass has its own angel which stands over it, saying to it, "Grow!" If you could hear what your guardian angel is now saying to you, I wonder what it is that you would hear him say?