

THE  
ANGELS

IN CATHOLIC TEACHING AND TRADITION



# THE ANGELS

IN CATHOLIC TEACHING AND TRADITION

Rev. Pascal P. Parente, S.T.D., Ph.D., J.C.B.

*“And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne, and the living creatures, and the ancients; and the number of them was thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: The Lamb that was slain is worthy to receive power, and divinity, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and benediction.”*

—Apocalypse 5:11–12

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina

Nihil Obstat: Joseph D. Brokhage, S.T.D.  
Censor Librorum

Imprimatur: † Paul C. Schulte, D.D.  
Archbishop of Indianapolis  
December 28, 1957

Copyright © 1961 by Society of St. Paul, New York, NY. Originally published by the Society of St. Paul, under the title *Beyond Space: A Book About the Angels*.

Copyright © 1973 by TAN Books. First published by TAN Books in 1973 under the title *Beyond Space: A Book About the Angels*. Republished by TAN Books in 1994 under the title *The Angels: The Catholic Teaching on the Angels*.

Library of Congress Catalog Card No.: 94-61948

ISBN: 978-0-89555-515-1

Cover design by Milo Persic, [milo.persic@gmail.com](mailto:milo.persic@gmail.com)

Cover image, Icon of the Archangels Gabriel, Michael and Raphael

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
[www.TANBooks.com](http://www.TANBooks.com)

2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Pascal P. Parente, Ph.D., S.T.D., J.C.B., scholar, professor and author, had a long-standing reputation as the foremost authority on ascetical and mystical theology in the United States. For 22 years he was professor of these subjects at Catholic University of America and for three years Dean of the School of Sacred Theology.

The secret of Father Parente's great popularity as a professor and author lay in his ability to express profound thought in simple, everyday language. In addition to numerous articles in theological magazines, Encyclopedia Britannica and the Catholic Encyclopedia, Father Parente published the following books: *The Ascetical Life*, *The Mystical Life*, *The Well of Living Waters*, *Susanna Mary Beardsworth*, *The Case of Padre Pio*, *School Teacher and Saint* and *Beyond Space*.

In June 1960, Father Parente retired to his country home in Cambridge, New York, where he divided his time between scholarly pursuits and gardening, his favorite hobby. He expressed the hope that, at last, he would have the opportunity to write the many books for which "the busy life of a professor left no time."

In 1970, the author passed to his eternal reward.



# CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . . . .	v
----------------------------	---

## Part I THE SPIRIT WORLD

### *Chapter I*

THE ANGELS . . . . .	3
Morning Stars of Creation . . . . .	3
The Population of the Angelic World . . . . .	9
What Is an Angel? . . . . .	14

### *Chapter II*

THE ANGELIC NATURE AND ITS OPERATION . . .	25
The Angelic Mind and Mode of Expression . . . . .	25
The Language of Angels . . . . .	28
Love and Free Will of the Angels . . . . .	33
Locomotion and Power of the Angels . . . . .	36

### *Chapter III*

THE SONS OF GOD AND THE SONS OF PERDITION . . . . .	42
Grace of God and Probation . . . . .	42
The Heavenly Hierarchies and the Choirs of Angels .	48
The Fallen Angels . . . . .	57

### *Chapter IV*

ANGELS AND THEIR NAMES . . . . .	66
----------------------------------	----

The Common Names . . . . .	66
The Name ELOHIM . . . . .	68
The Name “Sons of God” (BENEY ELOHIM) . . . . .	69
The Name “Messenger” (MALEAKH) . . . . .	69
The Name “Mediators” (MELIS) . . . . .	70
The Names “Ministers” (MESARETH) and “Servants” (‘EBHEDH) . . . . .	71
The Name “Watcher” (‘IR) . . . . .	72
The Name “Host” or “Army” (SABHA) . . . . .	73
The Name “Holy” or “Holy Ones” (QADHOS) . . . . .	73

### *Chapter V*

THE NINE CHOIRS OF THE ANGELS . . . . .	75
Specific Names of the Angels . . . . .	75
1. The Seraphim . . . . .	76
2. The Cherubim . . . . .	79
3. The Thrones . . . . .	83
4. The Dominations . . . . .	84
5. The Virtues . . . . .	84
6. The Powers . . . . .	85
7. The Principalities . . . . .	86
8. The Archangels . . . . .	87
9. The Angels . . . . .	88

### *Chapter VI*

PROPER NAMES OF THE ANGELS . . . . .	89
The Three Archangels . . . . .	89
The Archangel Michael . . . . .	90
The Archangel Gabriel . . . . .	96
The Archangel Raphael . . . . .	101

## Part II

## OUR GUARDIAN ANGELS AND ANGELOPHANIES

*Chapter VII*

THE GUARDIAN ANGELS . . . . .	115
-------------------------------	-----

*Chapter VIII*

THE GUARDIAN ANGELS OF NATIONS AND OF CHURCHES . . . . .	130
-------------------------------------------------------------	-----

*Chapter IX*

WHAT GUARDIAN ANGELS DO FOR US . . . . .	138
------------------------------------------	-----

*Chapter X*

ANGELOPHANIES OR ANGELIC MANIFESTATIONS . . . . .	145
Saint Margaret of Cortona (d. 1297) . . . . .	148
Saint Frances of Rome (d. 1440) . . . . .	150
Saint Gemma Galgani (1878–1903) . . . . .	153

*Chapter XI*

LITURGICAL CULT AND DEVOTIONS . . . . .	164
Confraternities and Associations . . . . .	174

BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	177
------------------------	-----



PART I

THE SPIRIT WORLD



# CHAPTER I

## THE ANGELS

### MORNING STARS OF CREATION

**P**URE spirits, the closest image and likeness of the Creator, were the effect of a divine act of creation. A spirit world was produced, at once, in its fullness and in its grandeur. When, at the word of the Almighty, light's first rays lit up the primeval, shapeless world, still "wrapped in a mist as in swaddling clothes," a wondrous song, a joyful melody filled the new heavens with never-ending strains. The Lord recalls these primordial times when He asks, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . When the morning stars praised me together, and all the sons of God made joyful melody."<sup>1</sup> These "sons of God," living witnesses of the creation of the material universe, were our Angels, the morning stars of creation.

It is an article of faith, firmly established in Scripture and Tradition and clearly expressed in Christian Doctrine from the beginning, that this spirit world, our Angels, began with time and was created by God. This traditional belief of both

---

<sup>1</sup> Job 38:4, 7. As a matter of fact, the Greek version of the Septuagint of the book of Job, which is a rendition of the accepted sense rather than of the letter of the text, translates "sons of God" of our Vulgate as "Angels," and the same verse reads as follows: "When the stars were made, all my angels praised me with a great voice."

the Old and the New Testament was given a more formal and solemn expression in the fourth Lateran Council in 1215: God “by his almighty power created together in the beginning of time both creatures, the spiritual and the corporeal, namely the Angelic and the earthly, and afterwards the human, as it were an intermediate creature, composed of body and spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

From this definition we learn that the Angelic spirits were created when time began and not from eternity. Like all other creatures they were produced by the almighty power of God, out of nothing. It would be heretical to affirm that the Angels are an emanation of the divine substance.<sup>3</sup> Spiritual substances do not divide or split or multiply in any form whatever, nor change one into another; their individual existence can only be explained by creation.

The creation of the Angels is implicitly affirmed in all those passages of Sacred Scripture in which it is stated that all things were made by God; explicitly and formally their creation is mentioned by Saint Paul in one of those incomplete enumerations of the Angelic orders: “In Him [the Son of God, the Logos] were all things created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether Thrones, or Dominations, or Principalities, or Powers: all things were created by Him and in Him.”<sup>4</sup>

Creation itself is a revealed truth, not so the exact time when the Angels were created. Nothing definite can be

---

2 D. 428. A similar definition was given in the Vatican Council in 1869, D. 1782, 1801.

3 Vatican Council, D. 1804.

4 Col. 1:16.

determined on this point from Sacred Scripture. Neither Jewish nor Christian Tradition agrees on the time when the spirit world, our Angels, came into existence. With many of the fathers of the Church we believe as very probable that the Angels were created long before the material world. They were certainly created before man, because we find them already distinguished as good Angels and fallen Angels on man's first appearance on Earth.<sup>5</sup> This circumstance would seem to imply that a long time, one or more cosmic period, had elapsed from the time of their creation. It does not seem probable that God, who created this world for His own glory, would have no created intelligences to witness the awe-inspiring act of its making. The passage from Job quoted above seems to prove that such witnesses did exist. They saw the marvelous manifestations of the Divine Wisdom, Power and Goodness and praised the Lord, filling the heavens with "joyful melody." Man himself was not there at the beginning of creation to give glory to God; some created intelligence must have been present. The Angels were the first splendors created to reflect the glory of the Eternal. The first creative act must have produced a creature to the image and similitude of God, a creature able to understand, love, thank and praise God. When the whole material world had been created, the Lord formed another similar creature, "a little less than the Angels," consisting of body and spirit, able to know, love and serve Him on Earth as the Angels do in Heaven. We like to imagine the creation of the material universe placed between the creations of two orders of

---

5 Gen. 3:1 ff.; 3:24.

rational beings: one heavenly, purely spiritual (the Angels) and one earthly, partly material, partly spiritual (Man).<sup>6</sup>

Saint Thomas, with some of the fathers of the Church, regards as more probable the opinion maintaining that the Angels were created together with the material universe because they are part of that universe. He does not regard as erroneous the opinion of those who hold that they were created before the visible world.<sup>7</sup> The peculiar astronomical notions common in his day attributed to the Angels many duties that pertained to the physical government of the world, and thus they appeared more as a necessary part of the visible world than they actually are.

Another reason for that opinion is the authority of some of the fathers who saw the creation of the Angels in the words of Genesis, chapter 1:1, more exactly in the creation of Heaven: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." Thus, for example, Saint Epiphanius: "The word of God clearly declares that the Angels were neither created after the stars nor before heaven and earth. It must be regarded as certain and unshakable the opinion that says: None of the created things did exist before heaven and earth, because 'in

---

6 This opinion is thus expressed in the *Constitutions of the Apostles*, in the Liturgy of the Mass, called *Clementina*: "By Him [Thy only begotten Son] didst Thou make, before all things, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the Aeons and the Hosts, the Powers and Authorities, Principalities and Thrones, the Archangels and Angels. And after all these, didst Thou make the visible world by Him, and all the things that are therein." And in St. Ambrose: "Even though the Angels, the Dominations and the Powers had a beginning, they were already there when this world was made." *Hexaemeron*, I, 5, 19. The same opinion is defended by St. Jerome (*Super Epist. ad Titum*, I), St. John Damascene (*De Fide Orthodoxa*, III, 3) and others.

7 *Summa Theologica*, Pars I, Q. 61, art. 3.

the beginning God created heaven and earth' so that this was the beginning of all creation, before which none of the created things existed."<sup>8</sup> Origen, however, is more careful with his opinion: "This also is part of the doctrine of the Church, that there are certain Angels of God and certain good Powers, which are His servants in accomplishing the salvation of men. When these, however, were created, or of what nature they are, or how they exist, is not clearly stated."<sup>9</sup> He does not read in the words of Genesis what is not written there. Modern Scripture scholars reject as unfounded the opinion of those who see the creation of the Angels in the creation of Heaven. Thus, according to Ceuppens, the whole account of Genesis, chapter 1:1, treats only of things visible, not of the invisible and immaterial: "Heaven and earth is an expression used by the Hebrews to mean the whole visible universe, the cosmos, the well-ordered world as we see it."<sup>10</sup> Even more emphatic is Father Von Hummelauer: "Now the Angels are certainly not meant by the word *heaven*, because they are never called *heaven* . . . nor does the context offer sufficient reason for us to affirm that Angels are truly implied even though only implicitly."<sup>11</sup>

The wording of the definition by the Lateran Council, reported before, which seems to be opposed to the opinion of priority of creation of the Angels, creates no difficulty whatever. It is said there that God "created together [*simul*] in the beginning of time both creatures, the spiritual and the

---

8 *Adversus Haereses*, Panar., 65, 5.

9 *De Principiis*, Preface, 10.

10 F. Ceuppens, *De Historia Primaeva*, p. 9.

11 *Commentarius in Genesim*, p. 88.

corporeal, namely the Angelic and the earthly.” It is commonly admitted that the word “together” (*simul*) in this case has not the meaning of parity of time or simultaneousness, but parity of action. The expression was taken from Scripture where it is said, “He that liveth forever created all things together,”<sup>12</sup> meaning not that all things were created at the same time, but that all things were likewise created with no indication of time. Saint Thomas points out that this definition of the Lateran Council was aimed at a Manichaeian heresy of emanation. It did not bear on the time of creation of the Angels but on the fact that they were produced by the act of creation, just like the corporeal, earthly creatures.<sup>13</sup>

Both the existence and the creation of the Angels are dogmas of faith presenting one of the most inspiring and consoling aspects of our religion. As the first creatures of this universe, the Angels were the first revelation of the Supreme Goodness of God and of His transcendent Beauty. Even though part of the universe, the Angels really constitute a world to themselves, the spirit world, so exalted and so different from our visible, material world.

When God created the first life in this world He bade it to multiply upon the earth. The Lord blessed the first human couple He had created, saying, “Increase and multiply and fill the earth.”<sup>14</sup> It took mankind many thousands of years to discover and fill most of the earth. Not so with the spirit world. There are no more Angels today than when they were first created at the beginning of time. They filled the heavens

---

12 Ecclus. 18:1.

13 *Opusculum*, XXIII.

14 Gen. 1:28.

from the start, and their number was complete from the beginning. Their spiritual nature, just like our human soul, cannot be produced except by the Divine act of creation, with the difference that the human soul is created only in the course of time, when it is needed to inform a human body at the time of generation. Except for the apostasy and desertion of the fallen Angels, the Angelic family has remained the same from the time it was called into being by the loving Father of all.

No matter when the Angels began, there was a time in that endless eternity when the Angels, like all the other creatures, did not exist. The Eternal Wisdom, the Word of God, refers to such an epoch in the timeless existence of God, where It says, "The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His ways, before He made anything from the beginning."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, they were not created from all eternity but in the beginning of time.

## THE POPULATION OF THE ANGELIC WORLD

The exact number of Angels that inhabit the heavenly Jerusalem has not been revealed. To try to determine their number must appear like an idle question, since man has not been able even to determine the exact number of stars. The vast number of stars, each one a sun in itself, is awe-inspiring and quite beyond our powers of comprehension. Until now, no known mechanical device has been able to even remotely suggest the magnitude of this visible universe. What must be

---

<sup>15</sup> Prov. 8:22.

the magnitude, the splendor and the glory of the invisible, immutable Angelic part of the universe? What the vastness of the spirit world, the number of those splendors that decorate the heavenly home, the House of God, if the house of man, our Earth, is surrounded by such an infinity of stars? Who has ever been able to count all the men and women who have inhabited this Earth from the beginning to the present time?

Without Divine revelation we would be unable to know not only the number of Angels but even whether they exist at all. It is then on the data of revelation that we must depend in order to give some vague idea of the transcending vastness of the spirit world. These data actually suggest a multitude of Angels that is beyond all our power of comprehension.

Describing the throne of God surrounded by heavenly spirits, the prophet Daniel is at a loss in determining the number of those heavenly beings, our good Angels: “Thousands of thousands ministered to Him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before Him.”<sup>16</sup> Bible commentators tell us that the figures here given by Daniel do not express a definite number. They serve to convey the idea of a multitude that is far beyond the power of human language to express. More than figures, they are really hyperbolic expressions for an innumerable multitude of Angels standing around the throne of God.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> 7:10.

<sup>17</sup> J. Knabenbauer, *Commentarius in Danielelem Prophetam*, p. 195. See also R. V. O’Connell, *The Holy Angels*, p. 105; and C. F. Keil, *The Book of the Prophet Daniel*, p. 230.

The throne of the Most High, surrounded by His hosts of myriads and myriads of Angels, is a picture occurring frequently in the Scriptures of the Old Testament: "I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the army of heaven standing by Him on the right hand and on the left."<sup>18</sup> Awe inspiring is the vision described by the Prophet Isaias: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated, and his train filled the temple. Upon it stood the Seraphims, the one had six wings, and the other had six wings: with two they covered his face, and with two they covered his feet, and with two they flew. And they cried one to another, and said: Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God of hosts, all the earth is full of his glory."<sup>19</sup> Saint John the Evangelist, in his Apocalypse, describes a vision of many thousands of Angels round about the throne of God: "And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many Angels round about the throne . . . and the number of them was thousands of thousands."<sup>20</sup>

Saint Thomas holds that the multitude of the Angels far exceeds every multitude of material creatures,<sup>21</sup> quoting to this effect from Pseudo Dionysius who wrote, "The scriptural tradition regarding the Angels gives their number as thousands of thousands, multiplying and repeating the very highest numbers we have, thus clearly showing that the Orders of the Celestial Beings are innumerable for us. So many are the blessed Hosts of the Supernal Intelligences that they wholly surpass the feeble and limited range of our

---

18 III Kings 22:19.

19 Isa. 6:1 ff.

20 5:11.

21 *Summa Theo.*, I, Q. 50, art. 3.

material numbers.”<sup>22</sup> The more perfect creatures, writes Saint Thomas in the same article of the *Summa*, are produced in greater number, because God intends primarily the perfection of the universe in the production of things. With this principle in mind it is easy to understand how the number of the Angelic spirits must exceed beyond all comparison the number of human souls created from the beginning of the world until now and to be created from now to the end of the world.

When we speak of the number of Angels we refer to the good Angels who now live with God and minister to Him both in Heaven and on Earth, that portion of the spirit world which remained faithful to God after the fall of Lucifer and his rebellious spirits.

Nothing is revealed about the number of the fallen Angels. However, some theologians believe to have found something like a proportion between good Angels and demons (fallen Angels) in the words of the Apocalypse: “Behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his head seven diadems; and his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth.”<sup>23</sup> The stars of Heaven are understood by these authors to be a figure of speech for Angels and the red dragon for Satan: “On the strength of this text certain mystically inclined theologians estimate the proportion of the fallen angels to those that remained faithful as one to three, 1:3. Whether this estimate be correct or no,

---

22 *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, XIV.

23 Apoc. 12:3 ff.

we may safely assume that the number of the faithful Angels exceeded those who fell away.”<sup>24</sup>

An event that took place in the days of the prophet Eliseus seems to corroborate the view that there are many more of the good Angels than of the fallen ones; many more on our side than against us. A vast army of Syrians had been sent to apprehend the prophet who was alone with his servant. At the sight of the Syrian army, the servant became deadly frightened, not knowing that a more powerful Angelic army had been sent invisibly by God to defend the prophet: “And the servant of the man of God [Eliseus] rising early, went out, and saw an array round about the city, and horses and chariots; and he told him saying: Alas, alas, alas, my lord, what shall we do? But he answered: Fear not, for there are more with us than with them. And Eliseus prayed and said: Lord, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw, and behold the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Eliseus.”<sup>25</sup>

This powerful array of the heavenly armies ready to defend one of God’s prophets reminds us of the Divine Savior who, at the very moment of being delivered into the hands of His enemies, reminded the over-zealous Simon Peter, “Thinkest thou that I cannot ask my Father, and he will give me presently more than twelve legions of Angels?”<sup>26</sup>

What interests us, at present, are those “twelve legions of Angels.” A legion of soldiers, in New Testament times, was composed ordinarily of 6,826 men. Perhaps we should

---

<sup>24</sup> Pohle-Preuss, *God the Author of Nature and the Supernatural*, p. 341.

<sup>25</sup> IV Kings 6:15 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Matt. 26:53.

not take the expression as a definite number but rather as a symbolic figure of a vast multitude. In that dark and sad hour that marked the beginning of His great humiliation, the Savior calls God His Father and reminds His disciples that the hosts of Heaven are at His command. One of those heavenly spirits had come down to comfort Him.<sup>27</sup> Far more numerous than all the stars of Heaven, all the flowers of spring and all the children of men are God's Angels, the blessed citizens of the spirit world, the fulgid, glittering morning stars of creation.

### WHAT IS AN ANGEL?

"The Angels are spirits," says Saint Augustine, "but it is not because they are spirits that they are Angels. They become Angels when they are sent, for the name Angel refers to their office not to their nature. You ask the name of this nature, it is *spirit*; you ask its office, it is that of an Angel [i.e., a messenger]. In as far as he exists, an Angel is a spirit; in as far as he acts, he is an Angel."<sup>28</sup> The word "angel," comes from a Greek word meaning "messenger." In the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the most frequently used name to designate the Angels is *mal'akh*, which means messenger or legate.

This generic name "angel" does not reveal anything about the real nature of those celestial beings besides the fact that they are occasionally sent on a mission as messengers or legates of God to men. Because only on such

---

<sup>27</sup> Luke 22:43.

<sup>28</sup> *Serm. in Ps. 103*, I, 15.

occasions, and in such a quality, they make themselves visible to men, they have been given the name of messengers from the most common duty and office they fulfill toward God's children here on Earth: "And to the Angels indeed he saith: 'He that maketh his Angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.'"<sup>29</sup>

The office of being a messenger, an Angel, is neither the most important nor the most common among the duties of the celestial spirits in the court of Heaven; it alone does not offer enough ground for speculation on their true nature and operation.

Heaven is the true country of the good Angels: "Their Angels [of the little ones] in heaven always see the face of my Father who is in heaven."<sup>30</sup> Even while engaged here on Earth as guardians of the little children, they remain the blessed comprehensors, enjoying the vision of God, "the face of my Father." They are by grace the happy citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem from the beginning.

"Let us remember," writes Saint Bernard, "that the citizens of that country are spirits, mighty, glorious, blessed, distinct personalities, of graduated rank, occupying the order given them from the beginning, perfect of their kind . . . endowed with immortality, passionless, not so created, but so made—that is, through grace, not by nature; being of pure

---

<sup>29</sup> Hebr. 1:7. In this passage, Saint Paul quotes verse 4 of Psalm 103, the same verse Saint Augustine commented on in the above quotation. Literally that verse should read, "Who makest thy messengers the winds, and thy ministers the burning fire." Saint Paul, and with him Saint Augustine and many other fathers, interprets that verse allegorically and apply it to the heavenly messengers of God, the Angels.

<sup>30</sup> Matt. 18:10.

mind, benignant affections, religious and devout; of unblemished morality; inseparably one in heart and mind, blessed with unbroken peace, God's edifice dedicated to the divine praises and service. All this we ascertain by reading, and hold by faith."<sup>31</sup>

All this is really what we gather and ascertain by reading the sources, Scripture and Tradition, regarding the nature, character and blessed condition of the Angels. All the qualities of the Angelic spirits listed here by Saint Bernard are most beautiful, and they are theologically correct. However, we have omitted one of the qualifications from the above passage in order to make the quotation perfect. The words omitted are these: "having ethereal bodies." On this very important point of the perfect spirituality of the Angelic nature there still remained some confusion in the days of Saint Bernard, as it had been the case for several centuries during the Patristic period. Saint Bernard expresses his doubts and hesitation on this point when he adds, "As regards their [the Angels'] bodies some authorities hesitate to say not only whence they are derived, but whether in any real sense they [the bodies] exist at all. If anyone is inclined to think the derivation of these bodies a matter of opinion, I do not dispute the point."<sup>32</sup> It is Catholic doctrine<sup>33</sup> today, even though not yet an article of faith, that the Angels are pure spirits, incorporeal substances, free and independent of any material body, ethereal or otherwise.

---

31 *De Consideratione*, Lib. V, cap. 4.

32 *Ibid.*

33 D. 428, 1783.

By “pure spirit,” we understand a subsistent intelligent being whose subtle and transcendent nature is in no way whatever composed of matter, however refined and ethereal. An Angel then is such a spirit. Both his existence and operation are free and independent of matter; nor is the Angel related to a body, like the human soul, which even though perfectly spiritual, is naturally related to the human body as an essential part of the whole human nature. The Angelic nature is wholly spiritual; man’s nature is composed of body and spirit

One of the reasons why so many of the ancient writers, including a good many among the fathers, attributed subtle bodies to the Angels, even while admitting their spiritual nature, is the fact that for them the words “body” and “spirit” did not have that definite and perfect philosophical meaning which those words acquired especially during the Scholastic period of Christian philosophy. Such a cloudy philosophical notion, for example, appears manifest in the *Catecheses* of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem. For him, whatever has not a gross body can rightly be called a spirit; so that the air we breathe, any vapor or gaseous matter was called spirit or spiritual body.<sup>34</sup> They attributed such kind of bodies to Angels. Others made a distinction between earthly bodies and heavenly bodies, attributing a subtle, rarefied nature to the latter. They were confirmed, it seems, in this erroneous opinion by a false interpretation of Genesis, chapter 6:2 ff., according to which the “sons of God” mentioned there, who took to themselves wives and procreated children, were erroneously

---

<sup>34</sup> *Catecheses*, XVI, 15.

understood by them to be Angels; whereas they were human beings, the descendants of the religious and devout Seth and Henos. Then again, they were led to believe that those ethereal human forms assumed by the Angels in their various apparitions here on Earth were part of their Angelic nature. Saint Basil the Great believed that the Angelic nature was a “breath of air or an immaterial fire.”<sup>35</sup> This is why they are localized, he said, and become visible, in the form and shape of their own bodies, to those who are worthy to see them. We find these notions about ethereal bodies both among the Greek and the Latin fathers. While Saint Jerome has nothing definite regarding the nature of the Angels, he rejects the argument in favor of a corporeal nature inferred from Genesis. Saint Augustine thought it more probable that they had subtle bodies. According to him the demons, before their fall, had such heavenly bodies; since their fall, however, their bodies consist of damp, thick air.<sup>36</sup> Cassian clearly expresses the same opinion in these words: “Even though we define as spiritual some of the substances, such as the Angels, the Archangels, and the other powers, as also our own souls and certainly this subtle air, nevertheless they are by no means to be regarded as incorporeal, for in their own way they possess a body whereby they subsist, even though it is a much more subtle one than our own. . . . Hence it appears that God alone is incorporeal.”<sup>37</sup> It is more surprising to find the same opinion expressed by Saint John Damascene, who knew the writings of Pseudo Dionysius on this subject for which he had

---

35 *De Spiritu Sancto*, 38.

36 *De Genes, ad Litt.*, III, 14, 15; *De Civ. Dei*, XXI, 10, etc.

37 *Collationes*, VII, 13.

great admiration. While expressing some hesitation regarding the true nature of an Angel and while defining him as *asomatos* (without a body) he finally agrees with the current philosophy of calling the angelic nature “gross and material” if compared to God: “An Angel is an intellectual substance, endowed with liberty, perpetually active, without a body, serving God, having attained immortality by a gift of grace, the form and the limits of whose substance only its Creator knows. However, it is said to be incorporeal and immaterial only in reference to us, for anything compared to God, Who alone is incomparable, is found to be gross and material. The divine nature alone is immaterial and incorporeal.”<sup>38</sup> In the West, Saint Gregory the Great, while not completely free of the philosophy of “spiritual bodies,” inclines vigorously toward the opinion of Pseudo Dionysius that makes the Angels pure spiritual beings.<sup>39</sup>

Discussing the term “incorporeal” Origen writes, “The term ‘incorporeal’ is disused and unknown, not only in many other writings but also in our own Scriptures.” He then explains the expression “an incorporeal demon” by saying, “It must be understood that he [Christ] had not such a body as demons have, which is naturally fine and thin, as if formed of air [and for this reason is either considered or called by many incorporeal], but that he [Christ] had a solid and palpable body. Now, according to human custom, everything which is not of that nature is called by the simple and

---

38 *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 2, 3.

39 *Moral.*, II, 8; IV, 8; *Dialog.*, IV, 29.

ignorant incorporeal; as if one were to say that the air which we breathe was incorporeal.”<sup>40</sup>

From what has been said so far we must conclude that the terms “spirit” and “spiritual” were not taken by all in the same sense in which they are taken and understood today, in reference to the Angelic nature. A number of the earlier Scholastics retained the view of ethereal bodies in the case of the Angels, as Rupert of Deutz, Saint Bernard (as we have seen) and Peter Lombard. On the other hand Robert Pulleyn and Hugh of Saint Victor contended that the Angels must be regarded as pure spirits and immaterial beings. Owing to the position taken by the IV Lateran Council, the latter view became more common during the first part of the 13th century. Even though the doctrine had not been defined by the Council, it had nevertheless been made quite clear to what class of creatures the Angels belong. The Council divided all creatures into three classes: the purely spiritual, the Angels; the purely material, the material world; and the partly spirit, partly matter, human beings. By one of his subtle theories, Scotus is said to have ascribed bodies to Angels but in an entirely different sense.<sup>41</sup> Saint Thomas with Saint Albertus Magnus, Henry of Ghent, Durandus and many others were

---

40 Origen, *De Principiis*, Preface, 8.

41 *De Rerum Principiis*, Q. 7, art. 1, 2, 3. Some regard this opinion as wrongly attributed to Scotus by some Franciscan scholars. Rather than an ethereal body, he assigns to both Angels and human souls a *materia primo prima*, which is simply a passive potentiality (*potentia passiva*) material in its nature. He also attributes to both Angels and human souls a composition of matter and form, but because, he says, neither Angels nor human souls have a *forma corporeitatis* to complete the *materia primo prima*; they remain incorporeal, even though composed of matter and form.

in favor of the spirituality of the Angels in the strict sense of the word.<sup>42</sup>

This opinion of the Angelic Doctor regarding the nature of the Angels has become the common doctrine. They are pure spirits, not composed of matter and form, but composed of essence and existence, of act and potentiality. This doctrine is found already in the writings of Pseudo Dionysius<sup>43</sup> and of a few of the fathers, whom Saint Thomas follows closely in this question.

In his work on *The Celestial Hierarchies*, Pseudo Dionysius thus describes the Godlike immateriality of the Angels and their superiority of nature above all other creatures: “Those natures which are around the Godhead [the Angels]

---

42 *Summa Theo.*, I, Q. 50, art. 2. All these writers did not admit the distinction of *materia primo prima* excogitated by Scotus and attributed by them to all creatures alike. The Thomist principle was that material substances, and material substances alone, are composed of matter and form: “In material things there is one element which determines to a special grade, and that is form; and another element which is determined, and this is matter: . . . whereas in immaterial things there is no separate determinator and thing determined; each thing by its own self holds a determinate grade of being.” Although there is no composition of matter and form in an Angel, yet there is act and potentiality. Such a kind of composition is understood to be in the Angels; and this is what some say, that an Angel is composed of that whereby he is and that which is, or essence and existence, as Boethius says.

43 *De Divinis Nominibus*, IV. “Through these [the rays of God’s undivided goodness] all spiritual beings and virtues and powers [whether perceived or percipient] had their beginning. Through these they exist and possess a life incapable of failure or diminution, and are untainted by any corruption or death or materiality or birth, being separate above all instability and flux and restlessness and change. And whereas they are bodiless and immaterial, they are perceived by our minds, and whereas they are minds themselves, they possess a supernatural perception and receive an illumination [after their own manner] concerning the hidden nature of things, from whence they pass on their own knowledge to other kindred spirits.”

have participated of It in many different ways. On this account the holy orders of the celestial beings are present with and participate in the Divine Principle in a degree far surpassing all those things which merely exist, all the irrational living beings, and rational human beings. For molding themselves intelligibly to the imitation of God, and looking in a supernal way to the Likeness of the Supreme Deity, and longing to form the intellectual image of it, they naturally have a more abundant communion with Him, and with unremitting activity they tend eternally up the steep, as far as is permitted, through the ardor of their unwearying divine love, and they receive the primal radiance in a pure and immaterial manner, adapting themselves to this in a life that is wholly intellectual.”<sup>44</sup>

Because of their wholly spiritual and immaterial nature, the Angels occupy the first and highest place in the scale of created things. Man himself is second on the scale of creatures: “Thou hast made him [man] a little less than the Angels.”<sup>45</sup> Just like an Angel because of his spiritual, immaterial soul, less than an Angel because of his material body.

Every Angel is a distinct being, an individual subsisting in an intellectual nature; consequently, every Angel is a person. The classical definition of a person, by Boethius, applies to them most perfectly: a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. Every Angel is an individuated nature, endowed with intelligence and liberty, placed outside of its cause in the world of reality. All the essential elements of an

---

44 *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, IV.

45 Ps. 8:6.

individual personality are clearly manifest in those manifold accounts of Angels appearing in this world and dealing with man, as reported in the Bible, for example, the Archangel Raphael and young Tobias, Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, Gabriel and Saint Zachary. Rightly, therefore, Pope Pius XII condemns the opinion of those who “question whether Angels are personal beings.”<sup>46</sup>

Not only are the Angels real personal beings, but because of their spiritual nature wholly untrammelled by matter, their personality is far superior to human personality. Human beings differ from each other merely as individuals of the same species; Angels on the contrary, according to Saint Thomas, differ from each other specifically;<sup>47</sup> so that we may say that there are not two Angels of the same species; each of them is his own kind. This fact implies a far more perfect individuality, a higher form of personality than the one known to us. Because of this specific difference, it follows that every single Angelic creature reveals an entirely new aspect of the eternal beauty and glory of God. To them apply the words of Saint Paul: “Star differeth from star in glory.”<sup>48</sup>

This is the wondrous Angelic world that the Lord created at the beginning of time. In our earthly way of thinking, we may conceive it as a living diamond whose myriads of facets reflect constantly and harmoniously the divine splendors of the eternal glory of God. Among all created things, the Angels are the best reflectors of the divine light: “As our sun, through no choice or deliberation, but by the very fact

---

46 Encyclical *Humani Generis*, 26.

47 *Summa Theo.*, I, Q. 50, art. 4.

48 I Cor. 15:41.

of its existence, gives light to all those things which have any inherent power of sharing its illumination, even so the [supreme] Good . . . sends forth upon all things according to their receptive powers, the rays of its undivided Goodness.”<sup>49</sup>

---

49 P. Dionysius, *De Div. Nom.*, IV.