

which ended ten years ago; it is in order that we may continue, in our own several ways, that same Christlike apostolate with the example of this great Friar Preacher to guide us and his devotion to inspire us; it is that he may still preach through our means. We can hardly hope to measure up to his gigantic stature, but please God we may bring to the work something of his zeal for truth, something of his unswerving sincerity, and above all something of his burning and absorbing love of our Lord.

So many of us already owe him so much. We can best repay our debt by ensuring, in whatever way we can, that the good he wrought is not interred with his bones. There is only one other thing he himself would ask of us, as he so often asked in his lifetime, that we should pray for his soul. And we, who trust that the Lord he loved has taken him into the eternal happiness of heaven, nevertheless will make that prayer for him. May his great soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.

THE ANGELS AND PRAYER

ELIZABETH STOPP

IT is the business of the angels to mediate between God and mankind, to make his wishes known to us by enlightening our intelligence so that we may see more clearly what God wants of us, and thus may run more freely in the way of his holy will. It is their office to draw us ever closer to that love and praise of God which is their very existence; but whatever they are doing to help us, their gaze remains fixed upon the eternal Godhead, the Blessed Trinity. We are told in the scriptures that the angels have eyes at the back of their head as well as the front; in fact, in Ezechieh's vision the cherubim and the very wheels upon which they move are studded with eyes: 'And their whole body and their necks and their hands and their wings and the circles were full of eyes, round about the four wheels.' (10, 12.) This is the symbolism, magnificent in itself, though humanly helpless in the face of the unutterable, by which the prophet tries to convey the truth that the angels never lose sight of God although they are at the same time wholly

bent upon the execution of his commands here on earth.

If this is so, in what great intensity of prayer and love must the angels be concentrated when our Lord is made present on the altar at Mass and, his sacrifice renewed, comes to feed us with himself? Wherever the Blessed Sacrament is, there is God, and there, because God is infinitely simple and contained only within himself in the three persons, there is the whole court of heaven, all the angels and all the saints. That is what the Incarnation means: all heaven come down to earth in his train, ours for the asking, ours for the taking, in the hidden way we may 'take' it and live in it already here on earth. St Paul says to the Hebrews: 'The scene of your approach (to God) now is Mount Sion, is the heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God; here are gathered thousands upon thousands of angels.'

The angels will help us to 'ask' and to 'take' if only we will turn to them, especially during the sacrifice of the Mass. Indeed, we make them happy by asking for their help, if, as St Thomas confirms, we may speak of increasing the happiness of beings who are with God; for thus we in turn help them to fulfil their function. They are like the priest. In the book in which he sets forth his ideas and speculations about the heavenly hosts, Dionysius tells us that the angels are often seen in the scriptures in priestly robes, because 'they initiate us to the contemplation of heavenly mysteries, and because their existence is wholly consecrated to God'. (Coel. Hier. 15). The liturgy of the Mass is crowded with angels, explicitly and by implication. We are hardly aware of them; they are part of the well-known landscape of the Mass. But it is a most rewarding thing to go through the Mass and single them out for once, for when they slip back into position, everything is made more vivid.

Before the Mass begins, when we are purified by the sacramental of holy water in the *Asperges*, the priest asks God to help us through his holy angel:

Hear us, O holy Lord, almighty Father, eternal God:
and vouchsafe to send thy holy angel from heaven to
guard, cherish, protect, visit and defend all that dwell
in this house. Amen.

For the purpose of this prayer the church is called *habit-*

aculum—'little house'. The adjective is perhaps surprising in such a context, but conveys exactly that sense of homeliness and family feeling, of Nazareth, that should reign at the celebration of the feast of love, even though the *habituaculum* be St Peter's in Rome. The string of verbs explaining what it is we ask of God's angel: *qui custodiat, foveat, protegat, visitet atque defendat* . . . forms a kind of crescendo of security in keeping with the impression conveyed by the use of the word *habituaculum*. The word *foveat* is especially full of God's tenderness: his angel is to make us feel welcome and thoroughly at home while we are his guests at the *Agape*; he is to love and cherish us on our Father's behalf, not only to fulfil the sterner duties of guarding and defending against malign influences those who have come to the banquet; he is to extend loving hospitality in the full sense of the word, so that no one need go away saying: 'Thou gavest me no kiss'.

This prayer is not only said in a church, but wherever the *Asperges* is liturgically used, as in the sickroom before the priest administers Holy Communion. When the Blessed Sacrament is brought there, any house becomes God's house, God's little house;—(it is baffling to translate the Latin diminutive which is in itself quite devoid of the tinge of sentimentality that may slip in with the adjective 'little' in English)—it becomes a church and a temple of God for the time being, with one special angel to visit and to cherish this one guest who is in need.

The angels, as it has been said, are recalled in the Mass in two different ways: by explicit mention, as in the *Asperges* prayer, and implicitly, as for instance in the *Gloria*, where the very words of the angels are used: *Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*. Praise and glory are then repeated in words of earthly, not heavenly origin, and finally the supplication of the *Kyrie eleison* is continued in a plea for mercy addressed to God the Son, the Lamb of God. Every word in the Mass draws, or should draw, our thoughts to the Word Incarnate, and there could be no better preparation of mind and heart for the Calvary that is to come than the memory of Bethlehem. The angels sing to us anew every day in the Mass; the Church is telling us that

we are those shepherds, or perhaps she is trying to tell us that we should be as those shepherds, humble, poor, intent, if we could hear and see anew the angel of the Lord who comes to stand by us at Mass, as he came to the shepherds in the fields; and that the glory of the Lord may shine about us now as then, but not now in a way that can make us afraid, for we know the tidings of great joy that he comes to bring. 'And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.' At the *Gloria* we join in their song, pray with them in a way that is actual and real, for they are still singing this same song of praise in heaven, and because of Christ's coming, heaven has begun for us on earth. Up to a point it depends on us whether at Mass we are as the shepherds who hear them, or as those same shepherds when the angel had left them and gone back into heaven. Our Lord said to St. Catherine of Siena: 'Think of me and I will think of thee'. So it is with the angels. Devotion to them is, with God's grace, an infallible way of keeping them as it were on earth, and of enjoying their help at all times, but more especially at Mass.

And then, when the angels have become a vivid reality to us, we think of them as friends, as fellow creatures before the throne of God and joined in common worship at God's altar. We can only guess clumsily at their mode of existence, but because we love them as friends, no detail about them seems trivial, no speculation merely idle. It all helps to make us more at home in what is after all our real home, and that is what the angels want. Thus we may be permitted to speculate about the joy of the angel chosen to speak to the shepherds on Christmas night, and destined for this message from all eternity; the happiness of those other multitudes who were allowed to join him and sing the first *Gloria* on earth—'for now the angels can satisfy their eager gaze' (1 Peter 1, 12; R. Knox translation). We may ask these angels, through their King in the manger and their Queen who watched over him, to offer our praise with theirs, and to give us a share, however small, in their joy and certainty and love.

In the priest's prayer before the gospel there is another implicit reference to the angels and to the kind of service they may render at God's bidding. The prayer refers to a chapter in Isaias that contains one of man's most glorious visions of the angels. The priest says, and we may say it with him and for him and ourselves in our hearts:

Cleanse my heart and my lips, O almighty God, who didst cleanse the lips of the prophet Isaias with a burning coal: vouchsafe through thy gracious mercy so to cleanse me that I may worthily proclaim thy holy gospel. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

This vision of Isaias (Ch. 6) is the source too of a later part of the words of the Mass.

The prophet is praying in the temple before the altar when he sees God himself surrounded by the first among the choirs of angels, the seraphim. These are the angels that are nearest to God in the celestial hierarchy. They 'excel in what is the supreme excellence of all, in being united to God himself' (*Summa* I, 108, 6). According to the interpretation of Dionysius, their name means light and heat, and shows their burning love for God; the ardour, intensity and irresistible force with which they lift and transfigure all creatures, angels or men, that are below them, kindling them with that same living fire of love by which they are themselves consumed, purifying them and transmitting to them the light which dispels all gloom and darkness. The live coal with which the angel in Isaias's vision touches the lips of the prophet is symbolical of the seraphim's nature and mission. The coal was kept there for burning the incense that was to be either offered by itself at the altar of incense, or to hallow and purify the victim, the burnt-offering that the priest offered to God for sins. When the prophet was touched with the coal it was as though he himself were to be made pure and clean as the victim, his sins were to be consumed in the sight of God by being given a share in the burning purity of the seraphim. For how can he, a sinful man, belonging to a fallen race and a sinful nation, live, having seen the glory of God, and how can he be made ready to tell others of his vision?

The gospel which the priest reads every day at the Mass

gives us a vision of the living God, of his words and deeds when he became flesh and dwelt amongst us. We need, and we pray for the purity of heart and mind that sees God; and like the seraphim we need to be translucent to his light and love so as to put no obstacle in his way when his light and warmth want to shine through us upon others, proclaiming his holy gospel. That is what the prayer means, that being cleansed and afire with love, we may be ready to say with Isaias: 'Here am I. Send me', when God asks: 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?'

At high Mass the priest asks God to bless the incense: 'through the intercession of blessed Michael, the archangel, standing at the right hand of the altar of incense', and then the bread and wine, the crucifix and the altar, finally the priest and we ourselves as sharing in his priesthood before God, are incensed, to show our willingness to offer ourselves to God with our Lord. According to a commonly accepted opinion, the archangels belong to the third and last order of angels (principalities, archangels and angels), who are charged with the actual execution of the work inspired by God, lovingly contemplated by the first order of angels, disposed according to its universal causes by the second order, and finally applied to particular effects by the third. Angels look after ordinary human beings, archangels look after important ones charged with some great task, or upon some special occasion. They announce great things. Thus it was the archangel Gabriel who went to the city of Galilee, and whom before that, the priest Zachary had found standing at the right hand of the altar of incense, waiting to tell him of the coming birth of his son, St John the Baptist. At Mass, St Michael, the prince of the heavenly host, stands at the altar ready to repel and defeat Satan once more by virtue of the sacrifice of the second Adam; and ready to carry on high the incense that rises as a sign of our own sacrifice and self-offering to God, or as an emblem of prayer, ascending to God from a heart on fire with love for him. Incense is consumed by fire, changed into an ethereal substance; it signifies our spiritualisation by means of the fire and the death of sacrifice, at Mass, at every moment of our lives. And at this the angels of God preside. [*To be concluded.*]