

NATURES OF FIRE

GOD'S MAGNIFICENT ANGELS

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Introduction

Holy Card Angels

If you've ever seen a holy card of a guardian angel, it's probably one that features a large, feminine, winged being in a flowing gown with a star above her head hovering next to a couple of little kids as they cross a rickety bridge over a raging stream. She's making sure they don't fall in the water.

Isn't that sweet.

Actually, no. It's the worst possible depiction of an angel for at least three reasons:

1. Angels aren't female.
2. Guardian angels don't hover around you.
3. A guardian angel's primary job is not to keep you from drowning.

While I'm at it, let me add a fourth. Those fluffy angel wings everybody likes? No guardian angel has them.

Shocked? Good.

My mission is to purge all those pietistic and awful cultural angel images from your mind because real angels – God's magnificent servants – aren't like that. They're more like incandescent fire, and we all know we shouldn't play with fire.

Angels are awesome in every respect. They are awe-inspiring and *awe-full* in the traditional meaning of filling you with wonder about things greater than and beyond you.

Natures of fire

Angels are so vastly powerful, intelligent, and full of life that there is nothing on earth even remotely like them. We should never attempt to reduce them to comfortable versions of ourselves. They're not the stuff of holy cards.

They are *manifestations of the holiness of God* that comes to meet us in the circumstances of our real lives.

The prophet Daniel had some insight into this: "His throne was flames of fire," Daniel said, "with wheels of burning fire. A river of fire surged forth, flowing from where he sat; thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads stood before him" (Dan 7:9-10).

Those thousands and myriads ministering to God are angels, and they seem to be immersed in that "river of fire", a metaphor for God's holiness.

To understand invisible things we have to use analogies to visible things, even though analogies always fall short of the reality. In the case of the angelic nature, physical fire serves as a fitting metaphor.

Fire symbolizes many human dynamics: we can burn with love, be on fire with passion, radiate goodness or glow with zeal. We can “catch fire” or “get fired up” or “burn with intensity” at anything that enthuses us. Fire cleanses fields of chaff and purges impurities from metal. All of these images are rich with spiritual overtones pointing out some of the capacities of the angelic nature.

Of course, fire can also burn your house down. Wildfires rage out of control in destructive rampages. Metaphorically, you can “scorch” someone with criticism or “set fire” to someone’s reputation.

The destructive aspect of fire is also a metaphor – for the flames of hell that can encompass you through the power of sin and evil. Angels are sent to protect us from that too because God fights fire with fire.

Supernatural fire

Have you ever considered how many times scripture associates angels with fire? It’s more than a casual connection if we consider the number of references in question. Here are ten of them from Genesis to Revelation, and there are at least a dozen more:¹

- The angel that stood guard over Eden held a fiery sword (Gen 3:24)
- Two angels destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone (Gen 19:24)
- An angel appeared as a “pillar of fire” to protect the Israelites (Ex 13:21; 40:38)
- Elisha opened the eyes of his servant to see thousands of angels on the hillsides in the form of horses and chariots of fire (2 Kgs 6:17)
- A seraph angel purged Isaiah’s prophetic lips with fire (Is 6:7)
- “Flashing fire” came out of Ezekiel’s Cherubim (Ez 1:4)
- An angel stands in the fiery furnace with the three young men (Dn 3:25)
- Angels will be dispatched at the end of time to throw the wicked into the eternal flames (Mt 13:40.50)
- An angel of the Resurrection appears as a bolt of lightning over the tomb of Christ (Mt 28:2)
- An angel is in charge of the fire of the altar of incense in heaven (Rev 8:5).

The holy angels are associated with fire as a symbol of their identities, but they are not warm and cuddly creatures as we understand emotional warmth. They are

¹ For example: Ex 2:23ff; Num 21:6; Jdg 6:21 and 13:20; 2 Kgs 2:11; Ps 104:4; Ez 1:14; Dan 7:10; Mt 25:41; Lk 10:18; Heb 1:7; Rev 20:1; Rev 20:10.

perfectly good creatures as we understand the spiritual warmth of the saintly personality.

Angels bear that fire of God's holiness to the world, sometimes in dramatic ways. We see the most obvious example of it in the story of Moses' calling. Moses is captivated by a fascinating sight, which is described as something more than a burning bush. It is a fiery angel: "The angel of the LORD appeared to him as fire flaming out of a bush. When he looked, although the bush was on fire, it was not being consumed" (Ex 3:2)

From there, the Lord Himself takes over: "God said: Do not come near! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Ex 3:5). The angel has done his job. He bore the supernatural fire to Moses and initiated the dialogue and encounter with God. The angel brought sanctification, even to the earth itself, which he consecrated by his presence in the vanguard of God's appearance.

In many biblical passages, it is difficult to distinguish the angel messenger from the Lord in any given encounter. Numerous stories in the Old Testament refer to the "angel of the Lord" who speaks with the voice of God Himself or who initiates encounters, such as in the account of the burning bush, then promptly disappears and God continues.² That is a privilege of the angelic mission as divine emissary and a sign of how perfectly one the angel is with his Lord.

Servants of the original fire

Yet, we must keep the *infinite difference* between the divine nature and the created angelic nature very much in mind as we read. Angels are worthy of admiration and respect in every sense, but they are not God, not divine entities, not supernatural³ personas or demi-gods. If angels are natures of fire, it is because they are servants of the original, supernatural fire "from which all fire is born," says English writer Judith Lang.⁴

Nor must we ever presume that God *needs* angels in any way to accomplish His purposes. Everything the angels do, God could easily accomplish by divine decree. When He chooses to send them as His representatives, it is because He loves them and has given them some clear purpose in His Kingdom. God bestows His holiness on all His creatures in ways befitting their natures, just as Christ gave His Church the great commission to evangelize the world.

In this book I've lit a dozen or so spiritual flames for you in the form of short chapters to help you come to know more about the angelic nature. I hope this book

² When Abraham meets three angels in Genesis 18, they are presented as "the Lord" himself, a symbol the Fathers of the Church all considered to be a symbol and foretaste of the Trinity.

³ I explain why angels are not "supernatural" beings in Chapter 2.

⁴ Judith Lang, *The Angels of God: Understanding the Bible* (New York: New City Press, 1997), 125.

opens your mind to a profound sense of wonderment at God's magnificent servants and that your journey to understanding them will be full of the light and warmth of the spiritual fire holy angels bring to the world.

This angel fire can totally transform your spiritual life and set you aflame with zeal and virtue. That fire will put you more firmly on the path to heaven, if you let it.

Angels do that. *That's* their job.

Appendix: Fire and Ice

If God's angels are fire, then Satan's angels – demons – are ice, in a spiritual sense. And needless to say, fire and ice don't mix.

I'm speaking here not of a difference in their natures, which are both angelic, but of the character of their personalities. Angels and demons are spiritual persons in every sense, endowed with intellect and will, created with a personal ego and identity, which is to say that both angels and demons have a very personal involvement in their respective missions. They put their whole personalities into their objectives, for good or evil.

Ice-cold personalities

Scripture and the Church's teaching on hell suggest that the state of damnation is a kind of torture of flames (which I hope I never have to verify by personal experience), but that's not a description of the demonic personality. Demons are ice angels.

We understand physical cold as an absence of warmth. Spiritual cold (evil), then, is an absence of goodness, just like darkness is an absence of light. Demons as *persons* lack any shred of goodness or light.

The fallen angels were created good but chose to reject God's plan of salvation, which involved exalting human nature over the angels through Christ. Some of them chose not to serve God and lost their place in heaven. At the same moment, they lost their original innocence, the state of grace and every virtue, although they retained the natural powers of intellect and will that God gave them.

Like a black hole – a patch of outer space turned in on itself – the fallen angels' rebellion drained them of all Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, which are essential attributes of God's personality, if we may call it that. At their fall, the demons were entirely corrupted, turned inside out. They became the personification of lies, ugliness and evil. That's what happens when you reject God.

In his famous work, *The Inferno*, the medieval poet Dante Alleghieri had an intuition of this inversion of the right order of things when he placed Lucifer at the lowest point of hell encased in ice, chewing for all eternity on Judas, the traitor, and Brutus, the betrayer of Julius Caesar. For Dante, betrayal was the greatest sin because he considered it Satan's original sin against God.

Common sense also recognizes the difference between a person with a warm personality, full of goodness and life, versus someone with a frigid personality whose negative characteristics flow out of a life of misery or evil.

My sister tells the shocking story of a chance encounter she had with one of the 9/11 hijackers, Mohammed Ata, who came into a convenience store she was managing prior to the 2001 attack. She recalls a literal chill run down her spine the moment she laid eyes on him. She didn't understand the ice-cold feeling at the time, but later she saw his picture identifying him as one of the hijackers, and then she understood the freezing aura the man's *very persona* seemed to exude.

In an even more penetrating way (because they are spiritual beings), demons are ice-cold spiritual vacuums, totally devoid of all good. They are malevolent personalities who have deliberately chosen their own personal hell away from God and against God. In so doing, their angelic mission became more sinister than the worst possible criminality we can imagine on earth. They know they cannot destroy God, so they propose to destroy *His children*.

In God's plan, however, they can only do that with our permission.

Fear and consent

The Church's teaching is very clear about the power demons exercise over the world and can *potentially* exercise over human beings:

According to Sacred Scripture...the dominion and the influence of Satan and of the other evil spirits embraces *all the world*. We may think of Christ's parable about the field (Mt 13:38-39), about the good seed and the bad seed that the devil sows in the midst of the wheat, seeking to snatch away from hearts the good that has been 'sown' in them (John Paul II, General Audience, August 13, 1986).

Because of their higher nature and natural gifts, they can harm us, but only if we are foolish enough to give them an opening. St. Padre Pio used to say that the devil is like a rabid dog on a chain. He can only do us harm if we come within the radius of his chain.

The Church is equally clear, however, about the superiority of the holy angels over the demons and is unequivocal in the assertion that each of us has a personal guardian angel who protects us from them. In Chapter 6, I pointed out the teaching of Thomas Aquinas in this regard. Several images of the New Testament also affirm the

restraining power of God's grace on the demons (see especially 2 Thes 2:7 and Rev 20:6).

The position of the believer towards demons then, must always be the balanced attitude of the Church. On the one hand, because they are superior beings, we must *prudently fear* demons. On the other hand, because they are subordinate to the power of God and His holy angels, we should not *be afraid* of them in a sense of unwarranted paranoia that they are lurking around us at all times ready to strike at a moment's notice. Neither should we believe that they can easily overpower us. They can't, because God doesn't let them.

Of course, we cannot avoid the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, but these are indirect influences of the forces of evil, for which the Church has plenty of wholesome spiritual advice. In the same General Audience cited above, Pope John Paul II said: "We may think of the numerous exhortations to vigilance (cf. Mt 26:41; 1 Pet 5:8), to prayer and fasting (cf. Mt 17:21)." In other words, God has given us all the tools we need to avoid the indirect advances of the unholy ones into our lives.

We can add another basic point of common sense to this teaching. Generally speaking, we have much more to fear from the evil deeds of human beings than any direct harm from demons. That's because we cannot avoid associating with human beings, but we can – and must – avoid any direct association with demons. *They cannot harm us without our consent.* There is good reason for the Church's "No Contact Policy" I spoke of in Chapter 3.

If it's hard to get your mind around how ice angels can co-exist with the fires of hell, think of what we mean when we use the term "freezer burn".

And here's a sneak peak into the whole book...

Natures of Fire: God's Magnificent Angels

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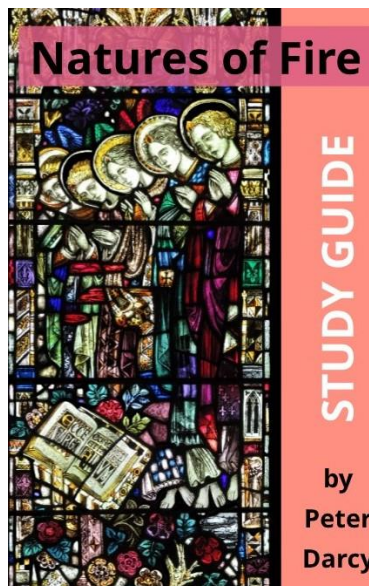
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