# God, Angels and Us

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What does the title of this lecture conjure up for you? With what expectations have you come? I imagine that for some it may have seemed predictable as the title of an Aquinas Lecture. After all, Thomas Aquinas, the medieval Dominican friar who died in 1274, has for long been known as the "angelic doctor". And the predictability may, for some of you, confirm that much Catholic theology is remote and irrelevant – medieval in the pejorative sense of what is outdated, angels on pin heads and all that, or prescientific, angels as just a crude way of talking about UFOs, those parts of the universe we don't yet understand. Worse, you may fear that angels have replaced Christ as the mediator, the go-between, of our relationship with God:

> To which of the angels, then, has God ever said: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you?" ... It is not under angels that he put the world to come, about which we are speaking. (*Hebrews* 1:5, 2:5).

For some of you, however, seeing angels in the title may have been very reassuring. This will not be a lecture playing down mystery and transcendence; this will not be an exercise in reducing Christianity to a generalised concern for justice and peace issues to transform society and its structures. Angels, even a rumour of them, announce awe and other-worldliness:

> Early successes, favourites of fond Creation,
> ranges, summits, dawn-red ridges
> of all forthbringing – pollen of blossoming godhead,
> junctures of light, corridors, stairways, thrones,
> chambers of essence, shields of felicity, tumults
> of stormily-rapturous feeling, and suddenly, separate,
> mirrors, drawing up again their own
> outstreamed beauty into their own faces.

I hope I am right in my hunch about the kind of expectations with which you are likely to have come. You will notice that some of these expectations are in fact reservations, hesitations, about the whole topic of angels. For some it is a mistake to take such an interest in angels (indeed to put them between God and us in the title), while for others we can never say enough about angels in a secularised age like ours. By the end of the lecture I hope to have convinced you that

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neither group is totally right, yet each has something to contribute. In doing things this way, I am already paying homage to Thomas Aquinas, who worked in much the same fashion in his most famous work, the *Summa Theologiae*. There is something you want to explore and affirm concerning God, angels and us, a thesis. First you must take objections seriously, listen patiently and present fairly; not straw men set up to be knocked down quickly. One of the many reasons for reading Aquinas is to learn to be subtle, to make distinctions rather than work in a world of yes-no choices, the style of the debating society. It can well be said that Aquinas never spoke without making distinctions. It is unlikely that the objections will contain no truth – they are likely to modify one's original position, one's provisional understanding. So with the angels. The objectors are right to point to all kinds of distortions and deviations in what we might at first take to be the Catholic position – angels are both less important than some think; and more important than some think.

## I

Unlike us today, the religious worlds reflected in the Scriptures were more easily disposed to believe in spirits, what might loosely be called the supernatural. Massive atheism and even agnosticism is a fairly modern phenomenon, a novel phase in humanity's history. While we have to work hard to get a hearing for God and the spiritual, to find a place in our culture and our media, earlier ages had to prune back, as it were, an all too pervasive other-worldly reality. The New Testament takes for granted the reality of good and bad spirits, angels and devils, and has to make way for Jesus Christ as the one and only mediator, the one who is truly God and truly human, and for us as the special objects of God's care and love. Could Christ really be that significant if he were a man and not an angel? Are we really worth that much attention from God? But the letter to the *Hebrews* is firm about the incarnate Son's unique importance and about our own. "Are they [the angels] not all ministering spirits, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" (1:14). Sure enough, we tend to find a strong involvement of angels at key moments in the history of *our* salvation: apart from the numerous accounts in the Old Testament, think of the annunciation to Mary, the nativity of Christ, the angels at the empty tomb.

This lesson in caution about the importance of angels, given that their existence and ministry were undoubted, has been continued by the Church's official teaching. One of the risks of belief in spiritual beings superior to us is that we might confuse them with God. There was an important succinct statement in the creed of the Council of Nicaea (325) declaring God to be maker of all things, visible and invisible. Pope Leo in 447 condemned as heretical the belief that the

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devil was never good and that his nature was not of God's making but arose out of chaos and darkness . . . the substance of all things spiritual and corporeal is good, and nothing is evil by nature. God the creator of the universe made nothing that was not good. We can linger a bit longer on the next authoritative and elaborate pieces of official teaching on angels, made at Lateran IV in 1215, a few years before Aquinas was born. That Council placed a statement of faith at the beginning of its documents, affirming God as:

> creator of all things invisible and visible, spiritual and corporeal; who by his almighty power at the beginning of time created from nothing both spiritual and corporeal creatures, that is to say angelic and earthly, and then created human beings composed as it were of both spirit and body in common. The devil and other demons were created by God naturally good, but they became evil by their own doing.

Lateran IV was therefore making a synthesis of what Nicaea and Pope Leo had taught. Aquinas accepted the revelation by God of Scripture, and tried to make theological and philosophical sense of it as both a believing Catholic who relied on Church teaching and as a man of his age. Since the 13th century, the century of Lateran IV and Aquinas, Pope Pius XII insisted on the personal nature of angels, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives a fairly extensive coverage. Angels, we are taught, are personal and immortal creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendour of their glory bears witness. The whole life of the Church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of the angels and, indeed, from the beginning until death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. Christ is firmly at the centre of the angelic world; they are *his* angels. There is a separate section on the fall of the angels.

Apart from Aquinas's method in doing theology, and his passion for it, the other main attraction of Aquinas for me is how he gives such a complete account of reality and yet does not neglect careful distinctions, a respect for differences. Aquinas really took to heart Lateran IV's point that we are beings composed of both spirit and body. And both dimensions of our existence need defending. Mistakes about this have far reaching and devastating consequences. Aquinas did not think we are like animals, he thought we are animals. Our materiality, our bodilyness is not a hindrance to a life of the soul but the only way we have to be spiritual. Being bodily is not a phase or a stage for us, to be left behind for good when we get to heaven. Aquinas says that my soul is not me. So for God to save only "souls" would not be to save *us*. It is the resurrection that is our central hope. Not the immortality of the soul. The wrong kind of interest in angels, the wrong kind of awe-struck admiration is dangerous. Our Saviour was human on earth and remains so in heaven, in his resurrected body.

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Again, this is why the sacraments are so important and why they are what they are: tangible, visible realities that transform us when used by God. Our earthly, earthed, material and mundane lives are our nature, created and intended by God, and we shall be saved as such, not by being turned into angels, into pure spirit. David Jones, artist and poet, admired Aquinas as "life-giving" and was constantly inspired by his theology. In a memorable reflection on Christmas, and the occasion is significant, Jones concluded his exploration of the importance of sacramentality by remarking that if we forget the animals (he had the nativity scene in mind) we are halfway to forgetting the creaturely in ourselves, and that in turn will impoverish the sacramental in us, for though the beasts know nothing of sacrament we could know nothing of it either did we not share the bodily with them. No wonder, added Jones, that the theologian most associated with the angelic hierarchies should have declared that our having bodies is an advantage. That theologian was Aquinas. We must not think of Christ as chiefly spirit, as a super-angel, for that would cancel out the coming near to us of God, the incarnation. Then the gap between God and us would be huge, we would be cosmically lonely:

> Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence. For Beauty's nothing but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear, and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrible.

Rilke, from whose *Duino Elegies*, I have quoted twice, found it easier and more convincing to believe in angels than in Christ. The pathos of his lament, of his elegies, could be and was met in the salvation Christ, God and man, brings us: "It was not the angels that he (Christ) took to himself, he took to himself the line of Abraham. It was essential that he should in this way be made completely like his brothers so that he could become a compassionate and trustworthy high priest for their relationship to God, able to expiate the sins of the people" (*Hebrews* 2:17). Catholic theology holds that angels are immortal, and Aquinas was clear that although angels, like everything else would fall out of existence if God did not uphold them, they do not contain an intrinsic source of perishability. How unlike us. In good and bad, for good and bad, we are more in an uncertain flux and mutability than the angels.

The context of the kind of statement of the faith made at Lateran IV was opposition to the errors of the Cathars ("the pure") and similar groups, among them the Manichaeans and the Albigensians. As it happens it was precisely to oppose the errors of groups like these that St Dominic founded the Order of Preachers in 1217 and that Aquinas joined soon after. In his treatise on the angels, *De*

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*substantiis separatis*, Aquinas confronts by name and at some length the errors of the Manichaeans. Nowadays in the wilder reaches of New Age thinking there is this kind of devaluing of the human and material in the name of the spiritual but it has its secular form too – the obsession with virtual reality, artificial intelligence, electronic chat rooms, inner or higher consciousness, the attack on the physically or mentally disabled, the cult of the mind untrammelled by the flesh. What is increasingly valued, and from different directions, is the "person" as the inner self, disconnected from politics, the social, justice and peace issues and all that cherishes our wounded human flesh. In bioethics this kind of dualism, this devaluing of the material in the name of some higher or inner "real" is tragically destructive. What seems to be gaining ground in some quarters is a secularised angelology which privileges disembodied communication and devalues interdependence in our frailty – a kind of fantasy to be like angels, pure intelligence without body. I am not, of course, suggesting that many individuals hold at any one time all these different devaluations of the truly human. It just seems to me that a certain mind-set or culture is gradually accumulating and it needs resisting.

A number of things can go wrong for those who have an undue attachment to the angelic, perhaps best summed up in saying that the incarnation is bypassed. Now of course people as a matter of sociological fact believe in all kinds of otherworldliness and experience the supernatural in a variety of ways. It is for the Christian to be alert not to be influenced by such distortions, even in the name of the "spiritual", and to try to complete the yearning this attraction for the angelic shows. If our horizon stops at the angelic, if we only hear the rumour of angels, then we need to hear through it the voice of God, the Word made flesh. Christ's incarnation enfleshes, it gives history and material creation a redemptive direction from within. It also makes the Church the main sacrament of the presence of God in time and space, All this is blotted out or avoided if a cult of the angelic remains a projection of our best and deepest self, a way of going beyond the normal bounds of the real without the demands of commitment and conversion tied to discipleship of a particular person, Jesus Christ, in a community willed by him, the Church. The angels are the angels of *Christ*, and they serve. The beauty of the angels taken on its own can be a fatal attraction, a narcissistic looking into the mirror of our own dreamed flawless perfection. Not only might the centrality of Christ, the suffering servant, risk being displaced by the mesmerising beauty of the angelic but indeed God himself might be outshone. Yet Aquinas is careful to say that even in bliss the angels who contemplate the divine wisdom do not fully comprehend it and do not know all its secrets (I q.57 *a.5* ad 2). In terms of the vision of the Word, and of created things in the Word, the angels do indeed know mysteries of grace but not all mysteries.

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Angels are not eternal because God alone exists from all eternity, and angels (like rational souls) have a nature that is immortal because it was given them by God, and, adds Aquinas for good measure, given when he chose (I q.61 a.3 ad 3). God remains in important respects unknowable to angels and to us, and this is a characteristic of Aquinas's theology.

It is at this point that a whole string of questions asked by Aquinas take on more relevance than might seem at first sight (I q.60 a.5): are the angels loving by nature? Are they loving as choosing to love? Does an angel love himself naturally or by choice? Does one angel love another as himself, by natural love? Does an angel naturally love God more than himself? One part of the answers given is:

> Since then the good, taken quite universally, is God himself, and since all angels, all men and all other creatures exist as contained within that good – because every creature, precisely in respect of what it is by nature, belongs to God – it follows that the instinctive natural love of each angel and each man is for God first of all and for God more than for self. Otherwise, if this were not true, if creatures by nature loved themselves more than God, then natural loving would be perverse; and would not be perfected, but destroyed by charity. (I q.60 a.5c)

Aquinas took a great interest in God as creator and in his own goodness and that of his creation – picked out at Lateran IV as we saw. The infinite goodness of God is best represented and shown, thought Aquinas, in a *variety* of created goodnesses than in a few samples of it. What the Scriptures reveal and the Church confirms, experience matches. Inanimate objects, plants and animals have a goodness of their own and we share it to some degree. Angels have a goodness of their own and we share it to some degree. It is dangerous for us to forget or violate either dimension of our nature, and unless we have some kind of conscious awareness of both non-spiritual matter and non-material spirits we become forgetful of our own natures, of who we are. In important ways our environment, our ecology, includes animals and angels. As David Jones put it in the preface to his *In Parenthesis*, we are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and we presume to other and more radiant affinities.

Can we say a little more about the dangers of neglecting the angels, our radiant affinities, of forgetting that we are spiritual as well as material beings? Yes. Some of it will be the familiar Christian criticism of a completely material life in all senses of the word "material". Angels remind us that we deal even now with more than flesh and blood, that whatever sense we manage to give to the human will include more than biology and will not be terminated by death. What we do in space and time will have infinite repercussions Although authoritative Church teaching on angels has been cautious,

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Catholic devotion and piety have often moved beyond this. So perhaps a word about guardian angels here. The notion is an ancient, pre-Christian one but it seemed to have been expressed most clearly, and to be influential thereafter, by Honorius of "Autun", a 12th century theologian who spent some years in England. He thought that at conception the soul of each of us was entrusted to an angel. Interestingly, the *Catechism* had originally said that human life is under the watchful care and supervision of the angels "from infancy" – this was changed, more in line with Honorius although he is not quoted, to "from the beginning". The *Catechism* (par.336) is somewhat generic in speaking of "human life" rather than individuals, and sometimes the notion of a guardian angel has been tied to baptism. Saint Padre Pio's devotion to his own guardian angel is well known, as was the encouragement he gave to others to turn to their guardian angels. Such personal devotion appropriates the universal affirmation concerning guardian angels found in the liturgy for their annual memorial (2 October). The Opening Prayer in the Roman Missal given for that day's Mass says:

> God our Father,
> in your loving providence
> you send your holy angels to watch over us.
> Hear our prayers, defend us always by their protection
> and let us share your life with them for ever.

This prayer encapsulates much good theology: the prayer is addressed to God, the angels are *his*, they are sent in his loving providence, to protect us now and to be sharers with us of God's life for ever. The wording is close to St Bernard's celebrated sermon on Psalm 90 ("He has given his angels charge of you, to guard you in all your ways"), used by the Roman breviary for 2 October. Bernard adds that we should show reverence for the presence of the guardian angels, devotion on account of their loving care, and trust in their protection.

Let me suggest an analogy with lions, by way of explanation. As we sit here, in parts of Africa there are lions roaming free. Those lions are in many ways utterly dependent on us, on our care. Not only could we annihilate all of them very quickly, if we chose to, but their continuing and free existence is dependent on our providing them with a suitable, protected environment, with assuring their supply of food and water and so on, and even intervening to assure their health, breeding and continuation. All this is, of course, is unknown to the lions as they go about expressing their natures as lions in their own way. As human beings we too are under the providential care of angels, whether aware of it or not. And we can scarcely fathom how that watchful care is exercised over us. Aquinas says that God exercises his providential care for us at times through secondary causes and this gives them dignity and worth. Incidentally, it is in terms of "guardian

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angels" that some of the more abstruse discussion in Aquinas on angels and space have an application that can readily be appreciated (angels on pin-heads and all that). The main point to grasp from Aquinas on this (I q. 52 a. 1 c) is that angels can be said to exist in place, but not in the same sense as we say this of a body. When an angel's power is applied in any way to a given place, he can be said to be locally there – where the body is to which it is applied. Not that the angel is contained by a place. Turning to the human soul, Aquinas remarks that as the soul is in the body as containing it and not as contained by it, in somewhat the same way, an angel is in a given bodily place not as contained by it but as containing it. Once again, we see how Aquinas's interest in angels, and in part from where he derives his knowledge of them, is bound up with making sense of the human.

Returning to the mention of devotion and piety, the liturgy, the Church at prayer, needs considering in the context of angels. Here too, an awareness of the presence of angels will rekindle in us aspects of our worship of God that might be neglected in a more horizontal, community centred style of liturgy. Liturgy is indeed an expression and a strengthening of community, especially the eucharist, if community is given its deep meaning of including those who have died in a state of grace and the angels. Recall that angels are part of our created environment, our ecology. To pray in the presence of the angels is to enhance the majesty and otherness of God, who is different from us far beyond the difference between us and angels. To pray at Mass with the myriad of angels, to the Lord God of hosts, is to locate ourselves *beyond* as well as within the material, corporeal world. We bring more of ourselves, as it were, in the presence of God. If we do not hear the cry of the oppressed at Mass and pray for them we are not being true to our natures, if we do not hear the choirs of angels at Mass and praise with them we are not being true to our natures. We bring a thinner self, a less real self to church. There is a traditional of considering the psalmody as an angelic office, and a fairly rare and revealing autobiographical comment of Aquinas's is apposite. In his accomplished but incomplete treatise *De substantiis separatis*, given over to the subject of angels, Aquinas confesses to its recipient that "since we cannot participate in the solemnities sacred to the angels (*sacris angelorum solemniis*) . . . we must compensate with the labour of writing whatever is taken away from the office of singing the psalms." This is probably an allusion, with a note of regret, to the privilege of being dispensed from attending office in common that masters in theology, as Aquinas was, were granted by the Dominican constitutions. The foundational *Rule* of St Benedict (ch. 19) reminded monks that they sang the psalms in the sight of God and his angels.

Among the forms of prayer available to us, a central place must go to participation at Mass, and within that the moment of the Sanctus is

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a privileged encounter with angels. This was how to see an angel, Cornelius Ernst explained. The Sanctus of the Mass, the thrice holy, occurs in one form or another in every known liturgy except, curiously, the earliest of these from the beginning of the 3rd century and the one liturgy derived from it. But the others, east and west, all have some form of the Sanctus. The liturgy here amplifies *Isaiah 6*, possibly by way of synagogue worship, in proclaiming that heaven as well as earth are full of God's glory. Isaiah's powerful vision was:

> In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; his train filled the sanctuary. Above him stood seraphs with six wings . . . they were shouting these words to each other: Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth. His glory fills the whole earth.

When Christians added the reference to "heaven" as well earth being full of God's glory they were underlining how the glory is not concentrated now in a particular place but in the body of the risen Christ and this glory is in heaven. So, it is in prayer at Mass that we are going to be, for now, most fully with angels in the presence of the risen and glorified Christ.

As for the decoration of churches, this should also create a space, construct an image, that begins to make us begin to feel at home in heaven as it were. To portray angels is to make visible their involvement with us now, and it provides a means of climbing up the ladder Jacob saw in his dream, with the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of Man. Aquinas (I q. 51 a.2 ad 1) makes an interesting point in discussing whether or not angels assume bodies:

> Angels do not need bodies for their own sake but for ours; coming into our human world and speaking with human beings, they give us a foretaste of that spiritual fellowship which we look forward to having with them in a future life.

Entering a church, even outside the time of Mass, should provide an anticipation of the intermingling of the human, angelic and divine that we call heaven. We move among representations, projections into our world of finite time and space, of Christ, Mary, different saints and angels. With a clear echo of the *Genesis* text concerning Jacob and his vision, the Roman Missal's entrance antiphon of the Common of the Dedication of a Church (on the day of dedication) proclaims: "This is a place of awe; this is God's house, the gate of heaven, and it shall be called the royal court of God". Perhaps you have seen that wonderful painting by Fra Angelico, another Dominican and one steeped in Aquinas, where in the next life the saints and the angels dance together in a transfigured world of nature. It seems to me to be a mistake to build and decorate churches in a way that concentrates almost exclusively on their use when a congregation is in them. The church building and its decoration should themselves image heaven and its inhabitants, so to say, and invite even

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the individual at prayer on his or her own to enter into that heavenly fellowship around the risen Christ.

The way artists have shown angels is an interesting index of the state of Christian belief in different ages, as Andrew Graham-Dixon has shown. The early angels of art generally have a stiff, intimidating, almost martial bearing and they tend to remain like this in Byzantine art. (Think of Rilke's "every angel is terrible"). They are not adolescent (like most angels of the early Renaissance) nor childish (like most angels of the Baroque and afterwards) but fully grown. They are impressive but impassive. When angels become more and more palpable, more and more like people, but with wings, we sense a reduction of distance, a collapse of difference and mystery, the slackening of the effort to express holiness. Of late, in an age of scepticism and doubt artists may only be able to indicate such presences as trembling voids of pure colour. There may or may not be something or somebody "out there". A popular alternative is to reduce angels to pretty or cute figures, inhabitants of a Disneyland theme park that was once called heaven. Think of all those T-shirts, posters and mugs reproducing Raphael's impish, urchin-like podgy pair of angels. The Renaissance ambiguity had certainly influenced his *Sistine Madonna* painting, but Raphael still held this newer view in tension with the inherited transcendent angelic presence shown in the same painting.

We therefore need a conscious awareness of sharing a created world with angels, and coming to God in their company, among other reasons so as not to diminish our sense of the human and of Christ. When today there is so much emphasis on being real, on realism, then the Christian must not accept a reductionist account of the real. The angels are real, our immortal souls are real, the divinity of Jesus Christ is real. But we need to persuade our culture to accept a wider and deeper sense of the real before we can preach convincingly about the truths of the Christian faith. Our belief in the existence and functions of angels expands our understanding of both God and human beings. Unless we convince our world to expand its generally accepted sense of the real, to have a metaphysics that accepts non-material realities, then our age will be less hospitable to hearing the full Good News about God and about Jesus Christ, true God and true man. Similarly with "community", such a powerful and evocative concept in both its secular and Christian senses. We are constantly striving to strengthen community. To be with angels gives us a more inclusive sense of the kind of community we are in as creatures and prepares us for sharing by grace in the heavenly community of God, the redeemed, angels and us.

## II

From Pope Leo's teaching mentioned above to that in the *Catechism* about 1500 years later, the Catholic Church has had an obvious

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concern to be clear about fallen angels, about the devil. The Scriptures are clearly and repeatedly concerned with this aspect of reality, and given its destructive effects on us and Christ's involvement with the demonic as recorded in the NT it is no incidental concern. Angels of the kind that cause grave injuries of a spiritual nature and indirectly even of a physical nature to individuals and to society cannot be ignored or trivialised. The *Catechism*, wanting to be pastorally sensitive as well as doctrinally correct, affirms that the power of Satan is real yet not infinite. He is only a creature, powerful from the fact that he is pure spirit, but still a creature. He cannot prevent the building up of God's reign. His destructive action is permitted by divine providence, which with strength and gentleness guides human and cosmic history. It is a great mystery that providence should permit diabolical activity, but we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him (Rm 8:28). What was Aquinas's position?

A characteristic of Aquinas's theology is that he delighted in what God created and found it good; no Manichean dualism for him. Such was his confidence in the created that he thought that to exist and to be good were interchangeable (*ens et bonum convertuntur*). Did this make him ignore evil and sin? Was he not aware of the tears of things? Certainly not. In line with what Lateran IV taught, Aquinas's first and main step was to affirm that God has created all that there is, including devils. This means he creates human sinners too, even the most wicked and despicable. How can this be? It might have been easier to say that God creates all that is good, and some other kind of creator (a dark god, a shadow side or whatever) creates all that is bad. And the two gods fight out a cosmic, apocalyptic battle for supremacy. This is not Aquinas's theology, nor indeed Catholic teaching. There is one God, sovereign, supreme, creator, maker of all visible and invisible. But how does Aquinas consider the existence of evil? Basically Aquinas believed that all there is, including the human and angelic, is made by God as good and intended to stay as such. "Naturally" as Lateran IV put it angels and humans are made good and for good – evil and self-corruption come by choice, by choosing against our natures in fact. Aquinas thought that spirits, angels, have a fixity about their choices that we only acquire at death – then the choices for or against God are forever. Listen to Aquinas:

> In explaining this fixity one has to argue, not from the gravity of the angels' sin as such, but from the nature that is involved in the situation. For as John Damascene says, "As death is to human beings, so their fall was to the angels", and it is clear that every mortal sin that a man commits, whatever the degree of gravity, can be remitted before death; but once death has intervened, such sins are irremissible – they remain forever. (I q.64 a.2c).

But there is an objection to be faced. God's mercy is greater than the devil's wickedness, as the infinite exceeds the finite; and it is only God's

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mercy that enables any sinner to return from wickedness to justifying goodness. So it is possible even for devils to return. Aquinas agrees that God's mercy delivers the repentant from their sins. But not those who cannot repent because of a changeless attachment to evil. (I q.64 a.2 ad 2). Elsewhere in his treatise on the angels in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas agrees with Augustine that when we read in the bible that "the devil sins from the beginning" (1 Jn 3:8) this is to be understood to refer only to his beginning as a sinner, not as a creature. It means he never withdrew from his sin. In yet another statement Aquinas elaborates on this element of fixity in angels, for good or bad, and as so often the discussion helps us to understand ourselves:

> But an angel's apprehension differs from a man's, and it differs in this, that the angel apprehends every object by an act of understanding which, considered in itself, involves no movement or change . . . But in our case change quickly intervenes . . . And so it is that the human will attaches itself to any object in a changeable way . . . Hence it is commonly said that while a man's free will is able to alternate between contraries both before and after choice, an angel's is able so to alternate only before choice. And so it is that the good angels, having once attached themselves to goodness are forever established in it; but the bad angels, once they have sinned are fixed in sin'. (I q.64 a.2c).

And what poetry Dante was to make out of this immobility of unrepentant sinners in his *Inferno*. Fire there is, but the deeper we go down into hell the worse the sin, and at the bottom of it all is not a furnace of fire but frozen, icy immobility. The most guilty are cut off from all contacts and movement, silent and immovable they are held fast by ice "like straw in glass". Down, right down, is Satan, held fixed in ice and generating cold. He, who for Dante, had been the greatest of the seraphim, the highest and the swiftest of angelic orders, has brought himself to this reversal. Satan keeps his six wings (recall the vision of Isaiah) but they cannot move him and only flap in a bat-like way to generate frozen air.

## III

What I have tried to do is to offer a theological account of angels in a way that also throws light on God and on us. Angels have their place in reality and their function in salvation history. To deny or neglect the angelic is to be mistaken about them, and also to distort our belief in God and our self-understanding What we wish to say or deny about angels is going to have implications for several other theological and philosophical topics. I have used Aquinas as the main theologian both to honour him in this lecture and because his contribution is so complete and still valuable. He wrote on angels in several places, apart from the extensive treatment in the *Summa Theologiae* on which I have mainly relied, and a final word on the

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treatise *De substantiis separatis* may be useful. This is a short, incomplete but important work from late on in his life, probably around 1271, and is almost a compendium. Interestingly it begins with a consideration of various philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, before expounding Catholic teaching from the Scriptures and the Fathers, especially Dionysius. The Manicheans come in for strong criticism, not least for reducing the origin of things not to one but to two principles of creation. They said that one of these was the author of good while the other was the author of evil. Aquinas quotes Dionysius approvingly when he writes that Scripture does not tell that to be good is one thing and to be a being is another and that life or wisdom is something else. Having cleared God of any causation or creation of evil, Aquinas has also to keep God and the angels separate. He is firm that given that spiritual substances have no matter, it does not follow that they are not distinguished from God. As in the *Summa Theologiae* there is a reliance on God's providence which exceeds what we can understand of his ways. The truth is, that nothing prevents certain things from taking place fortuitously or by chance so far as pertains to human knowledge, which yet are ordered according to divine providence. Evil is found in the world, among devils as among sinners, but God's goodness cannot be denied – it was not fitting that evils should be completely prevented through divine providence.

Quite apart from the value of the teaching, Aquinas's method (different as it is from that used in the *Summa Theologiae*) is instructive in itself, and tells us how our theology of angels is to be constructed – theology in dialectic with reason, the Catholic faith not losing its primacy yet not isolated from philosophy. The other important lesson from how Aquinas goes about discussing the angels is that he does not limit himself to looking to what is revealed in the Scriptures about them or what theology teaches. Reason and reflection on human experience can of themselves provide plausible grounds for the existence of angels. It all depends, of course, on the kind of philosophy you adopt, the kind of prevailing culture you are in. Any given epoch is going to have more than one philosophy, one metaphysics, available and here the Christian needs to build on and advance whatever philosophies make faith more credible and sustainable. In his treatise *De substantiis separatis*, because the method differs from that of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas is able to give ample space to presenting different philosophies and seeing which of them best suit his Christian purposes, indeed which philosophies understand certain problems better than others. Some of the thinkers he discussed did not make talk of angels possible or easy while others, especially Plato and Aristotle, did. Before turning to the Catholic faith, and we are at chapter XVII by then, Aquinas has done much serious philosophical work. He has told us what Plato and Aristotle,

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as the foremost philosophers, believed about the spiritual substances as to their origin, the condition of their nature, their distinction and order of government, and in what respect others disagreed with them, through error. Today's theologian needs to be as philosophically aware and discriminating.

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