

Fiat Lux! Anchored in Glory—No Scandals to Dread

SISTER MARIA OF THE ANGELS, O.P.

Monastery of Our Lady of Grace

North Guilford, CT

“SOMETHING STRANGE IS HAPPENING—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep.” Thus begins an ancient homily used all over the world in the liturgy for Holy Saturday. This year these words have a particular poignancy. Something strange *is* happening. Churches all over the world are sunk in the unprecedented silence of suspended public worship.

Here in this monastery, although the usual silence continues to be punctuated by common worship, there is still a greater silence. The computer that was left on in order to receive updates on a relative afflicted with Covid-19 has been turned off. The message had arrived early on Good Friday—“the tubes on the ventilator became clogged and his wonderful heart stopped.” Other names of victims of “the virus” appear one by one on the board outside the chapel.

The nuns’ choir and the public chapel are almost completely dark. Together we sit in the shadow of death, the death of the Lord and so many others all over the world. The altar is stripped, the tabernacle empty, no sanctuary lamp, no exposition candles burning. We sit in a dark silence before Matins begins. The first streaks of dawn gradually appear and slowly light fills the air. One is reminded of the original *Fiat Lux!* and made bold to question the darkness. Why? How? How long?

Pope Francis, in his March 27 *Urbi et Orbi* message,¹ stated that the current crisis has exposed the illusion that “we would stay healthy in a world that was sick” and that the present moment “is a time to get our lives back on

¹ Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* Message, St. Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City, March 27, 2020 (see Vatican website).

track.” Often the best way to get “back on track” is to retrace one’s steps and return to the beginning. This year, in a unique way, we are invited to return to the very beginning when “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness,”² brought into being all that exists. This was an act of profound generosity and, at the same time, baffling simplicity. God had no need to create and was in no way changed by his creation of all things out of nothing.³

Why then did God create? Simply for the manifestation of his own goodness and the sharing of his own inner life of uncreated happiness with created persons. The one God, who is three divine persons, is the *causa et ratio* of the coming forth from and return of all creation to God.⁴ The goodness that is manifested by the created world and into which it is drawn is the goodness of the divine Trinitarian life. Put differently, God created, out of nothing, everything that is and with himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as the exemplar or model as well as the final goal.⁵ The existence of every created reality, with the Creator himself as the pattern

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], prologue.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas writes: “God did not need preexisting matter from which to fashion things. . . . He has the power to bring things into existence from nothing or, in other words, to create. . . . The divine action which brings things into being does not suppose the pre-existence of matter. The cause of diversity in things could not be on the side of matter unless matter were needed prior to the production of things, so that the various forms induced would follow diversity in matter. Therefore the cause of diversity in the things produced by God is not matter” (*The Compendium of Theology*, trans. Cyril Vollert [St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1947], 69, 71).

⁴ Gilles Emery, *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 122. See also Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 44, a. 3, resp.: “God is the first exemplar cause of all things. . . . An artificer produces a determinate form in matter by reason of the exemplar before him, whether it is the exemplar beheld externally, or the exemplar interiorly conceived in the mind. Now it is manifest that things made by nature receive determinate forms. This determination of forms must be reduced to the divine wisdom as its first principle, for divine wisdom devised the order of the universe, which order consists in the variety of things. And therefore we must say that in the divine wisdom are the types of all things, which types we have called ideas—*i.e.*, exemplar forms existing in the divine mind [ST I, q. 15, a. 1]. And these ideas, though multiplied by their relation to things, in reality are not apart from the divine essence, according as the likeness to that essence can be shared diversely by different things. In this manner therefore God Himself is the first exemplar of all things.” All citations from the *ST* are taken from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947).

and end of all things, is a relational existence. Everything that exists is the recipient of a particular form and dynamism to its proper end. When it exists according to this form and dynamism, it flourishes and gives glory to its Maker.

Reflecting upon these origins offers us the surest way of resetting our lives in a conversion that goes all the way down. Everything that exists has come forth from the mind of God. Only a return to the truth of real things and gaining a renewed perception of the way things are intended to correspond to the wise design of God can make possible a true reorientation of our lives.

Variety, Hierarchy, Mediation

Although God is one, simple, and immutable,⁶ the world he created is, by design, varied, hierarchically ordered, and possessed of an inbuilt tendency of movement toward completion. As Saint Thomas says:

The distinction and multitude of things comes from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe participates the divine goodness more perfectly and represents it better than any single creature whatever.⁷

⁶ The doctrine of the immutability of God is an especially consoling one to ponder during times of upheaval and uncertainty. According to this doctrine, the elaboration of which is assisted by the philosophical category of mixed relations, God is changed neither by the creation of the world nor by becoming man in the Incarnation. God himself is unmoved but remains the same God, namely, the Father eternally generating the Word, and with the Word, breathing forth Love. What is changed by creation and the Incarnation is, respectively, that there is now a created order of existing things, reflecting and participating (in various, hierarchical ways) the Trinitarian life of the Creator and a human nature that is hypostatically united to the second person of the Trinity. When everything seems to be in flux it can be very stabilizing to reflect and lean upon the unchanging God. How the Incarnate Lord is moved by the vicissitudes of our mutable world is another question.

⁷ *ST I*, q. 47, a. 1, resp.

So, in the beginning was God and then came his unfathomably generous act of creation in order to have created persons in his company. He created a world of fascinating variety in order to show forth his own simple and unique beauty. Perhaps a symptom of the sickness of our flat and insular world is a loss of taste for ordered variety, for hierarchy and the God-given dynamism toward perfection.⁸ Similarly, in our disembedded⁹ world of autonomous individuals, we have also lost a taste for mediation.

These losses have adversely affected our vision and have contributed to the occlusion of the manifestation of the Creator's intention for the world. Regaining an appreciation of variety and distinction and even for inequality can, paradoxically, position us for a new awareness of the unity and perfection of the universe and consequently for the reception of God's self-manifestation, a manifestation filled with promise. *God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.*

Along these same lines, a renewed acceptance of mediation is a crucial step on the road to a rehabilitated welcoming of God's purpose in creating a graded world. One of the things this gradation in being is intended to do is to establish an inbuilt interdependence among the various parts, to enable and encourage mutual assistance. God intended his creatures to be like him in being causes, albeit secondary ones, for each other and in enjoying a common life based on a mutual enjoyment of the good. It is precisely in these ways that creation participates in the divine life both *ad extra* and *ad intra*.

Where can we turn for help in recovering from these losses and for regaining a sense of wonder born of a keener awareness of the purposeful whole? Where can we turn for guidance not only about our beginnings but also about our end? For, even more than retracing one's steps, getting back on track requires clarity about the terminus.

New voices such as Dr. Reinhard Hütter have arisen in this post-modern wilderness. Although comprised mainly of previously delivered lectures subsequently printed as articles in various venues, his most recent work, *Bound for Beatitude*, presents a gently but tightly woven argument that could, borrowing the title given to the 1999 reprint of the late Dominican Gerald Vann's *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, be titled, *The Aquinas Prescription*. It is, as the author suggests, an "exercise in ressourcement" ordered to awakening the human mind and heart to its ultimate end, beatitude, and to lighten (in both senses of the term) the way each human person must

⁸ What Charles Taylor refers to as a loss of a "transformation perspective" (*A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006]).

⁹ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 146–58.

follow to arrive at that destination.

This excellent work not only proffers a prescription but, in itself, performs a remedial service; as a true work of *sacra doctrina*, it engages the reader in a contemplative ascent into the divine perspective. As the prologue explains in the opening lines, “The book treats the meaning and purpose of human life embedded in that of the whole cosmos.”¹⁰

Looking to the Angels

Times of crisis can lead to a renewed appreciation of our friends. Yearning anew for meaning and purpose, and following Dr. Hütter’s approach by considering the cosmos as a whole, might we look for help from some forgotten friends,¹¹ friends who are superior beings and who have already attained God’s purpose for them? Surely these friends already “anchored in the glory”¹² of the divine happiness are eager to help us poor creatures find our way home. In a world shrouded anew in darkness we have much to learn and benefit from these first creatures in the cosmos, citizens of the invisible realm.

So let us return to the beginning and the original *Fiat Lux!*—“Let there be light!”—a command which Saint Augustine interpreted as the creation of pure spirits.¹³ This unique reading allowed him to distinguish between

¹⁰ Reinhard Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 1.

¹¹ Thankfully, there has begun a renewed appreciation of these forgotten friends, the angels, among some scholars. Most notable is Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., *Angels and Demons: A Catholic Introduction*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016).

¹² See Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude*, 368.

¹³ See Elizabeth Klein, *Augustine’s Theology of Angels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 28. For all subsequent references to Saint Augustine’s angelology I am indebted to this superb study. Saint Thomas, in treating the question of when the angels were created, rules out the possibility of the angels having been created *after* the creation of the material universe: “It cannot be expressly ascertained from the canonical Scriptures when the angels were created. That they indeed should not have been created after the corporeal beings, reason itself makes clear, for it was not fitting that the more perfect should be created later” (*Treatise on Separate Substances*, ch. 17, no. 95, trans. Francis J. Lescoc [West Hartford, CT: Saint Joseph College, 1959], 101). Saint Thomas also, in a couple of places, details the various orthodox positions on when the angels *were* created. For example, see *ST I*, q. 61, a. 3, resp.: “There is a twofold opinion on this point to be found in the writings of the Fathers. The more probable one holds that the angels were created at the same time as corporeal creatures. For the angels are part of the universe: they do not constitute a universe of themselves; but both they and corporeal natures unite in constituting one universe. This stands in evidence from the relationship

the creation of light on the first and the fourth days. On the first day God created spiritual light (the angels), and on the fourth day he created corporeal light (the sun, moon, and stars).

Continuing with Saint Augustine as our guide, what might we learn about ourselves by considering the creation and mode of existence of the inhabitants of the invisible world? After much pondering and wrestling with a literal interpretation of Genesis 1:3, and in particular with the alternation of morning and evening before the sun had been created, Saint Augustine came to the following understanding elucidated by Elizabeth Klein and worth quoting in full.¹⁴

Thus on day one the angels are created. They are spiritual creatures whose beginning is fittingly described in the words *fiat lux* since they receive enlightenment along with their being. The following cycle of evening eclipsed by morning and overtaken by evening does not signify any amount of time as we know it, but rather indicates the angels beholding all things as they already exist in the mind of God (day) and then looking at creation, and knowing the created order as it is in itself (evening). When the angels then refer the good of the created order back again to the praise of God “it is as if morning has dawned in the minds of those who contemplate them.”¹⁵

Klein continues by citing the following text from Augustine’s *Literary Commentary on Genesis*:

The evening of the first day is also [spiritual creation’s] self-knowledge that it is not what God is, while the morning after that evening, which marks the conclusion of the one day and the beginning of the second, means its turning to refer what was created as to the praise of the creator, and to receive from the Word of God knowledge of

of creature to creature; ***because the mutual relationship of creatures makes up the good of the universe.*** But no part is perfect if separate from the whole. Consequently it is improbable that God, Whose *works are perfect*, as it is said in Deut. xxxii.4, should have created the angelic nature before other creatures. At the same time the contrary is not to be deemed erroneous; especially on account of the opinion of Gregory Nazianzen, *whose authority in Christian doctrine is of such weight that no one has ever raised objection to his teaching, as is also the case with the doctrine of Athanasius*, as Jerome says” (emphasis in bold-italic added).

¹⁴ See also Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 54–55, for his presentation of Augustine’s teaching on the creation of the angels.

¹⁵ Klein, *Augustine’s Theology of Angels*, 28 (citing St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 9.29).

the creation that was made after itself.¹⁶

The angels receive the light of the Word at the very moment of their creation, are given to understand that they *are not God*, and then turn toward the giver of their existence *in praise*. The light they receive is an illumination from and by the Word whom they know before they know themselves. This is what Augustine refers to as “morning knowledge.” It is in the subsequent evening of the first day that “they come to see their creaturely status and understand themselves in themselves. In other words, they come to know themselves, but already in relationship with God and with each other.”¹⁷ Here we have an initial lesson for an existential theological reorientation. Let us learn from the angels’ recognition of their creaturely status and their intrinsic relationality and make this an initial point of reference for getting “back on track.”

The angels, in turning their gaze back to the Word, are also privy to God’s creating act in the following days. “When God speaks, in order to make something, Augustine explains, this signifies the angels seeing by God’s Word what is about to be made in the way in which it already exists in the mind of God.”¹⁸ They see it both in the Word and as it is brought into existence. The angels, then, on Augustine’s view, are privileged witnesses to the spectacular work of creation. They saw each created reality as it preexisted in the Word and were already praising God for it as it all came forth into being. The angels thus understood themselves as in communion with God and each other, and as a community continued to refer “its knowledge of itself, and of the beauty of creation back to God. This motion, of seeing and knowing God, seeing and knowing oneself and creation, and then turning back to God is called worship.”¹⁹

It can be consoling, in a time of darkness and the almost global cessation of public worship, to think about the angels who, recognizing their creaturely status, exist in an abiding state of humility, solely for the praise of God.²⁰ But to avoid the charge of turning away from current harsh

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 4.39, quoted in Klein, *Augustine’s Theology of Angels*, 28.

¹⁷ Klein, *Augustine’s Theology of Angels*, 29.

¹⁸ Klein, *Augustine’s Theology of Angels*, 29.

¹⁹ Klein, *Augustine’s Theology of Angels*, 29.

²⁰ Another elevating exercise is to reflect on the number of these splendid creatures. It would stretch this essay beyond reasonable proportion to consider this in detail. Suffice it to point out the difference that the concept of number or multitude takes on when referring to spirits rather than physical things, and therefore what is meant by the references to the angelic *multitude*. Thomas established this

realities to myth or fantasy let us consider some *reasons* for holding to the existence of these pure spirits.

Reasons for Believing

Here Saint Thomas Aquinas is our best guide. Various arguments²¹ for

distinction early on in *ST I*, in the questions on the Trinity, when he explains what numeral terms mean in *God*: “We may observe that all plurality is a consequence of division. Now division is twofold; one is material, and is division of the continuous; from this results number, which is a species of quantity. Number in this sense is found only in material things which have quantity. The other kind of division is called formal, and is effected by opposite or diverse forms; and this kind of division is called formal, and is effected by opposite or diverse forms; and this kind of division results in a multitude which does not belong to a genus but is transcendental in the sense in which being is divided by one and by many. This kind of multitude is found only in immaterial things” (*ST I*, q. 30, a. 3, resp.). The Benedictine Abbot Anscar Vonier develops the implications of this in such a profound way it is worth citing him at length: “The concept of multitude in spirits is something very different from the concept of multitude in material things. Number is indeed a marvel of material nature; even the human race has that astonishing factor of number; God has multiplied the children of men. St. Thomas remarks wisely that with material things, man not excluded, number supplements the weakness of the species; a species is saved from death, from disappearance, through its numbers, and the weaker the species the greater the numbers. It is evident that when we come into the spirit world the notion of number must take a different form, and when we say that angels are innumerable we mean something quite other than the idea suggested if we say, for instance, that the pebbles on the shore are innumerable. In material things number is rather a necessity than a perfection, in spiritual things multitude means perfection, and cannot mean anything else. . . . In our Scriptures spirit-multiplicity is always associated with the society of God, with the praise and contemplation of his perfections. Spirits are multiplied for this very end, that the perfections of God may be reflected more and more completely. . . . One angel reflects God’s glory in one way, another angel in another way, and multitude is something very perfect for this precise reason that it is an image of a perfection which is absolutely inexhaustible” (*The Angels* [London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1934], 39–41).

- ²¹ See Kenelm Foster, “Angelology in the Church and in St. Thomas,” appendix 1 in Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby, vol. 9, *Angels* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 304: “Against [the] background of an agelong [*sic*] and biblically very conservative witness on the part of the teaching Church, St. Thomas’s treatise on the angels stands out as probably the most brilliant piece of speculation on the subject produced by a western theologian. It is both a summary and a critique: it summarizes and critically assesses the theological tradition on the matter down to his own time. This tradition—formed chiefly by three writers, Dionysius, Augustine and Gregory the Great—derived its essential data from Scripture, but it inevitably derived much also from the assumptions and preoccupations, from the whole *forma mentis* of the culture in which it was born and grew up.”

the existence of separate substances can be found throughout the Angelic Doctor's corpus; they are present in some of his minor works as well as in most of his major works. Thus, "in various ways St. Thomas seeks to show the reasonableness of positing an order of separated substances and the harmony of this doctrine with some generally accepted philosophical conceptions."²²

To consider his arguments based on the order of the universe one can start by taking a look around and noting the wide range of beings.²³ Some things are just material, like a desk or the dust on a keyboard. Other things are somehow living, like the plant on the windowsill or the grass on the lawn outside the window, actively soaking in the sun but incapable of sensing the presence of a human admirer. Next one can think of something that can freely move around but not engage in conversation, like someone's pet cat or a neighbor's dog. We might then think of a close friend, who not only exists like a piece of dust, soaks in the sun like a plant, and moves about like a cat or dog, but also thinks and loves and can share a meal with us; or one might think of a close friend or relative who has died and exists in an unnatural state as a disembodied soul.

Now take this brief meditation on the various levels of being a step further. What is next? Does it seem fitting that, after such a step by step progression (from sheer matter, to matter that is alive but without the capacity to sense, to matter that can sense and move but not communicate by language, to matter that is informed by a rational soul or a separated

²² James Collins, *The Thomistic Philosophy of the Angels* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 27. Collins groups Thomas's arguments according to the following schema: There are two groups of arguments. The first is in relation to causality and is based on the regular movement of the celestial spheres. The second is in relation to hierarchy and includes arguments based on the order of the universe, the perfection of the universe and the nature of the intellect. For a very concise analysis of Thomas's arguments for the existence of angels see David P. Lang, "Aquinas' Proofs for the Existence and Nature of Angels," *Faith and Reason: The Journal of Christendom College* 21, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 1995): 1–7.

²³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 5: "We cannot go from one extreme to the other except through intermediaries. . . . Now at the topmost summit of things there is a being which is in every way simple and one, namely, God. It is not possible, then, for corporeal substance to be located immediately below God, for it is altogether composite and divisible, but instead one must posit many intermediates, through which we must come down from the highest point of the divine simplicity to corporeal multiplicity" (in *On Spiritual Creatures*, trans. Mary C. Fitzpatrick and John J. Wellmuth [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1949]).

soul awaiting its resurrected body), there would be a leap in the great chain of being to the uncreated God, who is the source and end of all that is and in whom there is no distinction between essence and existence?²⁴ Would it not be most orderly for there to be some creatures that are, so to speak, higher than embodied rational souls but lower than God, creatures that are like God in being pure spirits yet unlike him because their existences are received and distinct from their essences?

Another closely related approach to the argument based on the order of the universe, and the abhorrence of any “gaps” in the chain of being, is one that considers the existence of angels from the perspective of the perfection of the universe.²⁵ Given that there exist things that are purely material and creatures that are both material and spiritual, does it not seem appropriate that among created reality there would exist creatures that resemble God in being purely spiritual?²⁶ In other words, the perfection of the universe requires not only the orderly arrangement of created realities but also the existence of every sort of thing that is possible.²⁷

The above condensed and overly simplified accounts of Saint Thomas’s arguments for the existence of angels have been presented from the standpoint of “fittingness.” Some go further and have held that the existence of pure contingent spirits is demonstrable. The late Dominican Father Benedict Ashley, for example, held for the demonstrability of the existence of the angels. While he recognized that most will concede only arguments

²⁴ Bishop Robert Barron offers a helpful overview of Thomas’s proof of the real distinction in his “The One Who Gives: Derrida, Aquinas, and the Dilemma of the Divine Generosity,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 18, no.1 (2020): 17–18.

²⁵ St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 50, a. 1, and q. 51, a. 1. See also *Summa contra gentiles* II, chs. 46 and 91, and Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 88–91.

²⁶ See Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 88–89: “Indeed, repeatedly in his work, St. Thomas Aquinas discerns the *a priori* necessity of the existence of intellectual substances separated from matter based on what we are able to know about the logic of the creative plan as it is reflected in the metaphysical structure of the universe. . . . For example, Aquinas likes to highlight the general law of mediation or of gradualness that regulates ‘the order of things.’ Hence, once we have acknowledged, at the one extreme, the existence of God, Pure Act, and given, at the other extreme, the existence of corporeal substances, Thomistic thought abhorring a vacuum and disproportion, immediately infers from this the existence of an intermediate category of created spirits.”

²⁷ See Mortimer Adler, *The Angels and Us* (New York: MacMillan, 1982), 55–67.

with probative force,²⁸ he was “personally convinced”²⁹ that there were rational arguments which followed the principles used in the proofs for the existence of a First Cause and for the spirituality of the human soul which led “to a factually certain conclusion concerning the existence of pure spirits.”³⁰

Others before him, such as Étienne Gilson, also held that it was possible to argue conclusively to the existence of angels. Gilson claimed:

The order of creatures in which the highest degree of created perfection is realized is that of pure spirit, commonly called angels. Some historians pass over in complete silence this part of St. Thomas’s work or at best dismiss it with a few allusions. Such an omission is particularly regrettable in that St. Thomas’s study of the angels is not entirely or specifically a theological inquiry. *Angels are creatures whose existence can be demonstrated.*³¹

Gilson further posits that: “To disregard them destroys the balance of the universe considered as a whole. Finally, the nature and operation of inferior creatures, men for example, *can only be well understood by comparison and contrast with the angels.* In short, in a doctrine in which the ultimate reason of beings is often drawn from the place they occupy in the universe, it is difficult to omit the consideration of one whole order of creatures without upsetting the equilibrium of the system.”³²

Thus, Gilson claims not only that the existence of the angels is philosophically demonstrable but also that a regard for them is necessary for the balance of the whole of the created order. Furthermore, thinking about pure contingent spirits and comparing them with human nature and operation bears fruit in a deeper understanding of ourselves.

What Faith Teaches

Thinking about the reasonableness of the existence of pure contingent spirits based on the order and perfection of the universe may not appeal

²⁸ Benedict Ashley, *The Way Toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 119: “Most Thomists consider such purely rational arguments for pure spirits to be merely probable.”

²⁹ Ashley, *Way Toward Wisdom*, 119.

³⁰ Ashley, *Way Toward Wisdom*, 119.

³¹ Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), 160 (emphasis added).

³² Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 160 (emphasis added).

to everyone. So let us turn to the Scriptures. What do we find there? We may be surprised to discover something that our eyes may have glossed over many times, namely that angels are conspicuously present in the very first chapter of each of the four Gospels. In Matthew, an unnamed angel appears to Saint Joseph to advise him of the truth of Mary's pregnancy (Matt 1:20–21); in Luke, we have the more familiar annunciation scene when Gabriel appears to Mary and converses with her about the conception and birth of the Messiah (Luke 1:26–38); in Mark Jesus's forty days in the wilderness are peopled by angelic ministrations as well as by Satan's temptations (Mark 1:13). Finally, the last sentence of the first chapter of John's Gospel records Jesus telling Nathanael that he will "see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John 1:51).

We may also be surprised, if we take a closer look at the New Testament, to find how often Jesus himself speaks of the angels. For the sake of brevity just consider some of the references in the first canonical Gospel. There, in the Gospel of Matthew, in Jesus's elucidation of the parable of the weeds in the field, he explains that the reapers are the angels and that, at the close of the age, "the Son of man will send his angels to gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers" (Matt 13:41). Following his parable of the net, Jesus once again says that it will be the angels who will "come out and separate the evil from the righteous" (Matt 13:49). Further on, after a prediction of his Passion and the invitation to discipleship, Jesus claims that "the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of the Father," (Matt 16:27) at which time he will repay everyone according to their deeds.

Again, in the Gospel of Matthew, we find another type of reference to the angels — those of God's court,³³ when Jesus counsels his disciples not to despise the little ones because "their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 18:10). In an episode with the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection as well as the existence of angels, Jesus corrects them by stating that "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt 22:30).

As his Passion drew near, in a private conversation with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, Jesus delivered his great eschatological discourse. In the course of this preaching, he told them of his second coming and the role the heavenly army will play: "They will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out

³³ Bonino distinguishes between angels as God's army and as God's court (*Angels and Demons*, 16–17).

his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect” (Matt 24:31). As Jesus continued his address on the end time, he told his disciples that “of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt 24:32). On the same topic of his second coming, Jesus told his disciples: “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” (Matt 25:31). At the end of his life, after Jesus had been betrayed by Judas, one of his disciples drew his sword in a gesture of rescue, only to be reprimanded by the Lord, who asked him: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt 26:53).

In addition to above references to the presence of angels within the first chapter of each of the Gospels and some of Jesus’s own references to them in Matthew’s Gospel, we might also recall that the angelic choirs sang at his birth, that an angel warned Joseph about Herod’s wrath and wicked intent, that an angel came to comfort Jesus in his agony, that an angel was present at the empty tomb, and, finally, that two angels appeared to the disciples at Jesus’s Ascension into heaven.

The Church, as the faithful interpreter of the Word of God, has consistently upheld the truth of the existence of a created order that is invisible. Much of what the Church taught about the angels in its first twelve centuries was gathered and explicated at the beginning of the thirteenth century in the following declaration from the Fourth Lateran Council:

*We firmly believe and confess without reservation that there is only one true God . . . the one principle of the universe, the creator of all things, visible and invisible, spiritual and corporeal, who by his almighty power from the beginning of time made at once out of nothing both orders of creatures, the spiritual and the corporeal, that is, the angelic and the earthly, and then the human creature, who, as it were, shares in both orders, being composed of spirit and body.*³⁴

Only in the middle of the twentieth century was this long tradition of belief in angels apparently being called into question. Pius XII’s *Humani Generis*, promulgated on August 12, 1950, makes clear that new doubts

³⁴ Fourth Lateran Council (1215), in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Helmut Hoping (43rd Latin ed. [DH]), English ed. Robert L. Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 800.

had begun to be raised about the nature of angels. He wrote: "Some also question whether angels are personal beings and whether matter and spirit differ essentially" (§26). Here we find a first hint of an eclipse of angelology. Still, the Second Vatican Council did not see the need to devote much attention to them and simply reaffirmed the existence of the angels as worthy of veneration.³⁵

More recently, Saint John Paul II devoted six of his 1986 Wednesday audience catecheses on the Creed to the angels. He explained to the faithful that he would be presenting the faith on the creation of the angels as a "precise item of revelation: the creation of purely spiritual beings which Sacred Scripture calls 'angels.'"³⁶ He continued: "These other beings, purely spiritual, [are] *therefore not proper to the visible world*, even though present and working therein. They constitute a world apart."³⁷

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which, unlike the Wednesday catecheses, is part of the official magisterium, teaches the following: "The existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls 'angels' is a truth of faith. The witness of Scripture is as clear as the unanimity of Tradition. . . . As purely *spiritual* creatures angels have intelligence and will: they are personal and immortal creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendor of their glory bears witness."³⁸

At this point, a question emerges: Why, with Scripture and the magisterium unanimously, unambiguously, and consistently affirming the existence of the invisible world of pure created spirits, have they fallen out of the habitual consciousness of most of us? Is it not because we have all, in various ways, lowered our gazes? Or, put another way, have we somehow capitulated to the anthropocentric turn and raised our heads in a prideful stance of self-sufficiency?

A Theology of Paschaltide for a Time of Pandemic

The sudden anguish brought on by the novel coronavirus is distressing. People are asking "how?" and "why?" One response to both questions

³⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §50: "The Church has always believed that the apostles and Christ's martyrs who gave the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood are closely joined with us in Christ, and she has always venerated them with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy angels."

³⁶ John Paul II, "Creator of All Things, Seen and Unseen," (General Audience of July 9, 1986), §1, *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 14, 1986.

³⁷ John Paul II, "Creator of All Things," §1. These catecheses are worth reading in their entirety.

³⁸ CCC, §§328, 330.

is to return to the reality of the existence of contingent beings who are purely spiritual. Father Ashley, as was mentioned above, held for the demonstrability of the existence of pure spirits and proposed that rational arguments developed along the lines of the proofs for the existence of God were one way of demonstrating the existence of pure contingent spirits. One such argument, which follows principles Saint Thomas used for the existence of a First Cause, recalls the first of the Five Ways in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 2, which argues from the observable fact of motion to an Unmoved Mover whom we call God. This is one of the ways that Thomas, following Aristotle, argues for the existence of angels. Given the Philosopher's premises that the heavenly bodies are incorruptible, tend to a natural place, and are the cause of generation and corruption in the world, it follows that the movement of the celestial spheres is caused by incorporeal intelligences.

We cannot, obviously, adopt Aristotle's premises based on the cosmology of his time, but we can still posit the necessity of a first mover to move anything, including the planets, stars, and so on, from potency to act, a first mover who may or may not employ secondary movers or causes. Nothing excludes the possibility of the First Cause, God, using non-necessary secondary causes, the angels, in the ordering of the universe.³⁹ Saint Thomas presented this claim as one which was universally accepted, writing, for example, in *De veritate*: "Both saints and philosophers say that all corporeal things are governed by divine providence through the mediation of angels."⁴⁰

Even more recent saints and philosophers have maintained this view. Consider Saint John Henry Newman's sermon 29, "The Powers of Nature," in which he states: "I affirm, that as our souls move our bodies, be our bodies what they may, so there are Spiritual Intelligences which move those wonderful and vast portions of the natural world which seem to be inanimate."⁴¹

While this argument in particular might be easily dismissed in the light of twenty-first century physics, Father Serge-Thomas Bonino, in his magisterial work on the angels, cautions otherwise: "The idea of an angelic

³⁹ See Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 81.

⁴⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 8, resp. (trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. [Albany, NY: Preserving Christian Publications, 1993]). Thomas also makes a similar claim in *ST I*, q. 110, a. 1, resp.: "So are all corporeal things ruled by the angels. This is not only laid down by the holy doctors, but also by all philosophers who admit the existence of incorporeal substances."

⁴¹ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 453.

activity that habitually sustains the course of nature in a constitutive way should not be disregarded.⁴²

Given the possibility of angelic activity governing the natural world, in ways that nevertheless respect and preserve the integrity of the natural order, we turn now to a text of Saint Augustine which offers a pertinent explanation:

All things that come to corporeal and visible birth have their hidden seeds lying dormant in the corporeal elements of this world. There are of course the seeds plants and animals produce which we can see with our eyes; but of these seeds there are other hidden seeds from which, at the creator's bidding, water produced the first fishes and birds, and earth the first plants and animals of their kind. *Nor was this basic seminal force exhausted in that first primordial breeding; often, the suitable combinations of circumstances are lacking for particular species to burst into being and carry on their career. . . .*

It is the creator of all these invisible seeds who is the creator of all things, since whatever comes into our ken by a process of birth receives the beginnings of its course from hidden seeds, and derives its due growth and final distinction of shape and parts from what you could call the original programming of those seeds.

So then, just as we do not call parents the creators of human beings, nor farmers the creator of their crops, though it is through the external action they provide that the power of God operates inwardly to create these things; so we are not permitted to call bad, or even good, angels creators, just because *with their finer senses and more volatile bodies they perceive the seeds of these things that are hidden from our gaze, and scatter them secretly among suitable combinations of the elements, and so seize the opportunity to bring things to birth and accelerate their growth in novel ways*. No, the good angels only do such things as God commands them, and the bad ones, though they do them unjustly, only do them as far as he justly permits them. The unjust wills of the wicked angels are all their own, thanks to their malice; but their power is something they receive, and justly, whether for their own punishment, or the punishment of bad men, or for the praise and glory of the good.⁴³

⁴² Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 77n14.

⁴³ Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate* 3.2.13, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991).

What was it that brought about the “suitable circumstances” for a new virus to appear and for the acceleration of its growth? Could it be that there was angelic involvement in the appearance of a new virus to afflict the human community?⁴⁴ Is this something that God has “justly permitted”?

This possible answer to the “how” question provides a segue into the “why” question. A conceivable answer could be that God has withdrawn his protective hand for a time for the ultimate health of our souls. The world has been increasingly set on the course of a destruction of its own making. As Pope Francis prayed in his March 27 *Urbi et Orbi* message: “We have gone along at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything.”

Father Bonino, in his *Angels and Demons*, makes the dramatic claim that we have arrived “at an hour when Western culture is sinking inexorably into the night of massive unbelief.”⁴⁵ Perhaps the whole world needed a jolt, something to wake us up and shake us out of our crippling self-referentiality, our anthropocentrism. Perhaps we needed to be brought to the ground and given a new beginning, a new beginning with a fresh focus on the Creator and not on ourselves. And, perhaps, we needed a new impetus

⁴⁴ Dr. Francis S. Heinemann, MD, explains: “Viruses co-evolved with higher forms of life. The development of a new virus requires molecular evolution of a pre-existing virus. Molecular evolution is the result of a unique movement, or pause of motion of genetic materials. New viruses develop by mutation of old viruses. (Random?) mutations, which are changes in the form of genetic materials, arise continuously in DNA/RNA-based self-replicating structures such as viruses. Mutations, which are changes in the form of genetic materials, arise based on the motion of DNA and RNA polymerases—the enzymes that replicate genetic material—and the preexisting DNA/RNA template and the nucleotide building blocks necessary to build the genetic material of a new virus. If everything required for replication of viral genetic material (the polymerase enzymes, the template DNA/RNA, and the precursor nucleotides) is moving in a standard way, an exact replicate of the template is produced and an exact copy of the viral genetic material results. If the polymerase pauses or the template moves or an incorrectly base paired nucleotide moves into position, a mutation may occur meaning the new DNA/RNA structure is slightly different” (personal correspondence with the present author). Another possibility is that an existing virus jumps species. This is something that is considered to be a rare occurrence requiring a unique interaction between two species or after a mutation creates a new virus capable of infecting a new species. According to Neel V. Patel’s account, Covid-19 is a “zoonotic disease—it jumped from another species to human hosts” (“How Does the Virus Work?,” *MIT Technology Review* 123, no. 3 [2020]: 22). Regardless of the precise mechanism, local motion was required and local motion is the special province of the angels (good and bad alike); see *ST I*, q.110, a. 3.

⁴⁵ Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 1.

for living according to the forms and patterns God has inscribed in his creation.

Of course, we simply do not know. But, in the face of a self-reproducing agent that is hardly alive itself and parasitic on the cells of living organisms, a microscopic⁴⁶ entity a thousandth of the width of an eyelash, we find ourselves powerless. Recognizing this in humility we can turn the awareness to a good purpose and raise our gaze to the Creator and to those friends who first witnessed God's self-gift in the creation of the world. They are here to help us. They see all creation both in the Word and in themselves.⁴⁷ Thus, seeing the reasons of things, the nature of things, and their finalities and already secure in the vision of God, they want us to share in their happiness and their life of worship. They delight in their role of being secondary causes, servants of the one Mediator who is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. They "speak" to us by turning their attention to us, by focusing their higher intellects on us and thereby fortifying our own intellectual powers. They also "speak" by proposing intelligible truths under the similitudes of sensible things.⁴⁸ Why are we so deaf?

There are various ways of answering this question. One is that we cannot hear, or are not listening to, the angels because our own minds are dulled by sensuality, or our imaginations glutted with images. We cannot hear because we cannot be still.

Another response is provided by Saint Augustine, who suggests that humans do not listen to angels because of their own pride and anger.⁴⁹ Pride comes from loving ourselves wrongly, from not recognizing our creaturely status and the gift that it is. Anger can be a result of this fundamental disorientation of the soul away from God toward the self. As a response to perceived deprivation or the experience of being slighted, anger could very well be born from the false sense of entitlement that is part of the human condition in this secular age.⁵⁰

Not all of the angels chose to return the glory to God. The devil, "who in his pride refuses to refer his own being and that of creation back to God,"⁵¹ seeks to convince us of a false independence and superiority. The temptation remains to be like God on our own initiative. But we

⁴⁶ A single particle is approximately eighty nanometers (one billionth of a meter) in diameter (Patel, "How Does the Virus Work?," 22).

⁴⁷ See Klein, *Augustine's Theology of Angels*, 33.

⁴⁸ *ST I*, q. 111, a. 1, resp.

⁴⁹ See Klein, *Augustine's Theology of Angels*, 71n67.

⁵⁰ See Edward Norman, *Secularisation: Sacred Values in a Godless World* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

⁵¹ Klein, *Augustine's Theology of Angels*, 46.

are not gods and are only like unto God when we receive everything from his loving, albeit incomprehensible, providence. In this one cosmos, comprised of invisible as well as visible inhabitants, we form one community—a varied, hierarchical reflection of the one and triune God, simple, immutable, and unfathomably generous. Even in the most challenging of times, we are invited to receive everything from God, and in the company of the angels, turn back to him in praise and thanksgiving.

The singular Holy Saturday of 2020 passed through the lighting of the new fire, the solemn Vigil and into Easter morning. Yet, something strange is still happening—even the flowers seem to know. Many of the lilies have not yet opened. Neither did the roses, which instead encircle the Paschal candle with their heavy heads bowed. Let us, too, bow down and worship. Let us become newly cognizant of angels, who, as a community, establish and maintain a perpetual worship of God, and who protect each one of us individually.⁵² Many feel beaten down by both scandal and pandemic. We have before us an invitation to set out again as wayfarers, trusting in God's promise to make all things new and to provide help and companionship on the way.⁵³

An angel has come and rolled back the stone (recall that local motion is their special province).⁵⁴ The empty tomb has been revealed and the faithful women commissioned to go announce the Good News to the disciples hidden away behind locked doors. They obey in haste with a strange mixture of fear and joy. We, too, live in a strange mix of fear and joy. Still, we are called to obey and by the witness of our hope proclaim the Lord's triumph over death and every suffering that evil affords, be it moral or physical. None of these will triumph. There is another world, and its inhabitants are absorbed in worshipping God but simultaneously concerned about our salvation. The angels, as well as the saints, are here to help along the way until the number of the elect is complete and the old order has passed away and all is made new.

A longing for this other world, for our heavenly home, is the proper vocation of those called to the monastic life.⁵⁵ We are, as the Church

⁵² On the guardian angels, see Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 261–74.

⁵³ Bonino's comments are particularly apposite here: "I do not claim that it is necessary to force oneself to experience psychologically the immediacy of the angelic presence. This type of immediate, naïve relation to the supernatural has become difficult for us, if not impossible. But our intellect has everything to gain in discerning the presence and activity of spirit in the overall intelligible structure of the universe" (*Angels and Demons*, 107).

⁵⁴ See *ST I*, q. 110, a. 3.

⁵⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §38: "Now, the gifts of the Spirit are diverse. . . . He

teaches, meant to be eschatological signs, pointing to the life to come. But this vocation is complemented by a variety of others. As *Gaudium et Spes* teaches:

He summons others to dedicate themselves to the earthly service of men and to make ready the material of the celestial realm by this ministry of theirs. Yet He frees all of them so that by putting aside love of self and bringing all earthly resources into the service of human life they can devote themselves to that future when humanity itself will become an offering accepted by God.⁵⁶

Whatever our state in life is we are all *viatores*. May this current challenge redirect us to a renewed understanding of our common origin and our hoped-for destination. And let us raise our eyes on high and unite with the psalmist making the ascent to Jerusalem, who, as Augustine says, “cries out to God, ‘Alas, alas, how long-drawn-out is my exile! I have gone so far away from you. My pilgrimage is so wearisome! I have not yet arrived in that homeland where I shall live untroubled by any evil. Not yet have I attained to the fellowship of the angels, where I shall have no scandals to dread.’”⁵⁷

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calls some to give clear witness to the desire for a heavenly home and to keep that desire green among the human family.”

⁵⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §38.

⁵⁷ Saint Augustine, “Exposition on Psalm 119(120)” in *Expositions on the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 504.