

Angels



The Armenian Church Venerates the Angels

By Archbishop Shnork Kaloustian

The Church venerates not only saints but also the angels. The Armenian Church celebrates the feast of the Holy Archangels, St. Gabriel and St. Michael, and of all the Heavenly Hosts. The Christian Church believes in the existence of spiritual beings, called angels. This belief is biblical, and is confirmed by both the Old Testament and the New Testament. There are many passages in the Bible about angels. For example, some angels visited Abraham in connection with the destruction of the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was the angel of God who guided the people of Israel into the promised land. The angels conversed with prophets. They served as guides to the servants of God. It was an angel who announced the birth of St. John the Baptist. Angels gave the good news of the Birth of the Saviour to the shepherds.

They sang the first Christian hymn, "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2: 14). Our Lord often spoke about angels. They were the first and joyous witnesses of His glorious Resurrection. Thus angels appear every now and then in the course of the biblical history from the beginning to the end. The existence and appearance of angels being a matter of historical record, we must now learn something about their nature. Angels are spiritual beings created by God at the beginning of the creation of the world. They are gifted, like men, with intelligence and free will, but they are distinctly different from men in the fact that they do not possess physical bodies. They are by nature invisible to men, but they can manifest themselves, if God so wills, in assumed or apparent bodies. The word Angel is a Greek word meaning "messenger." The Armenian word for Angel, "hreshdag," has the same meaning. This gives a clue to the nature of their function: angels attend God and execute His commands on earth and in the universe as a whole.

St. Paul said, "They are ministering spirits sent to minister to them who shall receive the inheritance of salvation" (Heb. 1: 14). In other words, they are God's servants who carry out His orders. Angels are represented throughout the Bible as a class of spiritual beings, intermediate between God and men. It is commonly accepted that there are nine orders or classes of Angels. The degree of their closeness to God and the character of their function, serve as the basis for their classification into different orders. It is an established belief that all Christians, at least all children, have their Guardian Angels. "See that you despise not one of these little ones," said Christ, "for I say to you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18: 10). The function of these guardian Angels is to lead us, if we so wish, to the Kingdom of Heaven. I said, "if we so wish," because our guardian Angels can act upon our senses and upon our imagination, but never against our will; it is up to us to put our will into action.

There are two or three angels who are mentioned by name in the Bible; Gabriel is one of them. His name means "fortitude of God." Gabriel is first mentioned in the book of Daniel, where he gives the explanations of certain visions which the prophet Daniel had seen (Dan. 8: 16). Gabriel appears under his own name twice in the New Testament, first to Zachary, father of St. John the Baptist, announcing the birth of a child to him (Luke 1: 19), and second to Mary, mother of Jesus, announcing the birth of Christ (Luke 1: 26). "I am Gabriel who stands before God," said he about himself. From this reference some have been led to believe that this Angel belongs to the highest rank. The next Archangel mention by name is Michael, which means "who is like God?" According to a tradition, "who is like God?" was the war-cry of the good angels who fought against those angels who had rebelled against the authority of God.

As the leader of rebellious angels boastfully identified himself with God the Almighty, the loyal angels used to cry, "who is like God?" This war-cry was given as a proper name to the leader of the good angels, St. Michael. He also is mentioned in the Book of Daniel as the assistant and colleague of Gabriel, as "one of the chief princes" in heaven (Dan. 10: 13). He is also mentioned in the Epistle of St. Jude (1: 19) and in the Book of Revelation of St. John, as the champion of the Church against the powers of evil (Rev. 12: 7). In Christian art St. Michael is represented as an angelic warrior fully armed with helmet, sword, and shield, standing over a dragon with his lance pierced through the monster. On other occasions he holds a pair of scales in which he weighs the souls of the departed, showing that he has a function in the last judgment of souls. Besides the two individual Archangels, the names of two groups of angels are also mentioned in the Bible.

The first are Seraphim; these are a special class of attendants of God's heavenly court. These angelic beings are distinctly mentioned only in the book of the Prophet Isaiah. While he, Isaiah, stood in the Temple, he saw the presence of God on the Throne of His Glory. On each side of the Throne stood mysterious guardians, each supplied with six wings: two of these wings were for holding them up, two for veiling their faces, and two for covering their feet in the majestic presence of the Almighty. They are the closest servants of God, standing near His Throne and ministering to Him and proclaiming His Glory, each calling to the other, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His Glory" (Isaiah 6: 3).

One of these Seraphim flew towards the Prophet, having in his hand a burning coal with which he touched and purified the Prophet's lips, so that henceforth those lips might be consecrated to the utterances of divine inspiration. The number of Seraphim is thousands and thousands. They appear around the heavenly Throne in a double choir and the volume of chorus is such that the sound of their song shakes the world (Isaiah Ch. 6). The other class of heavenly beings that are frequently mentioned in the Bible is Cherubim. They are supposed to be the heavenly throne bearers of God. That is why we see this sentence frequently used for God, "who sittest upon Cherubim." Angels, like Saints, were held in the greatest veneration in the Christian Church.

Churches have been dedicated to the names of angels. Their protective power is clearly recognized by the Church and it is asked in prayers by the faithful. God is asked to sustain those who are laboring in this world by the protecting power of His heavenly hosts. God is praised and thanked for the favor of this angelic protection. Belief in Angels is in full keeping with our deepest and holiest feelings. We naturally long for spiritual and heavenly connections beyond this world. In our calm and thoughtful moments we feel the impression that we have direct and unbroken fellowship with intelligent beings higher and better than we are.

This peculiar impression attains a greater depth and richer sweetness when a spirit feels itself alone, or when it has freed itself from the bondage of perishable things. Let all those who think otherwise remember that there is sometimes more truth in the vague impressions of feelings of the heart than in the dry conclusions of the head. For love, which is the heart's activity, is more penetrating than thinking, which is the activity of the mind. The things that live forever and are loveliest are mostly born in the heart. This belief in angels had its origin in the human heart.

The biblical stories about angels did but intensify and strengthen it. Angels Day, therefore, is a day when we remember our better and higher friends, who are willing to assist us in our fight against the temptations of our common adversary, the Devil. It is a day in which we must cultivate in ourselves the angelic virtues of faithfulness to God, holiness of heart and purity of mind and soul. It is a day to invoke angelic assistance in carrying our prayers before the Throne of the Almighty. Finally it is a day in which we praise the most Holy Name of God, saying in unison with the angels: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts: Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory. Blessing in the Highest. Amen."

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"Saints and Sacraments of the Armenian Church"