

SUMMER READING

Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

A few years ago, Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, came out with a novel titled *Angels and Demons*. I didn't bother with the book, but one of my Dominican brothers, Fr. Brian Mullady, insisted I join him for the movie. He said we couldn't criticize it if we hadn't seen it. Readers of *Light and Life* know Fr. Brian is one of the most respected theologians in the Western Dominican Province, so I kept quiet, although I was tempted to say, "I've never killed anyone, but that doesn't keep me from criticizing murder." Nevertheless, I enjoyed the movie a great deal, although what it had to do with angels or demons is anyone's guess.

A year ago another friend approached me and asked, "What do you think about using *The Screwtape Letters* for our upcoming retreat?" My heart sank, and I said, "Oh no!"

"What's wrong?" my friend asked.

"For one thing," I replied, "I have a real fear of the devil. For another, I've never been able to get through *The Screwtape Letters*, and for a third, I think there's something really creepy about learning theology from The Father of Lies."

Force of will took care of the second of my reservations, so I made my way through *The Screwtape Letters*, at last. Lewis himself anticipated the third of my reservations, about learning theology from the Father of Lies, and, in the Preface to *Screwtape*, he warns the reader "... to remember that the Devil is a liar. Not everything that *Screwtape* says should be assumed to be true even from his own angle... There is wishful thinking in Hell as well as on Earth."

That leaves only my fear of the devil to contend with. Reading *The Screwtape Letters* did nothing to alleviate that fear, but then, I suspect Lewis wanted to increase, not decrease, our fear of the devil, and to make us more, not less, aware of his influence – and the influence of evil – in our lives.



ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY
Guido Reni

Fifteen years after C.S. Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, two Dominicans – one a member of the Western Province, and an editor of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* – collaborated on a book that reflected on the temptations of Christ, *The Devil and How to Resist Him*. *Screwtape* writes to his nephew

I wonder you should ask me whether it is essential to keep the patient in ignorance of your own existence. That question, at least for the present phase of the

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Men and Angels

FREE WILL: A GIFT & ITS CONSEQUENCES, I

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

TRUE HAPPINESS

Our faith presents us with a number of moral standards, some to imitate and some to shun. The angels are splendid representations of these standards, and the wise child will have no difficulty discerning which example to embrace. Our faith presents the “good” angels as our models in obedience, for they illustrate the principle that our happiness lies in making proper decisions and surrendering to God’s plan. Our Catechism reminds us,

The beatitude we are promised confronts us with decisive moral choices...It teaches us that true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, in human fame or power or in any human achievement... or indeed in any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love.... (CCC, #1723)

THE EXAMPLE OF PRAYER

When we desire something we not only will what we desire, but whatever enables us to achieve our goal. God wills us to be saved, so He gives us the commandments by which we reach our salvation. When we pray to do God’s will, we ask to share the life of the saints; this much is very clear. What we may overlook – or fail to consider – is that to pray for a goal is to pray for all the steps necessary to reach the goal. To see an example of this we need only consider the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us we do not urge God, “Do your will on earth,” nor do we say, “Let us do God’s will.” The first would appear to leave us out of the equation; the second to ignore God’s contribution to our salvation. St. Augustine taught, “*He who created thee without thyself will not justify thee without thyself.*” Therefore, when we say, “thy will be done” we acknowledge that our salvation is a project in which we will cooperate with God, asking God to provide the grace we need to achieve the full human potential of our actions.

St. John Chrysostom made the same point, in one of his homilies on St. Matthew gospel. He asks, “*See how He has taught us also to be modest, by making it clear that virtue is not of our endeavors only, but also of the grace from above?*”

To speak, as we do, of heaven and earth when we pray the Our Father, refers not so much to places as to the individuals who inhabit those places. We ask God to enlist us and to work with us in the quest for

perfection, so that we sinful citizens of earth may embrace God’s will as completely the righteous have. This reconciliation of the realms of heaven and earth becomes a sign of God’s seeking to restore the human race to the dignity and harmony it enjoyed before our First Parents sinned.

CHOICE: THE PATH TO HAPPINESS

Because everything flows from God’s will, everything, in its own way, comes from and is drawn toward the good. Plants are drawn to light naturally, without any knowledge of what they do. Dogs and cats may not be able to reflect on what they are doing, but they will make choices among foods because they understand, through their senses, that some things taste better than others. Other, higher, beings choose among options because they realize and acknowledge some superior aspect of goodness that enables them to make choices among various options. This capacity is the intellect. We see the intellect at work, for example, when we say, “This book is better than that.” The beings capable of making discreet judgments can also apprehend good in general. We say light is better than darkness, warmth better than cold, and life better than death. We are naturally drawn to what is good in these realities, and we call the capacity to appreciate these universal values the will.

THE CAPACITY TO CHOOSE

When we refer to “higher” beings, we describe only two: angels and humans. What sets us and angels apart from the rest of creation is our capacity to perceive good with our intellect, and to embrace it with our will. We humans learn to make these judgments through a process of sense perceptions that enable us – this does not take long – to reach universal conclusions. Angels do not have bodies, so they depend upon direct and immediate knowledge they receive from God.

INTELLECTUAL CHOICE

In God, the intellect and will are identified, for God wills nothing beyond Himself, because he is goodness itself. Obviously, this is not how choice operates with angels – or with us. The human intellect and will seek union with the good things we apprehend in the world around us. We know something to the extent the thing known becomes part of us. But we achieve this knowledge in different ways. Our intellect seeks to grasp what is outside it and make it a part of us. We might think of this in terms of some food we particularly enjoy – or

the above-mentioned book. When we particularly enjoy one or the other, we say we “devour” it.

THE CHOICE OF THE WILL

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that our will, by contrast, “*extends itself to what is beyond it and seeks to unite itself with the outside object.*” (ST I. 52.2) When we fall in love, for example, we throw ourselves altogether at the other person; we say we “lose” ourselves.

For angels and for us, free will is an essential characteristic of our dignity. Unlike animals, which act from natural judgments implanted by nature, we act because our intellect allows us to choose freely among good things. Our theology teaches that wherever there is intellect there is free will. Because the angels’ intellectual perfection surpasses ours, we must conclude they, like we, possess – and to a higher degree – free will. (ST I. 52. 3)

Like ours, the angels’ will is directed toward things in keeping with their nature. To reach above that nature – for example, to seek life with God – both we and the angels must be supported by grace, which enables us to look, see, and reach above our nature.

The difference is that we have our reward to look forward to in the future, in heaven; the angels, who see God face to face, already possess it. To be sure, the Scripture says “*there will be joy before the angels of God upon one sinner doing penance,*” (Lk 15.10) but St. Thomas Aquinas remarks this is an extra, marginal joy, and a rather minor one, added on to the beatitude the angels already enjoy in God’s kingdom. (ST I. 62.9)

THE GRAVITY OF CHOICE

In the Garden, Adam’s spirit was, initially, wholly subject to God, with the result that our first ancestor experienced no conflict between his body and his spirit. Human flesh was so (happily) subject to the human soul that it was not moved by passion. Nor was the body subject to illness or death. Sin, as we know, overturned that harmony.

For the soul to turn against God was a catastrophe; so were the consequences, which our First Parents did not immediately see. Once the soul was no longer a mediating force between God and the human body, human flesh turned against the soul. The result was death, infirmity, and the ongoing struggle between the soul and the senses that is a common – and sad – fact of our human experience. St. Paul eloquently sums up the case when he writes, “*I behold another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind*” (Rom 7:23) and “*the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh*” (Gal. 5:17).

St. Augustine echoed St. Paul (and anticipated St. Thomas Aquinas) when he wrote

...it is thoroughly in accord with both our faith and hope, that we are to take heaven and earth in the sense of spirit and flesh... let the will of God be done on earth. as it is in heaven; i.e., in such a way that...

as the spirit does not resist God, but follows and does His will, so the body may also not resist the...soul, which at present is harassed by the weakness of the body, and is prone to fleshly habit.

CREATION OF THE ANGELS

Scripture does not mention the creation of the angels, and the early Church Fathers are divided in their opinion on when God created them. St. Gregory Nazianzen (329-390) taught that the angels were the first acts of God’s creation. Gregory is the only one of the Fathers no one ever contradicted, so this gives his opinion a certain weight, but Thomas Aquinas politely suggests an alternative hypothesis – that angels were created at the same time as the other creatures. The reason, he argues, is that angels are a part of creation, and no part of a whole is perfect if it stands alone.

WHICH ANGELS SINNED?

If we ask which of the angels sinned, St. Thomas Aquinas replies that charity is incompatible with sin because its fire of love can only lead to God. Knowledge, on the other hand, is capable of leading individuals into any number of follies. (ST, I. 63. 7. ad 1) Therefore, he concludes, the angels who sinned were Cherubs, angels of the intellect. Moreover, he adds, the highest angel who sinned was the highest angel of all. The reason for this is the connection between pride and excellence. St. Thomas bases his conclusion on the logic of the early Church Fathers, who argued that the most splendid of the angels could not be content with second place. (ST I. 63. 7)

THE ANGELS’ CHOICE: PRIDE

St. Augustine teaches that pride is unique among sins because every other sin takes pleasure in doing something that is wrong. By contrast, he says, pride is taking inordinate pleasure in doing something good. Angels do not have bodies, so a number of sins are not within their grasp, but two of them are – pride and envy. Pride because it is the choice not to submit to a superior when submission is due, and envy because it grieves at another’s good fortune, which it views as a barrier to its own. Aquinas teaches that the Devil’s sin was, unquestionably, seeking to be like God. Not in equality, which he would have immediately realized was impossible. But he sought to be like God in self-sufficiency. He wanted to be subject to no one, and he wanted to dominate over others.

Here we should note that Pride is a sin of the Intellect. So, too, is its remedy, humility. Humility has nothing to do with a poor self-image; it is acknowledging God as the source of everything we have and everything we are. And this may be a good place to remark that the sins most apt to damn us are precisely the intellectual sins – and part of the reason is simply because we have to work so hard at them. We can easily overeat or fail in chastity; pride and envy require true cultivation.

A FATAL CHOICE

Pope St. Gregory the Great (540-604) calls the angels “the holy spirits of our homeland in heaven.” We might reasonably ask how some of them, at least, spirits who enjoyed so much, could possibly have sacrificed such happiness? Thomas Aquinas responds that sin is a deliberate turning away from the rectitude or right-ness an act ought to have, and because all rational creatures have free will, any rational creature, unless protected by a special grace, can sin.

THE ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Are the demons sorry for their sin? The answer to this question is yes and no. To be sorry for sin is a sign of the goodness of the will. Once God has rendered final judgment, it is too late for the will to express remorse for sin. On the other hand, the demons certainly lament the punishment they are forced to endure, for every will naturally desires happiness, and the very notion of punishment is repugnant to the will. The demons also envy the good fortune of those who do not suffer as they do. So, they may bewail their punishment, but they cannot express sorrow for the sin that merited it, for such sorrow would bear no fruit.

HELL: AN ETERNAL DIVISION

And part of the demons’ punishment is the awareness that they are eternally locked into their choice. This is not simply a speculative reflection. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the will is a two-fold operation, natural and deliberate. The natural will is God’s gift to us and, therefore, it must be good and seek good. The deliberate will is what we do with this gift. For an individual to turn his will to sin and find himself in Hell is sad enough. But once there, the natural will eternally reminds the individual he does not belong there. ■

SUMMER READING (Continued from page 1)

struggle, has been answered for us by the High Command. Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. (Letter 7)

Both Screwtape and our Dominican authors (who acknowledge Lewis’ triumph in creating him) reach the same conclusion. “Satan’s great triumph in modern times consists precisely in having caused mankind to disbelieve in him.” (*Devil*, Introduction)

The characteristic mark of Dominican spirituality is study, and reading *The Screwtape Letters* inspired me to do a little study about angels and demons. I turned, of course, to Thomas Aquinas, who is known as “The Angelic Doctor” precisely because he wrote a detailed treatise on angels. Along the way he wrote about demons. The latter still frighten me, but my return to a study of the angels has proven very reassuring. I planned to begin a series of reflections on the Ten Commandments in this issue of *Light and Life*, but instead I will devote this – and the next issue – to what the angels can teach us about the nobility and consequences of our freedom. ■

A PILGRIMAGE TO LOURDES

Friends of the Rosary Center know I am a chaplain to the Order of Malta and look forward to accompanying members of the Order to Lourdes each year on their annual pilgrimage. This year was no exception, and Malta volunteers from the Western United States took thirty malades to visit the holy sites that have brought such hope to so many for more than a century and a half.

Our schedule for these pilgrimages never varies, and on the Friday of our visit we paid a visit to the grotto where Our Lady appeared to Bernadette Soubirous, in 1858, and told her to share the message, “Repent!” The grotto holds a special box, a large metal container, into which pilgrims can put petitions, which will be remembered in the Masses offered daily in the sacred space. I spent some time composing my list of intentions before I left home, and you may be certain I included you and all your concerns.

In one of the homilies we heard during the pilgrimage, the preacher remarked an interview with Mother Teresa, in which someone asked her, “What most needs to change in the Church?” The interviewer was undoubtedly surprised by the reply: “You and me.” As we prepare for the novenas to honor Mary’s Assumption, let us pray that we may be willing to make the change of heart that will allow us to share her glory in the kingdom prepared by her son.

And let us pray for swift aid to repair damage done to Lourdes by recent flooding. ■

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