

LEADER



# INVISIBLE ALLIES

A Retreat Guide on St. Michael and the Angels

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# INTRODUCTION

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## INVISIBLE ALLIES

### RETREAT OVERVIEW

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Angels are not human beings who have died, gone to heaven, and earned their wings. The classic Frank Capra film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, got that part wrong. Angels are purely spiritual beings, which means they don't have bodies; they are entirely immaterial. But it also means that their spiritual powers of intelligence and will are not limited by their dependence on the five senses, as human intelligence and will are. In the whole hierarchy of God's creation, from atoms to rocks to plants to animals to human beings to angels, angels are the most superior creatures, the ones closest to God in their very nature.

But when God through the incarnation became man in Jesus Christ, the relationship between humans and angels changed. Angels still have the superior nature, but we have been given the grace of a more intimate friendship with God, a sharing in God's divinity, through grace, that even the angels don't enjoy.

In this Retreat Guide, *Invisible Allies: A Retreat Guide on St. Michael and the Angels*, we will explore, a little bit, how God wants the angels to be involved in our Christian journey, and what role they are called to play in the dramatic history of our salvation.

- In the First and Second Meditations, we will reflect on the Church's two liturgical celebrations dedicated to angels, and try to draw spiritual lessons for ourselves from those appearances.
- And in the Conference, we will bring some clarity to the often ignored, exaggerated, or misunderstood reality of the fallen angels—the devil and his demons, and how they try to tangle up human affairs.

Let's begin by quieting our souls and turning the attention of our hearts to God, who is eager to spend this time with us. Let's ask him for all the graces we need, especially the grace of a deeper insight into God's plan for our invisible allies, the angels.

### NOTES

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# FIRST MEDITATION

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## POWERFUL PRAISE

### INTRODUCTION

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The existence of angels is not a theory; it is a fact. God himself has revealed it. Angels are present and involved throughout the whole history of salvation as recorded in the Bible. They pop up all the time in the Old Testament. They appear in the Gospels multiple times, announcing the conception of St. John the Baptist, the conception and birth of Jesus, as well as his Resurrection, and giving comfort to our Lord when he is being tempted in the wilderness and in the Garden of Gethsemane. And the rest of the New Testament continually refers to the angels, especially the Book of Revelation, which gives us a glimpse of the angelic hosts in heaven.

### OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND?

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Clearly, angels are inextricably bound up with every chapter in the history of salvation. And yet, many Catholics rarely think about the angels. Since we normally can't see them, because they are pure spirits, we tend to go through our daily lives as if they didn't exist. Many of us regularly invoke the saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary, but it's the rare Christian who spontaneously calls on our less visible allies, the angels.

That's too bad, because if God has revealed their existence, it's for a reason. Knowing the truth about angels and being aware of how God involves them in our lives can help us in our quest to live life to the full, to become the saints that God created us to become.

Each year, the Church dedicates two liturgical celebrations to the angels. The first one occurs on September 29th, and it commemorates and honors St. Michael, St. Gabriel, and St. Rafael, the three Archangels mentioned in the Bible.

The prayers for the Mass on that day neatly sum up the Church's understanding of how angels fit into God's plan for salvation

### MARVELOUS MIRRORS

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The opening prayer begins by calling to mind why God created angels in the first place. It starts out by saying:

*O God, who dispose in marvelous order ministries both angelic and human ...*

The phrase, "dispose in marvelous order" refers to the beauty and wisdom evident in God's creation, beauty and wisdom that give us a little glimpse of the glory of God himself.

All of creation, from the most powerful angel to the smallest grain of sand, reflects God's goodness and magnificence. The way that the many different creatures all live and interact within a universal harmony reflects the dynamic joy and wisdom of the Trinity's own divine life. Here is how the Catechism explains it:

*The order and harmony of the created world results from the diversity of beings and from the relationships which exist among them. Man discovers them progressively as the laws of nature. They call forth the admiration of scholars. The beauty of creation reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator and ought to inspire the respect and submission of man's intellect and will.*

—CCC 341

The existence of angels, therefore, is part of God's self-revelation; it shows us unique aspects of his power and wonder. God wants us to know him, to delight in him, to rejoice in his greatness. By telling us about the angelic realm, which is not available for simple observation, like the rest of creation, he opens up for us new dimensions of awe, admiration, and praise. Just as we are filled with a deep sense of meaning, vitality, and inspiration when we behold the marvelous beauties of nature, like a sunrise over the ocean or a full moon shining on the snow-capped Rocky Mountains, so too our souls can be uplifted when we get to know and contemplate the angelic hosts.

### WONDER AND FEAR

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The awe-inspiring reality of the angels comes across in scripture whenever the angels decide to make themselves visible to human beings. The mere fact that they are able to do this—to take on a visible form even though by nature they are immaterial—demonstrates some of their power. The first reaction of people when they see an angel



demonstrates it even further: they either kneel down to worship, or they become almost paralyzed with the shock of a supernatural encounter.

A passage from Daniel Chapter 5 vividly describes the glory and power of the angelic presence. Daniel has been praying and fasting over his concern for the future of Israel, when an angel appears to him on the banks of the Tigris River. Here is Daniel's description of the encounter:

*As I looked up, I saw a man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face shone like lightning, his eyes were like fiery torches, his arms and feet looked like burnished bronze, and the sound of his voice was like the roar of a multitude. I alone, Daniel, saw the vision; but great fear seized those who were with me; they fled and hid themselves, although they did not see the vision. So I was left alone to see this great vision. No strength remained in me; I turned the color of death and was powerless. When I heard the sound of his voice, I fell face forward unconscious.*

—Daniel 10:5–8

In the Book of Revelation, St. John is given a vision of an angel that overwhelms him to the point that he feels moved to worship the angel as if it were divine. The angel has to convince him not to do that. Here is St. John's description of that encounter:

*After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth became illumined by his splendor... Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These words are true; they come from God." I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Don't! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brothers who bear witness to Jesus. Worship God.*

—Revelation 18:1, 19:9–10

The Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer for the Mass of the Archangels captures and expresses this amazing character of the angelic presence:

*... For the honour we pay the angelic creatures  
in whom you delight  
redounds to your own surpassing glory,  
and by their great dignity and splendour  
you show how infinitely great you are,  
to be exalted above all things ...*

The awesome magnificence of the angels is but a reflection of God's infinitely greater magnificence. And so, the first role of the angels in the history of salvation is to be an inspiration for us, to encourage us and move us to praise God for his grandeur and infinite majesty. That kind of prayer does more good to our souls than we realize, and we should give ourselves permission to engage in it more frequently.

## CONCLUSION: ANGELS SINGING

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It's especially appropriate that the existence of the angels moves us to praise God, because praising God is one of the primary activities of the angels themselves, according to the Bible. In fact, the two prayers of praise embedded most firmly in the celebration of Mass come to us in the Scriptures through angels.

The Glory, which we pray at the beginning of Mass, is taken from the hymn of praise that a host of angels sang in the presence of the shepherds on Christmas night. And the beginning of the Sanctus—the Holy, Holy, Holy—which we pray at the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, the real heart of the Mass, comes to us from Isaiah's and St. John's visions of angels praising God in heaven, recorded both in the Old and the New Testaments.

And during the Mass and other liturgical celebrations, our praise of God is actually joined to the angelic praise; we bring our earthly voices together with their heavenly voices, making the whole universe, visible and invisible, unite in worship. The next time you go to Mass, pay special attention to the many times the priest mentions the angels, and you will see that the Mass truly does build a bridge between heaven and earth.

But the angels are not simply an inspiration for our praise of and confidence in God's power and goodness. God has also given them some more down-to-earth ministries. And we will look at those in the next meditation. But for now, just take some time to savor the glory God reveals to us through the angels. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.



## QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

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1. When I think of the angels, what comes to mind? How well does my conception of the angels harmonize with what God has revealed about them?
2. God wants us to know about the angels, and that is why he revealed their existence to us. How would I explain to someone why it's important to know this revealed truth?
3. Praise is an important and enriching form of prayer. How often do I engage in it? How intentionally do I lift my heart to God in praise and thanksgiving during the celebration of Mass?

## THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

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*Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

—Luke 2:8–14  
NABRE

*Once when he [Zechariah] was serving as priest in his division's turn before God, according to the practice of the priestly service, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to burn incense. Then, when the whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the hour of the incense offering, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John... Then Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old*

*man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel said to him in reply, "I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time."*

—Luke 1:8–20  
NABRE

*Then I saw one of the seven spirits near me, radiant as at other times, under a form of light. I constantly saw him beside me when I was riding on the train. I saw an angel standing on every church we passed, but surrounded by a light which was paler than that of the spirit who was accompanying me on the journey, and each of these spirits who were guarding the churches bowed his head to the spirit who was near me. When I entered the convent gate at Warsaw, the spirit disappeared. I thanked God for His goodness, that He gives us angels for companions. Oh, how little people reflect on the fact that they always have beside them such a guest, and at the same time a witness to everything! Remember, sinners, that you likewise have a witness to all your deeds.*

—St. Faustina Kowalska  
Diary, 630

## NOTES

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# SECOND MEDITATION

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## ANGELIC MESSENGERS AND ANGELIC PROTECTORS

### INTRODUCTION

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The angels reveal unimagined dimensions of God's glory, as we saw in the first meditation. But they also have work to do on behalf of Christ's Kingdom. Their work for the Church consists primarily of two jobs.

### MESSENGERS OF THE LORD

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In the first place, they are God's messengers. This is actually what the word "angel" means. It comes from the Greek word "angelos," which means messenger. At times, God speaks directly to his people, and through the incarnation he has not only spoken to us but even come to dwell among us and walk with us. And yet, even in the New Testament, sometimes God still sends angels as his messengers.

The Archangel Gabriel comes to bring the good news of the incarnation itself to Mary. A host of angels announces the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. Angels appear to the women who visit Christ's tomb on Easter Sunday and give them a message to pass on to the Apostles. The entire Book of Revelation is a series of prophetic messages communicated to St. John largely through the ministry of angels.

We may ask ourselves why God chooses to use intermediaries instead of just speaking directly all the time. We can't understand fully the answer to that question, but we can understand it partially.

God has given an order and a harmony to his creation. Each of his creatures has certain capacities; each has its own nature. And the beauty of creation flows from each creature living and developing that nature to the full. Human beings and angels by nature both have spiritual powers—intelligence, will, freedom. And so, as God unfolds his plan of salvation, he doesn't override those natural capacities. Rather, he respects them and works with them to accomplish his will. Just as he entrusts the message of the Gospel to the Church, so that each of us can spread that message to those who haven't heard or accepted it yet, so he entrusts his angels with certain messages. He has arranged the universe so that we and the angels are partners in the work of building up Christ's

Kingdom. He didn't have to arrange things like that, but he did, and we can rest assured that he did so for some very good reasons.

### MESSENGERS TO THE LORD

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In the life of the Church, the angels are not just messengers from God to the human family. They also serve as messengers from us to God. In the offertory prayer for the Mass of September 29th, the feast of the Archangels, this comes across clearly. In that prayer, the priest says:

*We offer you a sacrifice of praise, O Lord,  
humbly entreating,  
that, as these gifts are borne by the ministry of Angels  
into the presence of your majesty,  
so you may receive them favorably  
and make them profitable for our salvation.  
Through Christ our Lord.*

The angels take our offerings from our earthly altars and bring them up to the heavenly altar—in doing so, they become our messengers to God.

In the First Eucharistic Prayer, this same action is highlighted after the consecration of the bread and the wine. The priest bows over the altar and says:

*In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God:  
command that these gifts be borne  
by the hands of your holy Angel  
to your altar on high  
in the sight of your divine majesty,  
so that all of us, who through this participation at the  
altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of your Son,  
may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing.*

The angels take this messenger job seriously. And throughout the history of the Church, the Lord has permitted some extraordinary manifestations of it. One example comes from the life of St. Gemma Galgani, a virgin and suffering soul who lived in twentieth-century Italy. She used to take advantage of the angelic messaging system. Her spiritual director lived in Rome, and she lived



in the countryside. This was before the days of modern communication, and so when she had an urgent message for her spiritual director, she would entrust it for delivery to her guardian angel. It became a frequent and effective means of communication.

I know one priest who invokes this ministry of the angels every time he preaches. He prays to his guardian angel to connect with all the guardian angels of everyone who will be listening, so that his message will truly penetrate their hearts.

## HEAVENLY PROTECTORS

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The second major job that God has given the angels in relation to the Church has to do with that term I just mentioned of “guardian angel.” The angels are not just reflections of God’s glory; they are not just messengers; they are also protectors.

Their role as protectors comes across clearly in the opening and closing prayers for the Mass of the Archangels. In the opening prayer, the priest asks the Lord:

*... graciously grant  
that our life on earth may be defended  
by those who watch over us  
as they minister perpetually to you in heaven.*

And in the closing prayer, he offers a similar petition:

*Having been nourished with heavenly Bread,  
we beseech you humbly, O Lord,  
that, drawing from it new strength,  
under the faithful protection of your Angels,  
we may advance boldly along the way of salvation.*

God has involved the angels in the history of salvation by giving them the job of defending us, watching over us, and protecting us. In this way too, they are meant to be our allies in the hard battle of good vs. evil here on earth, and in our own souls—invisible allies, true enough, but real allies nonetheless.

The second liturgical celebration dedicated to the angels commemorates in a special way this role of protection, since it focuses on giving thanks to God for our guardian angels. Church tradition clearly holds that there is a hierarchy of angels, a division of them into nine choirs or groups mentioned in the Bible and often referred

to in liturgical prayers: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. From these, God assigns to each one of us an individual guardian angel to accompany and help us on our journey of faith.

Jesus refers to this explicitly in the Gospel of Matthew when speaking of children and of spiritual childhood:

*See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.*

—Matthew 18:10

The offertory prayer for the Mass of the Guardian Angels takes up this sentiment, invoking their protection. The priest prays:

*Receive, O Lord, the offerings we bring before you  
as we venerate your holy Angels,  
and graciously grant  
that under their constant protection  
we may be delivered from present dangers  
and brought happily to life eternal.*

## CONCLUSION: OUR NEED FOR HEAVENLY DEFENDERS

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Why do we need the protection of guardian angels? And how do they administer this protection, if we can’t even see them? These are important questions, and they have to do with what some theologians call “spiritual warfare” or “spiritual combat.”

The good angels who live in communion with God and love us as God loves us aren’t the only purely spiritual beings involved in the history of salvation. Many of the angels whom God created as good became bad when, under the leadership of Satan (also known as Lucifer), they rebelled against God. Their rebellion led to the beginning of a spiritual battle that still continues today.

In the conference we will take a closer look at that reality, but for now, let’s take some time to prayerfully reflect on, and thank God for, the multifaceted ministry of the angels, our invisible allies. The following questions and quotation may help your meditation.





QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1. How often do I think about my guardian angel? What difference would it make in my life if I thought about and asked the help of my guardian angel more often?
2. Here is a traditional prayer to the guardian angel. What does it tell me about how God wants the angels to help us in our Christian journey?

Angel sent by God to guide me, Be my light and walk beside me, Be my guardian and protect me, On the paths of life direct me.

- 3. Explain in my own words why God has desired to reveal to us the existence of the angels, our invisible allies.

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

Then going out he [Jesus] went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. When he arrived at the place he said to them, 'Pray that you may not undergo the test.' After withdrawing about a stone's throw from them and kneeling, he prayed, saying, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done.' And to strengthen him an angel from heaven appeared to him.

—Luke 22:39–43 NABRE

We were being pounded by the storm so violently that the next day they jettisoned some cargo, and on the third day with their own hands they threw even the ship's tackle overboard. Neither the sun nor the stars were visible for many days, and no small storm raged. Finally, all hope of our surviving was taken away. When many would no longer eat, Paul stood among them and said, 'Men, you should have taken my advice and not have set sail from Crete and you would have avoided this disastrous loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage; not one of you will be lost, only the ship. For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood by me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to stand before Caesar; and behold, for your sake, God has granted safety to all who are sailing with you.' Therefore, keep up your

courage, men; I trust in God that it will turn out as I have been told. We are destined to run aground on some island.'

—Acts 27:18–26 NABRE

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, 'Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him.' Nathanael said to him, 'How do you know me?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.' Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.' And he said to him, 'Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'

—John 1:47–51 NABRE

NOTES

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# CONFERENCE

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## SPIRITUAL COMBAT AND THE DEVIL'S FAVORITE TACTICS

### INTRODUCTION

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Our fallen human nature weighs us down (this is what the Bible traditionally calls our “flesh”), and the fallen world around us is a constant source of spiritual interference. Both of those negative influences are intensified by activity the Church attributes to the devil and his followers, all of whom were created good angels by God, but became evil through their disobedient rebellion against God.

In this conference, we will look at some of the tactics used by the devil and his minions, and in so doing we will come to understand a little bit better how the angels administer their protection.

### THE REALITY OF SPIRITUAL COMBAT

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The origin of what many theologians call spiritual warfare is described with symbolic language in the Book of Revelation:

*Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth... Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it.*

—Revelation 12:3–4, 7–9

The exile of the devil and his demons to earth symbolizes the failure of their rebellion against God in heaven, but the continuance of that rebellion at work here on earth, as they keep expressing their hatred for God by trying to lead men and women into sin, cutting them off from God's grace.

The singular role of the Archangel Michael in that battle has led the Church to invoke him in a special way in the context of spiritual combat; he is considered the leader of the heavenly army that fights to protect us against these spiritual attacks. Until the end of history, when Jesus

comes again to judge the living and the dead and put a definitive end to all suffering and evil, this clash of good against evil will be ongoing. It is at the heart of spiritual combat.

### SPIRITUAL ARMOR

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A famous passage from the New Testament writings of St. Paul alludes to this sometimes forgotten dimension of our Christian lives. He writes:

*Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground.*

—Ephesians 6:10–13

Biblical scholars have different opinions about the specific interpretation of some of those phrases, but the bottom line remains clear. Just as good angels exist and are interested in helping us come closer to God, so too evil spirits exist and are interested in distancing us from God.

This was why Pope Leo XIII energetically promoted the prayer to St. Michael just before the beginning of the twentieth century, a century in which the spiritual battle took particularly virulent physical shape. St. John Paul II encouraged all of us not to forget about this prayer. He said:

*May prayer strengthen us for the spiritual battle that the Letter to the Ephesians speaks of... The Book of Revelation refers to this same battle, recalling before our eyes the image of St Michael the Archangel. Pope Leo XIII certainly had this picture in mind when, at the end of the last century, he brought in, throughout the Church, a special prayer to St Michael: “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil...” I ask everyone not to forget [this prayer] and to recite it to*



obtain help in the battle against the forces of darkness and against the spirit of this world.<sup>[1]</sup>

## AVOIDING EXAGGERATIONS

It's possible to overreact to this reality of spiritual battle. It's possible to become obsessed with the existence of evil spirits, and to attribute everything that goes wrong to their direct interference. That is a dangerous exaggeration, just as dangerous as the exaggerated denial of the very existence of demons.

The Bible and Church teaching make clear that evil spirits exist and are actively working against us, but they also make clear that God is still in charge, limiting the influence of evil spirits and giving us all the room we need to build our lives and exercise our freedom. The Catechism expresses this well.

First, it affirms the reality of this battle between good and evil, a battle that exists both in society as a whole, and in every human soul:

*By our first parents' sin, the devil has acquired a certain domination over man, even though man remains free... This dramatic situation of the whole world [which] is in the power of the evil one makes man's life a battle: The whole of man's history has been the story of our combat with the powers of evil, stretching, so our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day. Finding himself in the midst of the battlefield man has to struggle to do what is right ...*

—CCC 407, 409

Then the Catechism goes on to explain the very real limits that God has placed on diabolical activity:

*The power of Satan is, nonetheless, 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. Although Satan may act in the world out of hatred for God and his kingdom in Christ Jesus, and although his action may cause grave injuries—of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature—to each man and to society, the 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 [Romans 8:28].”*

—CCC 395

## THE DEVIL'S UNCOMMON TACTICS

In general, theologians identify four different ways that the evil spirits try to work their mischief. The first three are classified as extraordinary demonic activity, because they are much less common than the fourth.

The most dramatic tactic, and the most rare, is demonic *possession*. Through possession, a demon will gain direct power over a person's body, and from time to time will manifest that power in violent, frightening ways. Many apparent cases of possession are actually due to merely natural causes for hysterical behavior. But the reality still exists, and Canon Law stipulates particular norms regarding exorcisms in order to deal with cases of possession.

Demonic activity can also interfere in someone's life without taking possession of the person's body from within. External, direct interference is usually referred to as *obsession* if it has to do with mental and emotional disruptions—frequent and intense negative thoughts and unexplained bouts of depression, for example. It is usually referred to as *oppression* if it has to do with physical disruptions—inexplicable pains or illnesses, for example. If the physical disruption is associated with a place more than a person, it is usually called a demonic *infestation*.

Possession, obsession, and oppression are real tactics of the devil. But they are not always easy to identify, since many of the symptoms they induce can have merely natural causes. In the recommended reading list at the end of this conference, you will find some resources that can help you learn more about these extraordinary and less common manifestations of demonic activity.

## THE DEVIL'S FAVORITE TACTIC

But the most common, the ordinary and daily way that the evil spirits try to interfere with our growth in holiness and happiness, is much simpler and much less dramatic. It's called temptation.

The evil spirits' goal is to separate us from God. And no amount of possession or obsession can do that on its own—those extraordinary forms of demonic activity just make life more difficult and increase human suffering. But they can never force us to turn away from God. That can only happen if we freely give in to temptation, if we freely commit sin.

[1] St. John Paul II, *Regina Caeli* Address, April 24, 1994



The very un-dramatic temptations of every day, the temptation to over-indulge, to gossip and backbite, to wound and cut others down, to minimize or eliminate our times of prayer, to hold grudges and seek revenge, to fudge the truth, to run from our duties and our crosses and give in to laziness, lust, greed and self-absorption... These are the arenas of life where every single day we have a chance to show and grow our love for God and neighbor, or to drain and weaken that love.

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## HELPS AND HINDRANCES

Because of our fallen, wounded human nature, and because of the fallen world in which we live, we already have built in tendencies towards these sinful and destructive behaviors. The evil spirits act in our lives simply by trying to stimulate thoughts that make these behaviors more attractive. Their action takes place in our imagination and in our minds—they sow thoughts that serve as invitations to or justifications for what our fallen nature is already inclined to do, intensifying the temptation to do those things.

The good angels, on the other hand, will help protect us from those thoughts. We don't know all the details about how this works, but we know that they can directly obstruct or limit the activity of evil spirits. They can also stimulate thoughts that help expose the lies behind those temptations, reminding us of the truths of our faith, of God's goodness and his promises, of our calling to live in his friendship, the only place we can find the happiness we yearn for.

In that way, the angels truly are our invisible allies, some of the many allies and helps that God's grace gives us in the midst of our hidden, everyday battles. But we need to use those helps, and he won't force us to do so. He won't let us be tempted beyond our power to resist (Scripture promises that<sup>[2]</sup>), but neither will he eliminate completely these chances to fight for Christ's Kingdom and to glorify God by saying in our hearts and with our choices, "Thy will be done, Lord, thy Kingdom come."


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## CONCLUSION: KEEPING THE TRUTH IN MIND

It's important for us to know about this invisible dimension of our Christian lives, because God has revealed it to us. It helps us make sense out of the confusing contradictions in life, like the resistance we often feel when we try to do what's right even in the simplest circumstances. But we

shouldn't exaggerate it. In the end, our job remains the same. If we continually seek God in prayer, the sacraments, and faithfulness to his will, temptations will gradually lose their hold on us, and we will find ourselves not only defending the borders of Christ's Kingdom, but actually expanding them.

St. James sums this up powerfully and concisely in his New Testament Letter. He writes:

 *So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

—James 4:7–8

Take some time now to reflect prayerfully on the personal questionnaire, which are designed to help arm you and strengthen you for successful spiritual combat.

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## PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE


1. How does the idea of "spiritual combat" or "spiritual warfare" make me feel? Why?
2. What are some ways in which this reality can be over-emphasized in the life of a Christian?
3. What are some ways in which this reality can be under-emphasized in the life of a Christian?
4. Explain in my own words why it is impossible for the devil to force someone to commit a sin.
5. Why can ordinary temptations be considered more spiritually dangerous than extraordinary demonic activity like possession, obsession, and oppression?
6. Why does Hollywood gravitate more towards making movies about demonic possession than making movies about holiness?
7. What ordinary temptations occur most frequently in my life? What am I doing to strengthen myself against them?

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[2] "No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).



8. Here is the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel. What does this prayer say to me? How do I react to it, and why?

 *St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle.  
Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of  
the Devil.  
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray,  
and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly hosts,  
by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan, and all the  
evil spirits,  
who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls.  
Amen*

9. Explain in my own words why God chose to reveal the truth about angels and demons.

10. How often do I think about Christ’s promised victory over all evil and suffering at the end of history? How would it affect my daily life if I thought about this promise more often?

NOTES

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## FURTHER READING

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If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Angels and Demons: What Do We Really Know About Them?*  
by Peter Kreeft
- *Angels of God: The Bible, The Church, and the Heavenly Hosts*  
by Mike Aquilina
- *Meditations on the Angels*  
by Fr. John Hardon
- *An Exorcist Tells His Story*  
by Fr. Gabriele Amorth
- *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist*  
by Matt Baglio

## CONTACT US

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## NOTES

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