

29. September 2022

The mission of the three archangels

Dan 7:9-10,13-14

While I was watching, thrones were set in place and one most venerable took his seat. His robe was white as snow, the hair of his head as pure as wool. His throne was a blaze of flames, its wheels were a burning fire. A stream of fire poured out, issuing from his presence. A thousand thousand waited on him, ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was in session and the books lay open. I was gazing into the visions of the night, when I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven, as it were a son of man. He came to the One most venerable and was led into his presence. On him was conferred rule, honour and kingship, and all peoples, nations and languages became his servants. His rule is an everlasting rule which will never pass away, and his kingship will never come to an end.

Today in our Church we celebrate the three Archangels whose names we know from Sacred Scripture: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. Both today's feast and the memorial of the holy guardian angels celebrated on October 2nd invite us to raise our gaze to the supernatural world, which, although we cannot perceive with our senses, is no less real than the physical world in which we move.

In his book "Christus Vincit," Bishop Athanasius Schneider states that "the existence of angels is a very powerful call to the Church to look towards eternity, towards the invisible world that awaits us." In fact, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, "the Mystical Body of Christ consists not only of men, but also of angels." Thus, we are called from now on to act and worship in union with our brothers, the holy angels. For already here on earth we can anticipate eternal life, where we will be indissolubly united to the family of God, composed of men and angels.

Just as the Lord entrusts each person with a unique and unrepeatable mission when He created him, so too each of the holy archangels we celebrate today has a specific task, which is expressed in his own name. In the homily given by Pope Benedict XVI on this feast in 2007, he emphasized that "the three names of the Archangels end with the word 'El', which means 'God'. God is inscribed in their names, in their nature."

Indeed, as the Lord tells us, the angels "are continually in the presence of my Father in heaven." (Mt 18:10). That is to say that with their whole being they are oriented towards God and it is from this profound union with Him that they become His messengers. In the words of Pope Benedict, "They bring God to men, they open heaven and thus open earth. Precisely because they are with God, they can also be very close to man".

We will be able to better understand this mission of the angels in general if we look at the particularity of the three archangels we are celebrating today. Let us listen again to Benedict XVI:

The figure of St. Michael "we find in Sacred Scripture above all in the Book of Daniel, in the Letter of the Apostle St Jude Thaddeus and in the Book of Revelation. Two of this Archangel's roles become obvious in these texts. He defends the cause of God's oneness against the presumption of the dragon, the "ancient serpent", as John calls it. The serpent's continuous effort is to make men believe that God must disappear so that they themselves may become important; that God impedes our freedom and, therefore, that we must rid ourselves of Him." With his cry 'Who is like God?' which is in fact the meaning of his name, St. Michael unmasks the serpent's lie and gives God the glory that He alone deserves. "However, the dragon does not only accuse God" Pope Benedict continues. The Book of Revelation also calls it "the accuser of our brethren..., who accuses them day and night before our God" (Rev 12:10). In contrast, "the other function of the archangel Michael, according to Scripture, is that of protector of God's people (cf. Dn 10:21; 12:1)."

The second archangel, St. Gabriel, is linked above all to the mystery of the Incarnation (Lk 1:26-38). In one of his catecheses on the angels, Pope John Paul II explained that the name Gabriel means 'My Power is God' or 'Power of God,' "as if to say that at the summit of creation, the Incarnation is the supreme sign of the omnipotent Father." Although all angels are messengers, Gabriel is so par excellence, for he brings to the Virgin at Nazareth the great announcement, which will begin the saving work of God in Christ Jesus. He announces to her the fulfillment of the prophecies, the coming of the "Son of Man" whom Daniel beheld in the night vision recounted in today's reading; the One "whose power is eternal and will never pass away, and his kingdom will not be destroyed."

Finally, Raphael's name means "God heals." We meet this archangel above all in the Book of Tobit, where he performs two emblematic healing tasks. He heals the disturbed communion between man and woman, expelling the demons that time and again tear love apart; and, secondly, he heals Tobit of his blindness. Pope Benedict thus relates Archangel Raphael's role to the present times: "We all know that today we are seriously threatened by blindness with regard to God. Today the danger is very great that, in the face of all that we know about material things and what we can do with them, we become blind with respect to the light of God."

We Christians have also been entrusted with aspects of these three great missions: the fight against the "ancient serpent" as St. Michael, the proclamation of the Good News as St. Gabriel, the healing of inner wounds and spiritual blindness as St. Raphael. Thus, these three angels, who are our brothers in Christ, are to assist us especially in these times, when the devil is acquiring a growing influence over the world and the Church, when the proclamation of the faith seems to weaken, and when there is a great need for inner healing.