

God's angels are all around us

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

In case you haven't noticed, angels are "in" these days. In a big way.

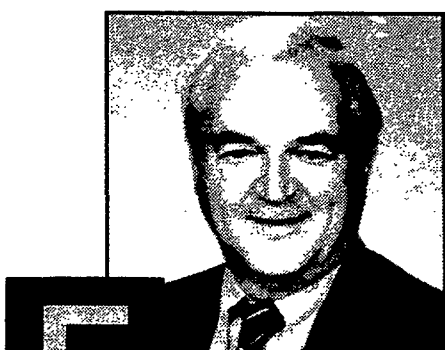
This past Christmas they made the cover of *Time* magazine and were the main topic of *Newsweek's* religion section.

Go into a large bookstore and you'll find, as I did recently, a shelf full of titles on angels: *The Angels Within Us*, *The Angel Book*, *Angel Letters*, *A Book of Angels*, *Ask Your Angels*, *Where Angels Walk*, *Angels: An Endangered Species*, *Angel Voices*, *Angels Among Us*, *Touched By Angels*, *Creating With the Angels*, and on and on.

It's not that this intense new interest in angels is without precedent. Three of the most popular Christmas films — all more than 40 years old — have angels as central characters.

In *It's a Wonderful Life*, the angel Clarence (played by Henry Travers) saves George Bailey (portrayed by Jimmy Stewart) from committing suicide by helping him see how much poorer the lives of his loved ones and friends would have been if he had never lived.

In *The Bishop's Wife*, the angel Dudley (played by Cary Grant) helps an Episcopal bishop (portrayed by David Niven) to see that his relationship with his wife (played by Loretta Young) and daughter, are more important than the building of a new cathedral.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

In *A Christmas Carol*, based on Charles Dickens's novel, the three ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future who visit Ebenezer Scrooge are really angels — messengers sent by God to save the old miser from himself and to teach him that true happiness comes from being generous to others.

And for several years one of the more popular television programs in America, "Highway to Heaven," featured an angel named Jonathan (played by the late Michael Landon).

Like most things in life, angels can be good or bad for your spiritual health.

They can be a means of opening our

hearts to the presence and needs of others. Or they can be a means of escape from reality into a world of fantasy and make-believe.

The word angel means "messenger." In the Bible, angels function as their name suggests — as messengers of God (2 Samuel 14:17; 2 Kings 19:35; Exodus 14:19; and in the Book of Revelation generally).

The angel Gabriel announces the births of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11-20) and of Jesus (1:26-38), an angel assists Jesus in his agony in Gethsemane (22:43), another angel removes the stone from the tomb of Jesus (Matthew 28:2-3), an angel also announces the message of the resurrection to the women who came to the tomb (28:1-7), and angels are part of the heavenly court at the Last Judgment (13:34-41; 25:31-46).

To be sure, few of us would expect an angel to announce the births of our children, or to abandon its duties at the heavenly court to satisfy some trivial desire.

But angels who grieve with the sorrowing, like the one who came to offer strength to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, are another matter. And so, too, are angels who bring hope to those in despair, such as the angel who announced the resurrection to the women who had searched frantically for the Lord's crucified body.

Properly understood, angels make

a lot of sense, especially for Catholics.

Why so? Because Catholicism is a tradition that emphasizes the principles of sacramentalism and mediation, and both of these have much to do with the function of angels.

The principle of sacramentalism means that God is present to us in and through the ordinary things of life: other people, daily events, nature's beauties.

The principle of mediation means that God is not only present to us in and through the ordinary things of life, but that God acts on our behalf in and through them.

Angels are signs of God's presence among us (sacramentalism), and at the same time instruments of God's love, mercy, and justice on our behalf (mediation).

Whenever we ourselves reach out to others — to comfort them in their grief, to strengthen them in their weakness, to assist them in their need, to give them hope in their despair, to defend them against injustice — we become for them angels of God.

The next time you do something like that for another person or for a group of people in need, and they say to you, "You're an angel," don't be too quick to turn down the compliment.

That's how God touches our lives and redeems them. The technical words are sacramentalism and mediation. But "angel" will do.

Happiness comes from helping others

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 1:29-39; (R1) Job 7:1-4, 6-7; (R2) 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23.

Muhammed Ali was boxing's heavy-weight champion of the world three times — a feat never duplicated. His picture appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* more times than any other athlete. Reporters, trainers and staff followed him everywhere he went.

But that was years ago. Whatever happened to Muhammed Ali? What is he doing today?

Gary Smith, a sportswriter, visited Ali to find out. The former champ showed him the barn next to his farmhouse. In the barn were pictures and framed newspaper articles from his prime: photos of the champ punching and dancing, holding his championship belt high in triumph, a framed poster that read, "The thrill in Manilla."

As the sportswriter looked at the pictures, he noticed they were covered with bird droppings. The former champ looked into the rafters at the pigeons who had made his gym their home. Then Ali walked over to the row of pictures and one by one turned them face down. Then he mumbled, "I had the world, and it wasn't nothin.' Look now."



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

From the beginning of His ministry crowds surrounded Jesus everywhere He went — just like crowds circled Ali. According to most standards Jesus was a smashing success, an overnight sensation, a hit. The disciples thought this was great. But not Jesus.

Fame, name, popularity — these do not make one happy. Jesus knew this; so He taught the way to real happiness.

First, happiness comes from helping others. Upon leaving the synagogue, Jesus entered Simon and Andrew's house. Simon's mother-in-law was sick. Jesus was told about it. And

the first thing He did was to go over to her, grasp her hand and help her up. Instantly, she was healed. And the cure was so complete that she immediately began to wait on them. That was her way of saying thanks. Happiness comes from helping others in the name of Jesus.

However, we must be wary of letting our busyness with others crowd out our prayer life. After sunset, Jesus cured everybody in the town who was ill or possessed by a demon. He was mightily tempted, not to seek the crowd's plaudits, but to reduce the Gospel to taking care of bodies. This temptation was so strong that Jesus got up early the next morning and withdrew to a desert spot to pray to His Father. Jesus, who had given so much to others the day before, needed some time alone with the Father. Likewise, we must never let our busyness crowd out our prayer life.

Lastly, we need to take inventory of our lives and get our priorities straight. When Simon and the other disciples discovered Jesus the next day, they said, "Everybody is looking for you." But Jesus would not let himself be side-tracked by the adulation of the crowds. He knew where He was headed; He knew His mission. Nothing else mattered.

Gorman Williams was a missionary

to India. In 1945 he purchased a ticket for a long-awaited vacation back to the United States. He could hardly wait to go home. A few days before he was to leave, some Jews escaped the wrath of the Nazis and sought refuge in India. The request was denied, but permission was granted to stay for a short time in the buildings near the dock. The living conditions were wretched, but far better than a Nazi concentration camp.

On Christmas Eve Williams heard about the plight of these Jews. He went to the dock immediately, entered the first building and called out, "Merry Christmas! What would you like for Christmas?"

"We're Jewish," someone answered. "I know," Williams said, "but what would you like for Christmas?" The Jews replied, "Some German pastries."

Williams sold his ticket to the United States and purchased more German pastries than anyone had ever seen and brought them to the refugees.

Later he told this story to a group of students. One brash young man reprimanded him. "You shouldn't have done that," he said, "they weren't even Christians."

"No they weren't," Williams quietly replied, "but I am." Williams had his priorities in order.

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'If I succeed in saving only a single soul, I can be sure that my own will be saved.'

—St. Dominic Savio