

# Angels

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The church has set aside September 29 as the feast day of archangels Gabriel, Michael and Raphael, and October 2 as the day to honor guardian angels.

This recent surge of interest comes after a period of several hundred years during which angels seemed to disappear from the Catholic horizon. That seeming drop-off came after angelology — the branch of theology dealing with angels — reached its zenith in the Middle Ages, with the likes of St. Thomas Aquinas writing about angelic nature.

But who exactly are the angels, why did they seemingly drop from sight and why this sudden attention to them?

The catechism is quite clear about who angels are.

"Angels are spiritual creatures who glorify God without ceasing and who serve his saving plans for other creatures ... (350)

The word "angel" comes from the Greek word *angelos*, a translation of the Hebrew word, *Mal'ak*, which means "messenger." St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out that their very name is "the name of their office." Thus angels are often depicted in Scripture serving as messengers — such as the archangel Gabriel announcing Christ's birth.

Angels also served as warriors. Archangel Michael, for example, led the fight against Satan, who along with his devil followers were angels who turned from God.

In addition, angels also function as protectors, as they did for Lot and his family, or as is emphasized in so many of the recent books containing accounts of angels allegedly physically saving people from harm.

Father Richard P. McBrien, in the 1981 edition of his "Catholicism," notes that angels are of theological significance in that they "remind us that there is more to the created order than what we actually see, feel, hear, and taste."

Indeed, angels have traditionally been part of a theological system that viewed the universe as including both spiritual and physical realms that work together, noted Father L. Michael Curtin, who serves in the Catholic Information Center in Washington, D.C.

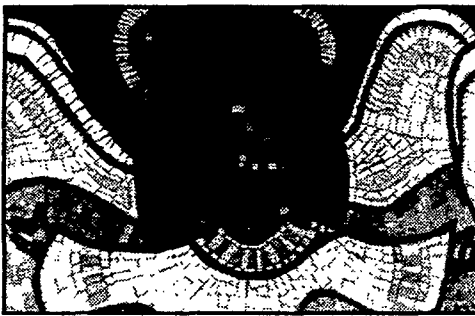
"Angels were part of the whole," Father Curtin explained. "The (medieval) cathedrals were decorated with angels, animals, men, all together."

The Christian theology of angels developed out of Jewish roots, which emphasized angels' roles as messengers and mediators between humans and God. The church's early theologians focused increasingly on angels' links to the ministry of Jesus.

The Scholastics of the Middle Ages



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer  
**A mosaic of angels watching over playing children hangs in the entrance to Guardian Angels Church and school in Henrietta. The photo below is a detail of one of the angels.**



studied the angels in depth, building upon Jewish, early Christian and Islamic sources, with St. Thomas Aquinas synthesizing much of the theology in his writings.

Medieval angelology developed during a period of optimism and confidence about the universe, Father Curtin observed. "They were coming out of a time of barbarism," he noted. "There was optimism about spiritual matters."

But then the focus on angels suddenly decreased. Some historians speculate that it may have been due to society and theologian's increasing reliance on reason — as opposed to emotion — as a whole during the Age of Reason. Angels were increasingly considered more part of romantic myth than as subjects for serious thought and study.

Father Curtin also believes that the Black Death in the 14th century shook confidence in an ordered, hope-filled universe. As the plague wiped out approximately half of Europe's population, people began to live day-to-day, focusing on mere survival. "That sense of being part of a whole was lost," he said.

The resurgence of interest in angels began back in 1975. That year, the Rev. Billy Graham, after finding few resources to help him with a sermon on angels, wrote "Angels: God's Secret

Agents." The book became a best seller, and a revised edition, simply titled "Angels," has been published this year.

"I think (Rev.) Graham's book was the forerunner of the current revival," noted author Joan Wester Anderson. "I think that book helped to start it."

Anderson has been in the midst of that revival. Her 1992 book, "Where Angels Walk," has sold more than a million copies, and she has two more books coming out next month: "Where Miracles Happen" and "An Angel to Watch Over Me: True Stories of Children's Encounters with Angels."

Anderson's own interest dates back to 1983 when her son, Tim, was caught in a blizzard while trying to drive home for Christmas. After his car broke down, a tow truck mysteriously appeared and towed the car to a friend's house. When Anderson's son came back out of the house to pay the driver, he discovered the truck was gone. And the only tracks in the snow were those of his own car.

Anderson later checked with the area's tow-truck companies, only to find that they had no records of the incident. Gradually, she became convinced her son was aided by an angel sent in response to her prayers for his safety.

Still, Anderson acknowledged, she held back talking about her beliefs or seriously pursuing the topic of angels because she feared it would undermine her career as a successful freelance writer. Then she read Sophy Burnham's

1990 book, "A Book of Angels," and realized that other people were interested in angels.

Her realization was confirmed when, as part of her research, Anderson placed an ad in several magazines asking for people to write her about their personal experiences with angels.

"Letters just kept coming," Anderson recalled. "Most were so grateful that someone was willing to listen."

Anderson speculated that some of the recent interest has resulted from people's longing for spirituality.

"I think for the longest time we as a country have taken God out of everything, and as a church I think we took the mystical out of things a bit," Anderson observed.

From a Catholic perspective, Anderson noted that in recent years "the church didn't want people having a faith that was based on miracles. They wanted us to have a faith that was active."

But what happened after years of that emphasis, she said, is "our hearts are hungry. I don't think we can deny the more personal experience for people."

Father Curtin speculated that this hunger is arising because that Americans are discovering that their traditional notion of "individualism" — which he described as a kind of selfishness with no sense of responsibility or obligation toward others — is not adequate.

"I think people want to move away from it," Father Curtin said. "We've got to live together a lot more, and we've got a few problems created by individualism."

By turning to angels, however, people are discovering a sense of community, Father Curtin said.

That community of angels has always existed, Yantz observed. It is just that people are now only beginning to pay attention to it once again.

"Perhaps it's just more visible today due to the fact our society has forced people to go through more trials in their lives due to problems with crime, drugs, unemployment and other ills," Yantz writes in her newsletter's fall edition. "People are more apt to listen to the angelic message God is sending them."

Father Curtin acknowledged that some of the current interest in angels has a faddish aspect to it, but he is certain that it can have good effects.

"If the angels have anything to do with it, they will divert people's attention to God," Father Curtin concluded.

Editors note: to receive "Angelic Thoughts," contact Audrey Yantz at P.O. Box 24982 Rochester, N.Y. 14624. One year's subscription costs \$15.00.

### Kids' Chronicle Answer Key

1. Samson	a. First woman
2. Saul	b. Sailed the ark
3. Jesus	c. Strongest man
4. Peter	d. First martyr
5. Eve	e. First king of Israel
6. Steven	f. The "Rock"
7. Noah	g. Son of God
8. Mary	h. Wrote many Psalms
9. David	i. Received the Ten Commandments
10. Moses	j. Mother of Jesus

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## Catechism sums up main beliefs

The Catechism of the Catholic Church includes a summary of church teachings concerning angels.

The main teachings begin with Statement 328: "The existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls 'angels' is a truth of faith. The witness of Scripture is as clear as the unanimity of Tradition."

The teachings are then outlined in Statements 329-336, and summarized in Statements 350-2.

Among the key points are:

- "As purely *spiritual* creatures angels have intelligence and will: they are personal and immortal creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendor of their glory bears witness." (330)
- "Christ is the center of the angelic world. They are *his* angels ... They belong to him because they were created *through* and *for* him ..." (331)
- "Angels have been present since creation and throughout the history of salvation, announcing this salvation from afar or near and serving the accomplishment of the divine plan ..." (332)
- "From infancy to death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession ... Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God." (336)