

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCES

On the Holy Angels



This is a series of six audiences given by St. John Paul II on the Holy Angels between July 9 and August 20, 1986.

July 9, 1986

Creator of all things, seen and unseen

1. We cannot conclude our catechesis on God, Creator of the world, without devoting adequate attention to a precise item of divine Revelation: the creation of purely spiritual beings which Sacred Scripture calls “angels”. This creation appears clearly in the Creeds, especially in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, *of all things* (that is, entia or beings) seen and unseen”. We know that man enjoys a unique position within the sphere of creation: by his body he belongs to the visible world, while by his spiritual soul which vivifies the body, he is as it were *on the boundary* between the visible and invisible creation. To the latter, according to the Creed which the Church professes in the light of Revelation, belong other beings, purely spiritual, *therefore not proper to the visible world* even though present and working therein. They constitute a world apart.

2. Today, as in times past, these spiritual beings are discussed with greater or lesser wisdom. One must recognize that at times there is great confusion, with the consequent risk of passing off as the Church's faith on the angels what does not pertain to it, or, vice versa, of neglecting some important aspect of the revealed truth. The existence of spiritual beings, which Sacred Scripture usually calls “angels”, was denied already in Christ's time by the Sadducees (cf. Acts 23:8). It is denied also by *materialists and rationalists* of every age. But, as a modern theologian acutely observes, “if one wishes to get rid of the angels, one must radically revise Sacred Scripture itself, and with it the whole history of salvation” (A.

Winklhofer *Die Welt der Engel*, Ettal 1961, p. 144 note 2; in *Mysterium Salutis*, II, 2, p. 726). The whole of *Tradition* is unanimous on this point. The Church's Creed is basically an echo of what Paul writes to the Colossians: “for in him (Christ) all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or authorities - all things were created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). That is to say, Christ who, as the Son-Word eternal and consubstantial with the Father, is the first-born of all creation (Col 1:15), is at the centre of the universe, as the reason and cornerstone of all creation, as we have already seen in the previous Catechesis, and as we shall see later when we shall speak more directly of him.

3. The reference to the “primacy” of Christ helps us to understand that the truth about the existence and activity of the angels (good and bad) is *not the central content of the word of God*. In revelation God speaks first of all “to men... and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company”, as we read in the Constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council (DV, 2). Thus “the most intimate truth ... both about God and the salvation of man” is the central content of the revelation which “shines forth” more fully in the person of Christ (*cf. DV, 2*). The truth about the angels is *in a certain sense “collateral”*, though *inseparable* from the central revelation, which is the existence, the majesty and the glory of the Creator which shine forth in all creation (“seen” and “unseen”) and in God's salvific action in the history of mankind. The angels *are not* therefore creatures *of the first order*, in the reality of Revelation, *though they fully belong to it*, so much so that sometimes we see them carrying out fundamental tasks in the name of God himself.

4. All this that pertains to creation enters, according to Revelation, into the mystery of Divine Providence 'Vatican I, which we have quoted several times, states it in an exemplarily concise manner: “All that God created, he conserves and directs by his Providence reaching from end to end mightily and governing all things well' (*cf. Wis 8:1*). 'All lies bare and exposed to his eyes' (*cf. Heb 4:13*), even what will take place through the free initiative of creatures” (DS, 3003). Providence then embraces *also the world of pure spirits*, which are intellectual and free beings still more fully than men. *In Sacred Scripture* we find *important references to them*. There is also the revelation of a mysterious, though real, drama concerning these angelic creatures, without anything escaping divine Wisdom, which strongly and at the same time gently brings all to fulfillment in the kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We recognize above all that *Providence*, as the *loving* Wisdom of God, was manifested precisely in the creation of purely spiritual beings, so as to express better the likeness of God in them who are so superior to all that is created in the visible world including man, who is

also the indelible image of God. God, who is absolutely perfect Spirit, is reflected especially in spiritual beings which *by nature* that is by reason of their spirituality are nearer to him than material creatures, and which constitute as it were the closest “circle” to the Creator. Sacred Scripture offers abundant explicit evidence of this maximum closeness to God of the angels, who are spoken of figuratively as the “throne” of God, as his “legions”, his “heavens”. It has inspired the poetry which present the angels to us as the “court of God”.

July 23, 1986

Creator of the angels who are free beings

1. Today we continue our catechesis on the angels whose existence, willed by an act of God's eternal love, we profess in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen”.

In the perfection of their spiritual nature the angels are called from the beginning, by virtue of their intelligence, to know the truth and to love the good which they know in truth in a more full and perfect way than is possible to man. This love is an act of a free will, and therefore for the angels also freedom implies a possibility of choice for or against the Good which they know, that is, God himself. It must be repeated here what we already mentioned earlier in regard to man: by creating free beings, God willed that there should be realized in the world *true love* which is *possible only on the basis of freedom*. He willed therefore that the creature, constituted in the image and likeness of his Creator, should be able in the greatest degree possible to render himself similar to God who “is love” (1 Jn 4:16). By creating the pure spirits as free beings, God in his Providence could not but foresee also *the possibility of the angels' sin*. But precisely because Providence is eternal wisdom which loves, God would have been able to draw from the history of this sin, incomparably more radical inasmuch as it was the sin of a pure spirit, *the definitive good of the whole created cosmos*.

2. In fact, as Revelation clearly states, *the world of the pure spirits appears divided into good angels and bad ones*. This division is not the work of God's creation, but is based on the freedom proper to the spiritual nature of each one of them. It is the *result of choice* which for purely spiritual beings possesses an incomparably *more radical* character than that of man, and it is *irreversible* given the degree of intuitiveness and penetration of the good where with their intelligence is endowed. In this regard it must also be said that the pure spirits *were subjected to a test of a moral character*. It was a decisive test regarding first of

all God himself, a God known in a more essential and direct way than is possible to man, a God who granted to these spiritual beings the gift of participating in his divine nature, before doing so to man.

A radical and irreversible choice

3. In the case of the pure spirits, the decisive choice regarded first of all *God himself*, the first and supreme *Good*, accepted or rejected in a more essential and direct way, than could happen within the scope of action of human' free will. The pure spirits have a *knowledge of God incomparably more perfect* than that of man, because by the power of their intellect, not conditioned nor limited by the mediation of sense knowledge, they see to the depths the greatness of infinite Being, of the first Truth, of the supreme Good. To this sublime capacity of knowledge of the pure spirits God offered the mystery of his divinity, making them thus *partakers*, through grace, of his infinite glory Precisely as beings of a spiritual nature they had in their intellect the capacity, the desire of this supernatural elevation to which God had called them, to make of them, long before man, "partakers of the divine nature' (cf. 2 Pt 1:4), partakers of the intimate life of him who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of him who in the communion of the three Divine Persons, "is Love" (1 Jn 4:16). God had admitted all the pure spirits, before and to the eternal communion of love.

4. The choice made on the basis of the truth about God, known in a higher way because of the clarity of their intellects, has divided also the world of pure spirits into the good and the bad. *The good chose God* as the supreme and definitive Good, known to the intellect enlightened by Revelation. To have chosen God means that they turned to him with all the interior force of their freedom, a force which is love. God became the total and definitive scope of their spiritual existence. *The others instead turned their backs on God* contrary to the truth of the knowledge which indicated him as the total and definitive good. Their choice ran counter to the revelation of the mystery of God, to his grace which made them partakers of the Trinity and of the eternal friendship with God in communion with him through love. On the basis of their created freedom they made a radical and irreversible *choice* on a parity with that of the good angels, but *diametrically opposed*. Instead of accepting a God full of love they rejected him, inspired by a false sense of, self-sufficiency, of aversion and even of hatred which is changed into rebellion.

5. How are we to understand such opposition and rebellion against God in beings endowed with such profound and enlightened intelligence? What can be the *motive for such a radical and irreversible choice* against God? Of a hatred so profound, as to appear solely the fruit of folly? The Fathers of the Church and theologians do not hesitate to speak of a “blindness” produced by the overrating of the perfection of their own being, driven to the point of ignoring God's supremacy, which requires instead an act of docile and obedient subjection. All this summed up concisely in the words: “I will not serve” (Jer 2:20), which manifest the radical and irreversible refusal to take part in the building up of the kingdom of God in the created world. Satan, the rebellious spirit, wishes to have his own kingdom, not that of God, and he rises up as the first “adversary” of the Creator, the opponent of Providence, and antagonist of God's loving wisdom. From Satan's rebellion and sin, and likewise from that of man, we must conclude by accepting the wise experience of Scripture which states: “In pride there is ruin” (Tob 4:13).

July 30, 1986

Creator of things unseen: the angels

1. In the previous catechesis we dwelt on the article of the Creed in which we proclaim and confess God as creator not only of the whole visible world, but also of the “things unseen”, and we treated of the question of the existence of the angels who were called upon to make a decision for God or against God by a radical and irreversible act of acceptance or rejection of his salvific will.

According to Sacred Scripture the angels, inasmuch as they are purely spiritual creatures, are presented for our reflection as a special realization of the “image of God”, the most perfect Spirit, as Jesus himself reminds the Samaritan woman in the words: “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24). From this point of view the angels are creatures closest to the divine exemplar. The *name* given to them by Sacred Scripture indicates that what counts most in Revelation is the truth concerning the *tasks of the angels in regard to man*: angel (*angelus*) in fact means “messenger” The Hebrew *malak*, used in the Old Testament, signifies more precisely “delegate” or “ambassador”. The angels, spiritual creatures, have a function of mediation and of ministry in the relationships between God and man. Under this aspect the Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ has been given a “name”, and therefore a ministry of mediation, far superior to that of the angels (cf. Heb 1:4).

Care and solicitude

2. The Old Testament emphasizes *especially the special participation of the angels* in the celebration of the *glory* which the creator receives as a tribute of praise on the part of the created world. The Psalms are in a special way the interpreters of this voice, when, for example, they proclaim “Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him all his angels ...” (Ps 148:1-2). Similarly in Psalm 102 (103): “Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!” (Ps 102 [103]:20). This last verse of Psalm 102 indicates that the angels *take part*, in a way proper to themselves, in God's government of creation, as “the mighty ones who do his word” according to the plan established by Divine Providence. To the angels in particular is entrusted a special care and solicitude for people, whose requests and prayers they present to God as, mentioned, for example, in the Book of Tobit (Cf. especially Tob 3:17 and 12:12). Psalm 90 proclaims:” “For to his angels he has given command about you... upon their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone”(cf. Ps 90-[91]:11-12). Following the Book of Daniel it can be said that the tasks of angels as ambassadors of the living God extend not only to individual human beings and to those who have special duties, but also to entire nations (Dan 10:13-21).

3. The New Testament highlights the role of the angels in *Christ's Messianic mission*, and first of all in the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God, as we observe in the account of the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (cf. Lk 1:11), of Christ himself (cf. Lk 1:26), in the explanation and orders given to Mary and Joseph (cf. Lk 1:30-37; Mt 1:20-21), in the indications given to the shepherds on the night of the Lord's birth (Lk 2:9-15), in the protection of the newborn child from the danger of persecution by Herod (cf. Mt 2:13).

Further on the Gospels speak of the presence of the angels during Jesus' forty days of fast in the desert (cf. Mt 4:11) and during the prayer in Gethsemane. After Christ's resurrection there will also be an angel, appearing under the form of a young man, who will say to the women who had hastened to the tomb and were surprised to find it empty. “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here ... go, tell his disciples ...” (Mt 16:5-7). Two angels were seen also by Mary Magdalene who was privileged with a personal apparition Of Jesus (Jn 20:12-17; cf. also Lk 24:4). The angels appear to the Apostles after Christ's ascension, to say to them: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10-11). They are the angels of him who, as

St. Peter writes, “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him” (1 Pet 3:22).

4. If we pass to the *Second Coming of Christ* in the *Parousia*, we find that all the Synoptic Gospels note that “the Son of man ... will come in the glory of the Father with the holy angels” (thus Mk 8:38; as also Mt 16:27; and Mt 25:31 in the description of the Last Judgment; and Lk 9:26; cf. also St. Paul in 2 Thess 1:7). It can therefore be said that the angels, as pure spirits, not only participate in the holiness of God himself, in the manner proper to them, but *in the key moments they surround Christ and accompany him in the fulfillment of his salvific mission* in regard to mankind. In the same way also the whole of Tradition and the ordinary Magisterium of the Church down the centuries has attributed to the angels this particular character and this function of Messianic ministry.

August 6, 1986

Angels Participate In History Of Salvation

In his general audience of August 6th, Pope John Paul II noted that the modern mentality does not see the importance of angels. Yet in the encounter with the world of angels, man comes to see his own being not only as body but also as spirit.

In the recent catechesis we have seen how the Church, illuminated by the light that comes from Sacred Scripture, has professed throughout the centuries the truth about the existence of the angels as purely spiritual beings, with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and has confirmed this in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), whose formulation was repeated by the First Vatican Council in the context of the doctrine on creation:

“God at the beginning of time created from nothing *both creatures together*, the *spiritual* and the *corporeal*, that is, the angelic and the earthly, and thus He created human nature as having both, since it is made up of spirit and body” (Constitution *De Fide Catholica*, DS 3002).

In other words, God created both realities from the very beginning - the spiritual reality and the corporeal, the earthly world and the angelic world. He created all this at one and the same time (simul) with a view to the creation of man, constituted of spirit and matter and set, according to the biblical narrative, in the framework of a world already established according to His laws and already measured by time (deinde).

Together with their existence, the faith of the Church recognizes certain distinctive characteristics of the nature of the angels. Their purely spiritual being implies first of all their *nonmateriality* and their *immortality*. The angels have no “body” (even if, in particular circumstances, they reveal themselves under visible forms because of their mission for the good of men), and therefore they are not subject to the laws of corruptibility which are common to all the material world.

Jesus Himself, referring to the condition of the angels, will say that in the future life, those who are risen “cannot die anymore, because they are equal to the angels” (Lk. 20-36).

As creatures of a spiritual nature, the *angels are endowed with intellect and free will*, like man, but in a degree superior to him, even if this is always finite because of the limit which is inherent in every creature. The angels are therefore personal beings and, as such, are also “in the image and likeness” of God.

Sacred Scripture refers to the angels also by using *terms* that are not only *personal* (like the proper names of Raphael, Gabriel, Michael) but also “collective” (like the titles: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, powers, dominions, principalities), just as it distinguishes between angels and archangels. While bearing in mind analogous and representative character of the language of the sacred text, we can deduce that these beings and persons, *as it were grouped together in society*, are divided into orders and grades, corresponding to the measure of their perfection and to the tasks entrusted to them. The ancient authors and the liturgy itself speak also of the *angelic choirs* (nine, according to Dionysius the Areopagite).

Theology, especially in the patristic and medieval periods, has not rejected these representations, seeking to explain them in doctrinal and mystical terms, without, however, attributing an absolute value to them. St. Thomas preferred to deepen his researches into the ontological condition, the epistemological activity and will into the loftiness of these purely spiritual creatures, both because of their dignity in the scale of beings and also because he could investigate more deeply in them the *capacities and the activities* that are proper to the spirit in the pure state, deducing no little light to illuminate the basic problems that have always agitated and stimulated human thought: knowledge, love, liberty, docility to God, how to reach His Kingdom.

The theme which we have touched on may seem “far away” or “less vital” to the mentality of modern man. But the Church believes that she *renders a great service to man* when she proposes sincerely the totality of the truth about God the Creator and also about the angels.

Man nurtures the conviction that it is he (and not the angels) who is at the center of the divine Revelation in Christ, Man and God. It is precisely *the religious encounter with the world of the purely spiritual being* that becomes valuable as a revelation of his own being not only as body but also as spirit, and of his belonging to a design of salvation that is truly great and efficacious within a community of personal beings who serve the providential design of God for man and with man.

Let us note that Sacred Scripture and Tradition give the proper name of *angels* to those pure spirits who chose God, His glory, and His Kingdom in the fundamental test of their liberty, They are *united* to God by the consummate love which flows from the beatific vision, face to face, of the Most Holy Trinity.

Jesus Himself tells us this: "*The angels in Heaven always see the face of my father who is in Heaven!*" (Mt. 18:10). "To see the face of the Father always" in this way is *the highest manifestation of the adoration of God*. One can say that this constitutes the "heavenly liturgy," carried out in the name of the entire universe; with which the earthly liturgy of the Church is incessantly joined, especially in its culminating moments.

Let it suffice here to record the act with which the Church, every day and every hour, in all the world, before beginning the Eucharistic Prayer *in the center of the Mass*, makes appeal "to the angels and archangels" to sing the glory of the thrice-holy God, uniting herself thus to those first adorers of God, in the worship and the loving knowledge of the unspeakable mystery of His holiness.

According to Revelation, the angels who participate in the life of the Trinity in the light of glory are also called to play their part in the history of the salvation of man, in the moments established by divine Providence "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to possess salvation?," asks the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* (1:14).

This is believed and taught by the Church, on the basis of Sacred Scripture, from which we learn that the task of the good angels is the protection of people and solicitude for their salvation.

We find these experiences in various passages of Sacred Scripture, like for example, Ps. 90 which has already been quoted several times: "He will give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Ps. 90:11-12). Jesus Himself, speaking of children and warning against giving

them scandal, refers to “their angels” (Mt. 18:10). Besides this, He attributes to the angels the function of witnesses in the last divine judgment about the fate of those who have acknowledged or denied Christ: “Whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man likewise will acknowledge him *before the angels of God*, but whoever denies me before men will be denied *before the angels of God*” (Lk. 12:8-9; cf. Rev. 3:5).

These words are significant because, if the angels take part in the judgment of God, then they are interested in the life of man. This interest and participation seem to be accentuated in the eschatological discourse, in which Jesus has the angels appear in the Parousia, that is, in the definitive coming of Christ at the end of history (cf. Mt. 24.31; 25:31-41).

Among the books of the New Testament, it is especially *the Acts of the Apostles* that show us some facts that bear witness to the solicitude of the angels for man and for his salvation.

Thus the angel of God liberates the Apostles from the prison (cf Acts 5:18-20 and first of all *Peter*, when he was threatened with death at the hands of Herod (cf. Acts 12:5-10). Or he guides the activity of Peter with regard to the centurion Cornelius, the first pagan to be converted (Acts 10:3-8, 11:1-12), and analogously the activity of the deacon *Philip* along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26-29).

From these few facts which we have cited as examples, we understand how the Church could come to the conviction that God has entrusted to the angels a ministry in favor of people. Therefore the Church *confesses her faith in the guardian angels*, venerating them in the liturgy with an appropriate feast and recommending recourse to their protection by frequent prayer, as in the invocation “Angel of God.” This prayer seems to draw on the treasure of the beautiful words of St. Basil: “Every one of the faithful has beside him an angel as tutor and pastor, to lead him to life” (cf. St. Basil, *Adv. Eunonium*, III, 1; cf. also St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* I, q.11, a.3).

Ministering Spirits

Finally, it is appropriate to note that the Church honors the *figures of three angels* with a liturgical cult; these are called by name in Sacred Scripture.

The first is *Michael the Archangel* (cf. Dan. 10:13-20; Rev. 12:7; Jude 9). His name is a synthesis that expresses the essential attitude of the good spirits. “Mica-EL” in fact means: “Who is like God?” In this name, therefore, we find expressed the salvific choice thanks to which the angels “see the face of the Father” who is in Heaven.

The second is *Gabriel*: a figure bound especially to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God (cf. Lk 1:19-26). His name means: “my power is God” or “*power of God*,” as if to say that the culmination of creation, the Incarnation is the supreme sign of the omnipotent Father.

Finally, the third archangel is called *Raphael*. “Rafa-EL” means: “God heals.” He is made known to us by the story of Tobias in the Old Testament (cf. Tob. 12:15-20), etc.). which is so significant for what it says about entrusting to the angels the little children of God, who are always in need of custody, care, and protection.

If we reflect well, we see that each one of these figures, Mica-EL, Gabri-EL, and Rafa-EL reflects in a particular way the truth contained in the *question* posed by the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews*: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to possess salvation?” (Heb. 1-14).

August 13, 1986

The fall of the rebellious angels

1. Continuing the theme of the previous Catechesis, which were dedicated to the article of the faith that concerns the angels, God's creatures, we shall begin today to explore *the mystery of the freedom* which some of them have turned against God and his plan of salvation for mankind.

As the evangelist Luke testifies, when the disciples returned to the Master full of joy at the fruits they had gathered in their first missionary attempt, Jesus utters a sentence that is highly evocative: “I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning” (Lk 10:18). With these words, the Lord affirms that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is always a victory over the devil, but at the same time he also reveals that the building up of the Kingdom is continuously exposed to the attacks of the spirit of evil. When we consider this, as we propose to do with today's Catechesis, it means that *we prepare ourselves for the condition of struggle* which characterizes the life of the Church in this final time of the history of salvation (as the Book of Revelation asserts: cf. 12:7). Besides this, it will permit us to clarify *the true faith of the Church* against those who pervert it by exaggerating the importance of the devil, or by denying or minimizing his malevolent power.

The preceding Catechesis on the angels have prepared us to understand the truth which Sacred Scripture has revealed and which the Tradition of the Church has handed on about Satan, that is, the fallen angel, the wicked spirit, who is also called the devil or demon.

2. This “fall”, which has the character of rejection of God with the consequent state of “damnation”, consists in the free choice of those created spirits who have radically and irrevocably *rejected God and his kingdom* usurping his sovereign rights and attempting to subvert the economy of salvation and the very order of the entire creation. We find a reflection of this attitude in the words addressed by the tempter to our first parents: “You will become like God” or “like gods” (cf. Gen 3:5). Thus the evil spirit tries to transplant into man the attitude of rivalry, insubordination and opposition to God, which has, as it were, become the motivation of all his existence.

3. In the Old Testament, the narrative of the fall of man as related in the Book of Genesis, contains a reference to an attitude of antagonism which Satan wishes to communicate to man in order to lead him to sin (Gen 3:5). In the Book of Job too, we read that Satan seeks to generate rebellion in the person who is suffering (cf. Job 1:11; 2:5-7). In the Book of Wisdom (cf. Wis 2:24), Satan is presented as the artisan of death, which has entered man's history along with sin.

4. In the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the Church teaches that the devil (or Satan) and the other demons “*were created good by God but have become evil by their own will*”. In fact, we read in the Letter of St. Jude: “ . . . the angels who did not keep their dignity, but left their own dwelling, are kept by the Lord in eternal chains in the darkness, for the judgement of the great day” (Jude 6). Similarly, in the *second Letter of St. Peter*, we hear of “angels who have sinned” and whom God “did not spare, but... cast in the gloomy abysses of hell, reserving them for the judgment” (2 Pet 2:4). It is clear that if God “does not forgive” the sin of the angels, this is because they remain in their sin, because they are eternally “*in the chains*” of the choice that they made at the beginning, rejecting God, against the truth of the supreme and definitive Good that is God himself. It is in this sense that St. John writes that “*the devil has been a sinner from the beginning...*” (Jn 3:8). And he has been a *murderer* “from the beginning”, and “has not persevered in the truth, because *there is no truth in him*” (Jn 8:44).

Satan: cosmic liar and murderer

5. These texts help us to understand the nature and the dimension of the sin of Satan, which consists in the denial of the truth about God, as he is known by the light of the intellect and revelation as infinite Good, *subsistent Love and Holiness*. The sin was all the greater, in that the spiritual perfection and the epistemological acuteness of the angelic intellect, with his freedom and closeness to God, were greater. When, by an act of his own free will, he *rejected the truth* that he knew about God, Satan became the cosmic “liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44). For this reason, he lives in radical and irreversible denial of God, and *seeks to impose* on creation - on the other beings created in the image of God, and in particular on people - his own tragic “lie about the good” that is God. In the Book of Genesis, we find a precise description of this lie and falsification of the truth about God, which Satan (under the form of a serpent) tries to transmit to the first representatives of the human race: God is jealous of his own prerogatives and therefore wants to impose limitations on man (cf. Gen 3:5), Satan invites the man to free himself from the impositions of this yoke, by making himself “like God”.

6. In this condition of existential falsehood, Satan - according to St. John - also becomes a “murderer”, that is *one who destroys the supernatural life* which God had made to dwell from the beginning in him and in the creatures made “in the likeness of God”: the other pure spirits and men; Satan *wishes to destroy life lived in accordance with the truth*, life in the fullness of good, the supernatural *life of grace and love*. The author of the Book of Wisdom writes: “. . . death has entered the world through the envy of the devil, and those who belong to him experience it” (Wis 2:24). And Jesus Christ warns in the Gospel: “... *fear rather him who has the power to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna*” (Mt 10:28).

7. As the result of the sin of our first parents, this fallen angel has acquired *dominion over man to a certain extent*. This is the doctrine that has been constantly professed and proclaimed by the Church, and which the *Council of Trent* confirmed in its treatise on original sin (cf. DS 1511): it finds a dramatic expression *in the liturgy of baptism*, when the catechumen is asked to renounce the devil and all his empty promises.

In Sacred Scripture we find various indications of this influence on man and on the dispositions of his spirit (and of his body). In the Bible, Satan is called “*the prince of the world*” (cf. Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and even “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4). We find *many* other names that describe his nefarious relationship with man: “Beelzebul” or “Belial”, “*unclean spirit*”: “tempter”, “evil one” and even “Antichrist” (1 Jn 4:3). He is compared to a

“lion” (1 Pet 5:8), to a “dragon” (in Revelation) and to a “serpent” (Gen 3). Very frequently, he is designated by the name “devil”: from the Greek *diaballein* (hence *diabolos*), which means: to “cause destruction, to divide, to calumniate, to deceive”. In truth, all this takes place from the beginning through the working of the evil spirit who is presented by Sacred Scripture as *a person*, while it is declared that *he is not alone*: “there are many of us” as the devils cry out to Jesus in the region of the Gerasenes (Mk 5:9); and Jesus, speaking of the future judgment, speaks of “the devil and his angels” (cf. Mt 25:41).

8. According to Sacred Scripture, and especially the New Testament, the dominion and the influence of Satan and of the other evil spirits embraces *all the world*. We may think of Christ’s parable about the field (the world), about the good seed and the bad seed that the devil sows in the midst of the wheat, seeking to snatch away from hearts the good that has been “sown” in them (cf. Mt 13:38-39). We may think of the numerous exhortations to vigilance (cf. Mt 26:41; 1 Pet 5:8), to prayer and fasting (cf. Mt 17:21). We may think of the strong statement made by the Lord: “This kind of demon cannot be cast out by any other means than prayer” (Mk 9:29). The action of Satan consists primarily in tempting men to evil, by influencing their imaginations and higher faculties, to turn them away from the law of God. Satan *even tempts Jesus* (cf. Lk 4:3-13), in the extreme attempt to thwart what is demanded by the economy of salvation, as this has been pre-ordained by God.

It is possible that in certain cases the evil spirit goes so far as to exercise his influence not only on material things, but even *on man’s body* so that one can speak of “diabolical possession” (cf. Mk 5:2-9). It is not always easy to discern the preternatural factor operative in these cases, and the Church does not lightly support the tendency to attribute many things to the direct action of the devil; but in principle it cannot be denied that Satan can go to this extreme manifestation of his superiority, in his will to harm and lead to evil.

9. To conclude, we must add that the impressive words of the Apostle John, “The whole world lies under the power of the evil one” (1 Jn 5:19), allude also to the presence of Satan in the history of humanity, a presence which becomes all the more acute when man and society depart from God. The influence of the evil spirit can *conceal itself* in a more profound and effective way: it is in his “interests” to make himself unknown. Satan has the skill in the world to induce people to deny his existence in the name of rationalism and of every other system of thought which seeks all possible means to avoid recognizing his activity. This, however, *does not signify the elimination of man’s free will and responsibility*, and even less the frustration of the saving action of Christ. It is, rather, a case of conflict between the dark powers of evil and the powers of redemption. The words that Jesus addressed to Peter at the

beginning of the Passion are eloquent in this context: "... Simon, behold, Satan has sought to sift you like wheat: but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail" (Lk 22:31).

This helps us understand how Jesus, in the prayer that he taught us, the "Our Father", that is, the prayer of the Kingdom of God, terminates almost brusquely, unlike so many other prayers of his era, by reminding us of our condition as people *exposed to the snares of evil and of the evil one*. The Christian, appealing to the Father with the Spirit of Jesus and invoking his Kingdom, cries with the power of faith. let us not succumb to temptation, free us from evil, from the evil one. O Lord, let us not fall into the infidelity to which we are seduced by the one who has been unfaithful from the beginning.

August 20, 1986

Christ's victory conquers evil

The Holy Father concluded his catechesis on God as the Creator of "the things that are unseen" by speaking of the victory of Christ over the spirit of evil.

1. Our catechesis on God, the Creator of the things "that are unseen", have brought fresh light and strength to our faith concerning the truth about the evil one, or Satan; he is certainly not willed by God, who is supreme Love and Holiness, and whose wise and strong Providence knows how to guide our existence to victory over the prince of darkness. The Church's faith, in fact, teaches us that *the power of Satan is not infinite*. He is only a creature - powerful, in that he is pure spirit, but nevertheless always a creature, with the limits proper to creatures, subordinated to the will and dominion of God. If Satan is at work in the world because of his hatred of God and of his Kingdom, this is *permitted by Divine Providence* which directs the history of man and of the world with power and goodness (*fortiter et suaviter*). It is *certainly* true that Satan's action *causes much damage*, both of a spiritual kind and also indirectly of a material kind, to individuals and to society, but *he is not able* ultimately to *neutralize the definitive* end towards which man and all creation tend. the Good. He cannot block the construction of the Kingdom of God, in which at the end there will be the full realization of the righteousness and the love of the Father for the creatures who are eternally "predestined" in Jesus Christ, his Son and Word. Indeed, we can say with St. Paul that the work of the evil one cooperates for the good (cf. Rom 8:28) and that it helps to build up the glory of the "chosen" ones (cf. 2 Tim 2:10).

Total salvation

2. Thus, the whole history of humanity can be considered as serving total salvation which means *the victory of Christ over the "prince of this world"* (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). "You shall bow down only before the Lord your God, you shall adore him alone" (Lk 4:8), says Christ eternally to Satan. At a dramatic moment of his ministry, when he was openly accused of casting out the demons because of his alliance with Beelzebul, the chief of the demons, Jesus replied with these words that are at once *severe and comforting*. "Every kingdom that is divided falls into ruins, and no city or family that is divided can stand upright. Now if Satan drives out Satan, then he is divided in himself. How then can his kingdom stand upright?... And if it is by the power of the Spirit of God that I cast out the demons, then it is certain that the Kingdom of God has come among you" (Mt 12:26-26, 28). "When a strong man, well armed, guards his palace, all his goods are secure. But if one stronger than he comes and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which he trusted, and divides his spoils" (Lk 11:21-22). The words which Christ speaks about the tempter find their historical fulfillment *in the cross and resurrection of the Redeemer*. As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ became a sharer in human nature even to the cross "*in order to reduce to powerlessness, by means of death, the one who has the power over death, that is, the devil... and thus to free those who... were held in slavery*" (Heb 2:14-15). This is the great certainty of the Christian faith: "the prince of this world *has been judged*" (Jn 16:11); "the Son of God has appeared, *in order to destroy the works of the devil*" (1 Jn 3:8), as St. John bears witness. It is therefore the crucified and risen *Christ* who has revealed himself as that "stronger one" who has overpowered "the strong man", the devil, and has cast him down from his throne

The Church shares in Christ's victory over the devil, for Christ has given to his disciples the power to cast out demons (cf. Mt 10:1 and parallels; Mk 16:17). The Church uses this victorious power through faith in Christ and prayer (cf. Mk 9:29; Mt 17:19ff.), which in particular cases can take the form of exorcism.

3. It is to this historical phase of the victory of Christ that the announcement and the beginning of the final victory, *the Parousia*, belongs: this is the second and definitive coming of Christ at the close of history, and it is towards this that the life of the Christian is orientated. Even if it is true that earthly history continues to unfold under the influence of "that spirit who now is at work in rebellious men", as St. Paul says (Eph 2:2), believers know that they have been called to struggle for the *definitive triumph of the Good*. "for our battle is not against creatures made of blood and of flesh, but against the Principalities and Powers,

against those who hold dominion over this world of darkness, against the spirits of evil that dwell in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

Definitive victory

4. As the end of the struggle gradually draws nearer, it becomes *in a certain sense ever more violent*, as Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, shows in a special emphasis (cf. Rev 12:7-9). But it is precisely this book that emphasizes the certainty that is given to us by all of divine Revelation that the struggle *will finish* with the *definitive victory of the good*. In this victory, which is contained in anticipation in the paschal mystery of Christ, there will be the definitive fulfillment of the *first announcement in the Book of Genesis*, which is significantly called the *Proto-Evangelium*, when God admonishes the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman” (Gen 3:15). In this definitive phase, God will complete the mystery of his fatherly Providence and “will set free from the power of darkness” those whom he has eternally “predestined in Christ” and will “bring them over into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (cf. Col 1:13-14). Then the Son will subject even the whole universe to the Father, so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

5. Here we finish the catechesis on God as the Creator of “the things that are visible and invisible”, which are united, in our structuring of the catechesis, with the truth about Divine Providence. It is obvious to the eyes of the believer that *the mystery of the beginning* of the world and of history is joined indissolubly to the *mystery of the end*, in which the finality of all that has been created reaches fulfillment. The creed, which unites so many truths in such an organic manner, is truly the harmonious cathedral of the faith.

In a progressive and organic way, we have been able to admire, struck dumb with wonder, the great mystery of the intelligence and love of God, in his *action of creation*, directed to the cosmos, to the human person, and to the world of pure spirits. We have considered the Trinitarian origin of this action and its wise orientation towards the life of man who is truly the “image of God”, called in his turn to rediscover fully his own dignity in the contemplation of the glory of God. We have been enlightened about one of the greatest problems that perturb man and characterize his search for truth: *the problem of suffering and of evil*. At the root, there is no mistaken or wicked decision by God, rather his choice - and in a certain manner the risk he has undertaken - of creating us free, in order to have us as friends. Evil too has been born of liberty. But God does not give up, and he predestines us with his transcendent wisdom to be his children in Christ, directing all with strength and sweetness, so that the good may not be overcome by evil.

We must now let ourselves be guided by Divine Revelation in our exploration of the other mysteries of our salvation. We have now received a truth which must be profoundly important for every Christian: that there are *pure spirits*, creatures of God, initially all good and then, through a choice of sin, irreducibly separated into angels of light and angels of darkness. And while the existence of the wicked angels requires of us that we be watchful so as not to yield to their empty promises, we are certain that the victorious power of Christ the Redeemer enfolds our lives, so that we ourselves may overcome these spirits. In this, we are powerfully helped by the good angels, messengers of God's love, to whom, *taught by the tradition of the Church*, we address our prayer: “Angel of God, who are my guardian, enlighten, guard, govern and guide me, who have been entrusted to you by the heavenly goodness. Amen”.

