

ANGELS in the Architecture

why churches matter

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TWO SUMMERS AGO, WHILE OUR COMMUNITY WAS ON PILGRIMAGE in Oxford, I found myself surrounded by angels. We were visiting the Church of St. Mary and St. John, on the Cowley Road, where SSJE's founder, Richard Meux Benson, had been vicar. Inside, everywhere I looked, there were angels in the architecture: in the stone, glass, and wood. Of all the beautiful things in the church – the pipe organ, the stained glass, the altar and reredos,¹ the arches – it was the angels that piqued my curiosity. Why were these angelic figures everywhere? What did they mean? And what were they trying to tell me?

I grew up in an evangelical tradition that did not talk much about angels, which is ironic, because it is from the Greek word for evangelist (*euangelion*) that we get the word “angel,” meaning a bearer of good news. While my mother didn't speak about angels, she certainly seemed devoted to them. Upon entering my parent's home, the first thing you would notice would be two curios filled with angels. There were cherubs, angels with trumpets, boy angels, girl angels, cupids, as well as a rather menacing angel standing on the head of a dragon-like creature with his sword in its mouth. In my adult life, I would come to know that this was the Archangel Michael, whose name means “Who Is Like God?” In Revelation, Michael defeats the dragon, “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:7-9).

The angels of Scripture are as varied as those in my mother's curio cabinet. Angels bear all sorts of different vocations. The angel Gabriel (whose name means “The Strength of God”) is a messenger: he visits the Virgin Mary to proclaim the good news that she will bear a child who will be the long-awaited Messiah. Shortly after, an angel of the Lord visits a group of shepherds outside Bethlehem to announce the birth of Jesus. The sky fills with angels praising and worshipping God, singing: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Luke 1:26-38; 2:8-14). There are also angels who minister: after Jesus is tempted in the desert, the devil leaves him and angels come to serve him (Matthew 4:1-11). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays in anguish about what is about to happen to him, and an angel of the Lord appears to him and gives him strength (Luke 22:39-43). In the book of Tobit, it is the Archangel Raphael (whose name means “The Healing of God”) who restores Tobit's sight (Tobit 11:7-9). All angels have a specific vocation and belong to one of the nine orders of angels that we hear mentioned throughout the pages of scripture: Seraphim,

¹ Reredos: a usually ornamental wood or stone screen or partition wall behind an altar.

Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Guardian angels.²

With such diversity in the angel ranks, I wondered anew about the angels lining the walls of the churches we visited on our pilgrimage. Who were these angels in the architecture, and what was their mission? Every part of these churches seemed to point deeper into the mystery of God, with the angels beckoning me to follow.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit our monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, you will notice many angels straight away. Angels throng the great Rose window at the back of the church in a vibrant vision of Heaven. Below the Rose window, where the Nativity is portrayed, angels gaze adoringly at the holy child. In the Lady Chapel, the lancet windows portray the mysteries of the Rosary, beginning with the depiction of the Annunciation and the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. When the light streams through these windows, all these angels shine forth in brilliant array, witnessing to the glory of God.

What about the angels we cannot see? One of my favorite scriptural encounters with an angel features Jacob. He contends all night with a mysterious figure whom some traditions have called an angel. In the morning, Jacob realizes that he has struggled with God. Jacob names the place "Peniel," which means "the face of God": "For I have seen God face to face" (Genesis 32:30). Our monastery church, like Peniel, is a holy place because it is a place of encounter. The angel who wrestled Jacob greets us every time we enter the worship space, every time we prepare to encounter God.

In a subtle yet very real way, every church has angels beyond those carved in wood or illuminated in stained glass. The architecture itself acts as angels do: sharing messages which enlighten our prayer and worship of God.

Take what happens as soon as you enter the monastery church. To enter it you must ascend a small staircase and go through a door into the narthex. However, that is not where your journey ends. Once there, you must turn ninety degrees to your left and go through a second doorway in order to enter the church. This detail might be lost on us initially, but it actually is intentional: all those who enter the monastery church must undergo a "conversion" experience. The word "conversion" comes from the Latin *convertere*, which literally means to turn around. To enter the church you must physically turn, in order to cross a threshold, into holy space.

A passerby on Memorial Drive might venture in, curiosity piqued as to what is inside this gothic-style building. Others experience a conscious yearning to know God. These seekers or pilgrims are not wandering randomly, but rather are following the desire of their hearts, which is mysteriously moving towards the source of all holy desire: into the heart of God. The building itself thus hints at the conversion God invites, as we give up any semblance of control and are turned – sometimes even pushed – in a direction that we would not normally go in order to enter. Simply to enter the sanctuary, we have already turned and converted – perhaps unaware that we have just encountered an angel in the architecture.

² Chase, Steven. *Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives on the Way of Angels* (Paulist Press, 2002).

A few years ago, a small group of school children, led by their teachers, made their way into the church. One of the children asked a Brother in quiet amazement, "How do you do that?!" He replied, "What do you mean?" She whispered, "How do you make it so quiet?!"

In the profound silence of the church, our eyes are drawn upward toward the light, as we follow the shape of the arches pointing to the saints depicted in the clerestory windows. The silence invites us to listen intently. In our Rule of Life, we say that in silence, "we pass through the bounds of language to lose ourselves in wonder. In this silence we learn to revere ourselves also; since Christ dwells in us we too are mysteries that cannot be fathomed, before which we must be silent until the day we come to know as we are known."³ In the silence of this sanctuary, we join the angelic hosts in the ennobling act of prayer, as we seek to deepen our relationship with the one in whom we live and move and have our being. In silence, we, finite creatures, seek the infinite.

The architecture of the monastery church depicts this intersection of finitude and infinite, *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is physical, temporal time: the way that we, as finite beings, delineate time in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries. *Chronos* greets us in how the rounded arches at the back of the church – in the Romanesque style (ranging from the 6th to 11th centuries) – give way to pointed gothic arches (prevalent from the 12th to the 16th centuries), in the Quire on the other side of the gate.⁴ This journey through *chronos* points and leads to the altar, which is a place of *kairos*: God's time, the critical moment that holds all of eternity. *Kairos* is unknowable to us time-bound beings, yet we experience it each time we approach the altar.

The altar is the focus of our sanctuary, as it is of all sanctuaries. In our church, the high altar is adorned with an unusual architectural feature: a baldacchino, a canopy arching high above. Here, another angel in the architecture points us to the deeper mystery of God taking place before our eyes.

The baldacchino forms a cube through four pillars, representing the earth with its four directions. These pillars support the canopy, which is topped with a dome representing heaven. Connecting heaven and earth – and protecting a stone altar beneath – the baldacchino recalls another story earlier in Genesis where Jacob falls asleep, using a stone as a pillow. While asleep he dreams of a ladder stretched to heaven, with angels ascending and descending back and forth between earth and heaven. We read: "Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'" If we continue a little further, we read that Jacob poured oil on the stone which he had used as a pillow and built an altar there, consecrating that place and giving it a new name: Bethel (Genesis 28:10-19). In John's gospel, Jesus recalls this story from Genesis, identifying himself as the stone altar, the place where heaven and earth meet: "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John

³ Chapter 27, "Silence," *The Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist*.

⁴ Quire is an archaic spelling of the word "choir," and is the section of a monastic church where the community sits together to worship and chant the Psalter.

1:47-51).

Upon the altar, heaven and earth are joined, and we get a glimpse of God. Upon this altar we offer up praise, thanksgiving, and all that we are to God. In return Jesus becomes truly present to us in the sacramental signs of bread and wine (which become to us flesh and blood), descending with the angels and bringing us with him up to heaven. Each time we consume this bread and wine, we ascend one more rung on the ladder with the angels, moving toward the holiness to which we have been called, becoming one with our Father in heaven. The founder of our Society, Richard Meux Benson once wrote: “As each touch of the artist adds some fresh feature to the painting, so each communion is a touch of Christ which should develop some fresh feature of his own perfect likeness within us.”

In a sermon delivered at the University Church in Oxford around 1826, John Henry Newman describes heaven as an endless and uninterrupted worship of the Eternal Father, Son, and Spirit.⁵ He takes as his reference point numerous passages in the Revelation to John: “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!’ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshipped” (Revelation 5:11-14).

This passage from Revelation gives me chills, because this is what we do here in this monastery church every day: worship God, bestowing on Him blessing and honor and glory and might with the very best of our abilities. Perhaps our numbers are few and the quality of our voices is sometimes nowhere near angelic; but we, like the angels, were created for the love and pleasure of God and He delights in our love just as much as we delight in His. We have an inherent instinct to adore our creator. In this, we mirror God, who gazes in reverence on the Creation and yearns for us to know God as God knows us. Our love and praise are mutual. We offer them in tandem with the worship of the heavenly hosts. In his book *The Angels and the Liturgy*, Eric Peterson writes “When the church gathers in worship on earth, it is conjoined to the worship which is offered in the heavenly city by the angels. Through all the pain of this world there remains, eternal and unmoved, that worship which the angels offer to the Eternal, and in which the Church on earth takes part.”⁶ With the angels we sing, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people of earth,” and “Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the Highest!”

Worship is a sanctifying act. The word “sanctify” has the same root as the Latin word *sanctus*, which means holy. These roots imbue the word “sanctuary.” In this sanctuary, in the shared experience of worship, we offer all we are, all we have, all of our blessings, and all of our sufferings, and we give it to God in sacrifice, asking nothing but to be sanctified and become more like God, that is: holy and fully God’s. In the same sermon, Newman goes on to say: “To be holy is ... to live habitually in sight of the world to come as if we were already dead to this life.” In other words, now is our time to prepare and

⁵ Newman, John Henry. *The Parochial Sermons*. Volume I. (D. Appleton and Co., 1843).

⁶ Peterson, Eric. *The Angels and the Liturgy*. Translated by Ronald Walls. (Herder and Herder, 1964).

practice, joining the angels in the eternal praise of God, here on earth as it is in heaven.

A pew card at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Iffley near Oxford, describes the meaning and purpose of its church building: “With the passing of the centuries there have been inevitable changes, but there have been no drastic alterations to the basic plan of the building, nor to its function. It exists to praise God. And for worship, sacred ritual and teaching. It is a sacramental reminder to the identity of those who gather inside it each day.”

Our churches are angels – angels, made of architecture – which exist to praise God as they help to deliver God’s messages. Even when we sleep, the angels keep at this holy task. And when we gather as a community in our own churches, chapels, and sanctuaries, with our hearts and minds turned toward God, we ourselves become channels of grace, temporal containers of eternal love. We become one with all the angels – both the angels in the architecture and the eternal company of heaven – as we too become bearers of good news, teaching, guidance, protection, and sanctuary to others. We lift up our voices with them, crying, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!”⁷

7 *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979): 362.

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