



In the mind of our dear Lord, Jesus Christ, there is nothing more real or more terrifying than the existence of sin and the consequences of sin: eternal damnation, i.e., HELL. I cannot conceive of a more graphic and passionate way to express these realities than the way Jesus does in this week's Gospel. He says:

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with

one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" (Mark 9:42–48, NAB)

The fact is 90% of the biblical teaching about hell comes from Jesus himself. Obviously, no one understands the true nature of sin and hell as well as Jesus does.

One of the great modern questions is, "How could an all-loving God cast a human being into Hell for all eternity – 'where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'?" Let me offer three brief observations which might help us to understand this mystery.

- 1) **Sin is much worse than we know.** Jesus revealed to us by his entire life, but especially in his Passion, the true nature of sin. Sin separates us from God; sin is always (whether we know it or not) an offense against God; the wages of sin is death. Consider the gravest sin you can imagine – perhaps the violation of a child, or worse yet, the violation of your own child! How would you "feel" about the perpetrator? Does not justice demand a punishment of some sort? If we, sinful human beings, can perceive the horror of sin and the need for just punishment, how much more does God who is Infinite and perfect Love? The more we love, the more we are repulsed by sins committed against our loved ones. The suffering and death of God on the Cross was the price to be paid for sin – a price no one of us could possibly pay. Sin is much worse than we know because, as sinners, we are infected with a degree of blindness. Eternal damnation is a matter of truth and justice.
- 2) **The all-loving God died on the Cross to save us from hell; God desires all to be saved.** The Catechism defines hell as the "state of definitive **self-exclusion** from communion with God and the blessed" (#1033). God does not cast anyone into hell against their will – the damned will know full well that they are where they belong. No one will say, "I got a bad deal!" Jesus taught us the way to heaven, the way to eternal love, but he will not force us to follow him.
- 3) **If Hell does not exist, there is no real possibility of a loving relationship with God.** Human love requires freedom, otherwise we are mere robots. The Catechism explains:

We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves: "He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 Jn 3:14-15). Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren (Mt 25:31-46). To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. (#1033)

In the Gospel today, Jesus is mercifully trying to save us by helping us realize that there is nothing more real or more terrifying than the existence of sin and the consequences of sin: eternal damnation – HELL. The fact is, if there were no hell, there would be neither ultimate justice nor real human love. If we succumb to the superficial thinking that leads much of modernity to reject belief in the existence of hell, perhaps we would do well to remember where such thinking originates: who was the "father of lies" who whispered so tenderly into the ear of Eve: "Surely, you will not die"? Oh yes, the Devil is still making his rounds and whispering, "Surely, there is no hell." We must all choose whom we will believe.

Your Servant in Christ, Fr. Terry Staples

# HOLY GUARDIAN ANGELS

Celebrated October 2<sup>nd</sup>



Angels are messengers from God. The word angel comes from the Greek word for “messenger.” In a very real way, these powerful spirits point out to us the ways of God. God gave us guardian angels to protect and guide us. Guardian angels assist us in work or study. In times of temptation, these spiritual beings direct us to do good. Thomas Aquinas said that angels are the most excellent of creatures because they have the greatest intelligence next to God. Guardian angels are best known for protecting us from physical danger. Whenever you meet with danger or discouragement, your guardian angel is your personal,

heavenly bodyguard. Perhaps no aspect of Catholic piety is as comforting to parents as the belief that a guardian angel protects their little ones from dangers, real and imagined. However, Guardian Angels’ main role is to care for the salvation of our souls. It is wonderful to know that God has promised to love, protect, and be with us always. One way he does this is through His angels. Because angels always see and hear God, they can intercede for us. The angels offer prayers to God for us. We should love our guardian angels, respect them, and pray for their intercession.

The concept of an angel assigned to guide and nurture each human being is a development of Catholic doctrine and piety based on Scripture but not directly drawn from it. Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:10 best support the belief: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.” Additionally in Psalm 91:11 “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways”. Saint Jerome wrote that the human soul is so valuable in heaven that every human person has a guardian angel from the moment the person comes into being. These pure spirits, which we can neither see nor feel, play an important role in our lives.

Early devotion to angels dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, with local celebrations honoring guardian angels emerging in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Franciscan order began observing the feast in 1500. In 1607, Pope Paul V added the feast to the General Roman Calendar. Pope Clement X elevated it to an obligatory double feast in 1670. Some regions, with permission from the Congregation for Divine Worship, celebrate the feast on the first Sunday of September. It was established as an obligatory memorial in the Roman Catholic Church in 1976.

**Reflection** Devotion to the angels is, at base, an expression of faith in God’s enduring love and providential care extended to each person day in and day out.