

QUESTION 112

The Mission of the Angels

The next thing we have to consider is the mission of the angels. On this topic there are four questions: (1) Are some angels sent on mission to minister? (2) Are all angels sent on mission? (3) Do those who are sent on mission also stand before God? (4) Which orders of angels are sent on mission?

Article 1

Are angels sent on mission to minister?

It seems that angels are not sent on mission to minister (*mittantur in ministerium*):

Objection 1: Every mission is to some determinate place. But intellectual actions do not fix any determinate place, since the intellect abstracts from the here and now. Therefore, since angelic actions are intellectual actions, it seems that angels are not sent on mission to perform their actions.

Objection 2: The empyrean heaven is a place that suits the dignity of the angels. Therefore, if they are sent on mission to us, then it seems that something of their dignity is lost. But this is absurd.

Objection 3: Being occupied with something exterior impedes the contemplation of wisdom; hence, Ecclesiasticus 38:25 says, "He who is less involved in action shall receive wisdom." Therefore, if some of the angels are sent on mission for exterior ministries, then it seems that they are held back from contemplation. But the whole of their beatitude consists in contemplating God. Therefore, if they were sent on mission, their beatitude would be decreased. But this is absurd.

Objection 4: To minister is the role of someone lowly; hence, Luke 22:27 says, "Who is greater, he who reclines at table or he who serves? Is it not he who reclines at table?" But the angels are greater than we are in the order of nature. Therefore, they are not sent on mission to minister to us.

But contrary to this: Exodus 23:20 says, "Behold, I will send my angel who shall go before you."

I respond: On the basis of what was said above (q. 108, a. 6), it is possible to make clear that some of the angels are sent on mission by God in order to minister.

For as was explained above when we were discussing the missions of the divine persons (q. 43, a. 1), someone is sent on mission when he proceeds in some way from another in order to begin to exist where he had not previously existed, or to exist where he had previously existed, but in a different way.

Now the Son (or the Holy Spirit) is said to be sent on mission insofar as He (a) proceeds from the Father through origin and (b) begins to exist in a new way, viz., through His assumed nature (or through grace), in a place where He previously existed through the presence of the divine nature. For it is proper to God to exist everywhere, since given that He is a *universal* agent, His power touches all entities and thus, as was explained above (q. 8, a. 1), He exists in all things.

By contrast, since an angel is a *particularized* agent, his power does not touch the whole universe; instead, it touches one thing in such a way that it does not touch another. And so an angel exists here in such a way that he does not exist elsewhere. Now it is clear from what was said above (q. 110, a. 1) that corporeal creatures are administered by the angels. Therefore, when something is to be done by an angel with respect to some creature, the angel is applied *de novo* to the body in question by his power; and so the angel begins to exist there *de novo*. And all of this stems from God's command. Hence, it follows, given these premises, that an angel is sent on mission by God.

Now the action exercised by an angel who has been sent on mission proceeds from God as the first principle by whose will and authority the angel is acting; and so the action is traced back to God as its ultimate end. This satisfies the notion of a *ministry*. For a minister is, as it were, an intelligent instrument; but an instrument is such that it is moved by another and such that its action is ordered

toward that other. This is why the actions of the angels are called ministries, and for this reason they are said to be sent on mission in order to minister.

Reply to objection 1: There are two senses in which an operation can be called an ‘intellectual operation’:

First, the operation can be thought of as consisting in the act of understanding itself, e.g., the act of contemplating. And an intellectual operation, taken in this sense, does not fix a determinate place for itself. Indeed, in *De Trinitate* 4 Augustine says, “Even we ourselves, insofar as we mentally understand something eternal, are not located here in this world.”

Second, an operation can be called ‘intellectual’ because it is regulated and commanded by an act of understanding. And given this sense, it is clear that intellectual operations sometimes fix determinate places for themselves.

Reply to objection 2: The empyrean heaven pertains to an angel’s dignity with a sort of fittingness, since it is fitting that the highest location of bodies should be attributed to a nature that is above all bodies. However, an angel does not receive any dignity from the empyrean heaven. And so when he is not actually in the empyrean heaven, he does not lose any dignity—just as a king does not lose any dignity when he is not actually sitting on the royal throne that befits his dignity.

Reply to objection 3: In our own case, being occupied exteriorly impedes the purity of contemplation because we enter into an action with our sentient powers, whose acts are such that when they are intense, they retard the acts of the intellective power. But an angel regulates his exterior actions solely by an intellectual operation. Hence, his exterior actions do not in any way impede his contemplation; for because one of the two actions is a rule and measure of the other, the one does not impede the other, but instead aids the other. Hence, in *Moralia* 2 Gregory says, “The angels do not go forth in such a way that they are deprived of the joys of interior contemplation.”

Reply to objection 4: In their exterior actions the angels minister principally to God and secondarily to us. This is not because we are superior to them, simply speaking. Rather, every man or angel, insofar as he becomes one spirit with God by clinging to God, is superior to every creature. Hence, in Philippians 2:3 the Apostle says, “... regarding one another as superior.”

Article 2

Are all the angels sent on mission to minister?

It seems that all the angels are sent on mission to minister:

Objection 1: In Hebrews 1:14 the Apostle says, “Are they not all administering spirits, sent on mission to minister?”

Objection 2: As is clear from what was said above (q. 108, a. 6), among the orders of angels the order of Seraphim is the highest. But as Isaiah 6:6-7 has it, a Seraph was sent to cleanse the lips of the prophet. Therefore, *a fortiori*, the lower angels are sent as well.

Objection 3: The divine persons infinitely exceed all the orders of angels. But as was explained above (q. 43, a. 1), divine persons are sent on mission. Therefore, *a fortiori*, so are all of the highest angels.

Objection 4: If the higher angels are not sent on mission for an exterior ministry, this is only because the higher angels are executing divine ministries through the lower angels. But since, as has been explained (q. 50, a. 4), all the angels are unequal, each angel other than the lowest has an angel lower than himself. Therefore, only a single angel would be sent on mission to minister. But this is

contrary to Daniel 7:10 (“Thousands of thousands were ministering to Him”).

But contrary to this: Referring to Dionysius’s opinion, Gregory says, “The higher ranks do not in any way have a role in exterior ministry.”

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (q. 106, a. 3 and q. 110, a. 1), the order of divine providence is such that—not only among the angels, but in the whole universe as well—lower creatures are administered by higher creatures. However, sometimes in the case of corporeal things, there is, by divine dispensation, a departure from this order for the sake of a higher order, viz., because the departure expedites the manifestation of grace. For instance, God brought it about directly, without any action on the part of the celestial bodies, that the man born blind was given sight and that Lazarus was raised from the dead. Now the angels, too, both good and bad, are capable of acting on lower bodies outside of the action of the celestial bodies—for instance, by condensing the clouds into rain or by doing other such things. And no one should doubt that God could reveal things directly to men without the mediation of the angels, or that the higher angels could do this without the mediation of the lower angels.

Taking these considerations into account, some have claimed that as a general rule it is only the lower angels who are sent on mission and not the higher angels, but that by divine dispensation the higher angels are also sometimes sent on mission.

However, this claim does not seem plausible. For the order among the angels involves the gifts of grace. But the order of grace has no order higher than itself for the sake of which it might be set aside in the way that the order of nature is set aside for the sake of the order of grace.

Notice, in addition, that the reason why the order of nature is set aside in the working of miracles is to strengthen our faith. But it would do no good for the angelic order to be set aside, since we would be unable to perceive this.

Again, among the divine ministries there is no task so great that it could not be executed by the lower orders. Hence, Gregory says, “The archangels are called upon to announce the greatest things. This is why the Archangel Gabriel is sent to the Virgin Mary.” But as Gregory adds in the same place, this was the highest of all the divine ministries.

And so one should simply claim, with Dionysius, that the higher angels are never sent on mission for an exterior ministry.

Reply to objection 1: In the missions of the divine persons there is (a) a *visible* mission that involves a corporeal creature and (b) an *invisible* mission that involves a spiritual effect. Likewise, in the missions of the angels there is (a) something called an *exterior* mission, which involves carrying out a ministry to corporeal things, and not all the angels are sent on this sort of mission, and (b) something called an *interior* mission, which involves intellectual effects—as when one angel illuminates another—and all the angels are sent on this sort of mission.

An alternative reply is that the Apostle says this in order to prove that Christ is greater than the angels through whom the law was given, so that he might show the excellence of the New Law in comparison to the Old Law. Hence, what he says need not be taken to apply to angels other than the ministering angels through whom the law was given.

Reply to objection 2: According to Dionysius, the angel who was sent to cleanse the prophet’s lips was one of the lower angels, but he is equivocally called a Seraph, i.e., one who is on fire, because he came to burn the prophet’s lips.

An alternative reply is that the higher angels communicate their proper gifts, on the basis of which they are named, through the mediation of the lower angels. So, then, one of the Seraphim is said to have cleansed the prophet’s lips with fire, not because he himself did it directly, but because a lower angel did it by his power—just as the Pope is said to absolve someone even when he gives absolution through another.

Reply to objection 3: As is clear from what has been said, the divine persons are sent on mission in an equivocal sense, and they are not sent on mission in order to minister.

Reply to objection 4: There are many levels within the divine ministries. Hence, nothing prevents even unequal angels from being sent directly on mission in order to minister—though in such a way that higher angels are sent for higher ministries, and lower angels for lower ministries.

Article 3

Do the angels who are sent on mission also stand before God?

It seems that the angels who are sent on mission (*mittuntur*) also stand before God (*assistunt*):

Objection 1: In *Homilia* Gregory says, “Therefore, it is the case both that the angels are sent on mission and that they stand before God. For even if an angelic spirit is limited to a particular place (*circumscriptus*), the highest spirit Himself, viz., God, is not so limited.”

Objection 2: Tobias’s angel was sent on mission to minister. But according to Tobit 12:15, he himself said, “I am the angel Raphael, one of the seven who stand before God.” Therefore, the angels who are sent on mission also stand before God.

Objection 3: Each beatified angel is closer to God than Satan is. But according to Job 1:6 (“When the sons of God came to stand before the Lord, Satan also was present among them”), Satan stands before God. Therefore, *a fortiori*, the angels who are sent on mission to minister also stand before God.

Objection 4: If the lower angels do not stand before God, then this is because they receive divine illuminations through the higher angels and not directly. But every angel, except the one who is highest of all, receives divine illuminations from higher angels. Therefore, only the highest angel would stand before God. But this is contrary to Daniel 7:10 (“Ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before Him”). Therefore, even those who minister stand before God.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 17, commenting on Job 25:3 (“Is there any numbering of His soldiers?”), Gregory says, “Those Powers stand before God (*assistunt*) who do not leave to announce things to men.” Therefore, those who are sent on mission to minister do not stand before God.

I respond: The angels who stand before God and the angels who minister are spoken of by appeal to their similarity with those who serve under a king. There are some who always stand before the king and listen directly to his commands, while there are others—for instance, those in charge of administering the cities—to whom the royal commands are announced by those who stand before the king. The latter are said to administer, but not to stand before the king.

Therefore, notice that all the angels see God’s essence directly and, on this score, even those who minister are said to stand before Him. Hence, in *Moralia* 2 Gregory says, “Those who are sent to minister exteriorly for our salvation are always able to stand before the Father, i.e., to see His face.”

However, not all the angels can perceive the secrets of the divine mysteries in the very splendor of the divine essence; the only ones who can are the highest angels, through whom these secrets are made known to the lower angels. And on this score, the only angels who are said to stand before God are the highest angels, who belong to the first hierarchy, the property of which, according to Dionysius, is to be illuminated directly by God.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2: The replies to the first and second objections are clear from what has been said, since these objections are talking about the first mode of standing before God.

Reply to objection 3: Satan is not said to have stood before God, but is instead described as having been present among those who stand before God. For as Gregory says in *Moralia* 2, “Even

though Satan lost beatitude, he did not lose his nature, which is similar to the angels.”

Reply to objection 4: All those who stand before God see certain things directly in the splendor of God’s essence, and so it is said to be proper to the whole first hierarchy to be illuminated directly by God. However, the highest among them see more than the lower ones do, and the former illuminate the latter about these things—just as, among those who stand before a king, one knows more than another about the king’s secrets.

Article 4

Are all the angels of the second hierarchy sent on mission?

It seems that all the angels of the second hierarchy are sent on mission:

Objection 1: According to Daniel 7:10, all the angels either stand before God or minister to God. But the angels of the second hierarchy do not stand before God, since, as Dionysius says in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 8, they are illuminated by the angels of the first hierarchy. Therefore, all the angels of the second hierarchy are sent on mission to minister.

Objection 2: In *Moralia* 17 Gregory says, “There are more who minister than who stand before God.” But this would not be the case if the angels of the second hierarchy were not sent on mission to minister. Therefore, all the angels of the second hierarchy are sent on mission to minister.

But contrary to this: Dionysius says, “The Dominations are beyond all subjection.” But it involves subjection to be sent on mission to minister. Therefore, the Dominations are not sent on mission to minister.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), to be sent on mission for an exterior ministry is proper to an angel to the extent that he acts by God’s command on some corporeal creature, and this is what is involved in the execution of a divine ministry. But as Dionysius says in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 7, the properties of the angels are made clear by their names. Therefore, the angels who are sent on mission for an exterior ministry belong to those orders whose names imply some sort of execution.

Now the name ‘Dominations’ does not imply any sort of execution, but implies only arranging and commanding what is to be executed. However, some sort of execution is implied by the names of the lower orders. For the names ‘Angels’ and ‘Archangels’ come from announcing, and the names ‘Virtues’ and ‘Powers’ are predicated in relation to some action, and, as Gregory says, a Principality is in charge of those who operate. Hence, it belongs to these five orders to be sent on mission for exterior ministries, but not to the four higher orders.

Reply to objection 1: The Dominations are here counted among the angels who minister not because they execute a ministry, but rather because they arrange and mandate what is to be done by the others—just as architects do not do any manual labor in their trade, but only arrange and direct what others have to do.

Reply to objection 2: There are two possible explanations concerning the number of those who stand before God and the number of those who minister.

Gregory claims that more of them minister than stand before God. For he understands the phrase ‘thousands of thousands were ministering to Him’ (Daniel 7:10) as partitive rather than multiplicative, so that the meaning is ‘thousands from among the number of the thousands’. And so the number of those who minister is posited as indefinite, in order to signify excess, whereas the number of those who stand before God is posited as finite, since the passage adds that “ten thousand times a hundred thousand were standing before Him.” This follows the line of the argument proposed by the Platonists, who claimed

that the closer things are to the unitary first principle, the smaller they are in number—just as the closer a number is to the number *one*, the smaller the multitude it numbers.

This opinion is salvageable as far as the number of orders is concerned, since six orders minister and three stand before God.

By contrast, in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 14, Dionysius claims that the multitude of angels exceeds every material multitude, so that just as the higher bodies exceed the lower bodies in magnitude, i.e., in immensity, so too the higher incorporeal natures exceed all corporeal natures in multitude. For that which is better is such that God intends it more and multiplies it more. Accordingly, since those who stand before God are higher than those who minister, there will be more who stand before God than who minister. Hence, on this view the phrase ‘thousands of thousands’ is interpreted multiplicatively, so that it means ‘a thousand times a thousand’. And because ten times a hundred is a thousand, if the text said, ‘ten times a hundred thousand’, then that would mean that there are just as many standing before God as ministering. However, because it says, ‘ten thousand times a hundred thousand’, it follows that many more are being said to stand before God than to minister. However, it does not say this in order to indicate that this is the precise number of angels there are. Rather, there are many more angels than this, since their number exceeds every material multitude—something which, as Dionysius points out in the same place, is signified by the multiplication of large round numbers by one another, viz., ten, a hundred, and a thousand.