

“What Angels Do”

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Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.
(John 13:23)

Most parents are acutely aware of the dangers of clearly preferring one child over another. In the Gospel of John numerous times the disciple John is labeled as the one “whom Jesus loved.” Why is one disciple singled out in this way? The teachings for the New Church are clear why this is the case as in the following quotation.

Useful services are the determining factor in the happiness imparted by the Lord in heaven, and those services are the chief way in which the Lord is worshipped. This goes to explain why John reclined at table on the Lord's breast, and why the Lord loved him more than the rest. It was not on account of John himself, but because he represented times when charity [or wise kindness] is exercised, that is, useful services are performed. (*Arcana Caelestia* 7038:3)

All angels get their happiness from being useful. The disciple, John, was beloved because he represented this reality. With all the things that are necessary to serve the billions of angels in heaven, we might think that the useful service of each angel is a necessity, but it is not. We are told that the Lord gives angels jobs “not because He needs their help but in order that the angels there may have jobs and duties, and therefore life and happiness in keeping with the duties and services they perform” (*Arcana Caelestia* 8719).

One of the powerful collection of teachings of the New Church is the rich, complex and very vivid picture of life after death that we are given. Rather than an image of heavenly life that is cloudy and vague the New Church presents an inspiring description of heavenly communities composed of people who have lived good lives and now are angels and are gathered together with others who are kindred spirits. Each of these angels has his or her own particular useful service that uniquely adds to the perfection of heaven. Each angel is able to perform a singular role that no one ever has done as well and no one could ever do in the same way to eternity (see *Heaven and Hell* 405).

What are the particular expressions of useful service that each angel performs? The lesson this morning from *Heaven and Hell* described a number of these roles, but there are many more. In introducing the idea of what angels do in heaven the book *Heaven and Hell* states:

There is no way to list all the functions that people have in the heavens or to describe them in detail, though it is possible to say something on the subject in general terms; they are innumerable and vary depending on the roles of the communities as well. In fact, each community plays a unique role, since the communities differ depending on their good qualities and therefore on their function. This is because these good qualities for everyone in the heavens are good qualities in act, which are functions. Everyone there does something specifically useful, for the Lord's kingdom is a kingdom of uses. (*Heaven and Hell* 387)

Another paragraph in this chapter states:

There are so many jobs and services in heaven, so many tasks, that there are simply too many to list. There are relatively few in the world. No matter how many people are involved, they are all caught up in a love of their work and tasks out of a love of service—no one out of selfishness or a love of profit. In fact, there is no love of profit for the sake of livelihood, since all the necessities of life are given to them for free. They are housed for free, clothed for free, and fed for free. (*Heaven and Hell* 393:3)

If angels get so much for free one thinks that the angels would have comparatively little to do, but listen to the following idea about the clothing of angels:

We can tell that angels' clothes do not merely look like clothes but really are because they not only see them, they feel them as well. Further, they have many garments that they take off and put on, and they put away the ones they are not using and put back on the ones they are. I have seen thousands of times that they wear different clothes. I have asked them where they got their clothes, and they have told me that their clothes come from the Lord and are given to them, and that sometimes they are clothed without noticing it. (*Heaven and Hell* 181)

So, some of the time angels dress just like you and I do and sometimes they are instantly clothed by the Lord. I think we can see something of this instant change in this world when our minds can be caught up with a very mundane issue but then we hear about a close friend in need. Almost instantly our mind is focused on a very different set of priorities and thoughts, as though the Lord suddenly clothed us anew.

Sometimes it seems that people who have learned what the New Church teaches about angels end up feeling like they will never achieve what strikes them as an impossible perfection. All angels do indeed want to be led by the Lord as they understand Him, but this comes with huge variety as is indicated in the following quotation.

All who enter into heaven enter into their heart's highest joy. . . The case is comparatively like that of a peasant and a king. The peasant may experience the highest joy when going about in a new garment of coarse wool or sitting at a table laden with a cut of pork, a bit of beef, cheese, beer, and mulled wine. He would be anxious at heart if he were to be dressed like a king in purple, silk, gold and silver, or if he had placed before him a table laden with many kinds of delicacies and sumptuous foods accompanied by vintage wine. It is apparent from this that those who are last experience heavenly happiness as well as those who are first, each on his own level. (*Divine Providence* 254:3-4)

Another way that a person can feel distant from angels is when that person recognizes his or her own imperfections and assumes that angels have none of these. But angels can have their own imperfections as illustrated in the following teaching about why judges are needed in heaven. It involves some newcomers to heaven who are surprised to hear there are courts of law there. Their response was to question why. They said:

“What is the purpose of these? Are not all in heaven inspired and led by God, and do they not all therefore know what is just and right? What need is there then for judges?” But the

older man replied, “In this world we are instructed and taught what is good and true, also what is just and right, the same as in the natural world. Moreover, we learn these things not directly from God but indirectly through others. Every angel, too, like every human being, thinks truth and does good as though of themselves, and this is not pure but mixed in character, depending on the angel's state. In addition, among angels also, some are simple and some wise, and the wise have to make judgments when the simple ones among them, owing to their simpleness or ignorance, are uncertain about what is just or deviate from it. (*Conjugal Love* 207:3-4)

Another statement indicates that angels can feel stress and a wise leader of a heavenly community intervenes to keep this from becoming too big a problem. The source of this stress is described in the following statement.

“We have days of celebration here, proclaimed by the prince, to relax people's spirits from the fatigue that the drive to excel may have produced in some of them.” (*Conjugal Love* 17:1)

Or there is the following teaching about lower angels sometimes thinking that they need to tell higher angels how to better do their roles.

It sometimes happens that those in a lower heaven seek to go up into a higher heaven; they seek to do so because of a wrong desire that has its origin in pride, dominion, or envy. Those who have that desire and venture up are also let in now and again; but then they suffer badly. They are seized by anxiety, at length by pain, and also by blindness; their intelligence is destroyed, and their happiness. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8797)

You could wonder what you might do some day as an angel and how does it relate to what you have done in your life in this world. About this we are taught:

Everyone in heaven is engaged in his or her work according to its correspondence, and the correspondence is not with the work itself but with the use of each particular task; and everything has a correspondence. When we are engaged in an activity or a task in heaven that does answer to its use, then we are in a state of life very much like the one we were in in this world. (*Heaven and Hell* 394)

Some jobs in this world relate to jobs we are told angels have. Others may seem to have no relationship to needs in heaven. We can be sure though that the Lord is preparing each of us for some role and it is His greatest desire that this role be one in a heavenly community.

May each of us in this world do what we can to be led by the Lord from our current life to a better one. May we be sure that each of us is being prepared by the Lord, if we are willing, for an angelic use that will be the greatest happiness we can know. AMEN.

Lessons: John 13:21-26, Revelation 21 (portions), *Heaven and Hell* 391

John 13:21-26 (NKJV)

²¹ When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.” ²² Then the disciples looked at one another,

perplexed about whom He spoke.²³ Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.²⁴ Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom He spoke.²⁵ Then, leaning back on Jesus' breast, he said to Him, "Lord, who is it?"²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped *it*." And having dipped the bread, He gave *it* to Judas Iscariot, *the son* of Simon.

Revelation 21:1-4, 9-11, 22-26

¹ Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. ² Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. ⁴ And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." . . . ⁹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God. Her light *was* like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. . . . ²² But I saw no temple in [the city], for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb *is* its light. ²⁴ And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. ²⁵ Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). ²⁶ And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.

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All the communities in the heavens are differentiated according to [or defined by] their forms of service because they are differentiated according to [or defined by] their good qualities. Their good qualities are good qualities in action or acts of thoughtfulness, which are services. There are some communities whose tasks are to take care of babies; there are other communities whose tasks are to teach and lead children while they are growing up; there are other communities that look after young boys and girls who are well disposed because of the way they were raised in this world and have come [straight] to heaven, where they are taught and raised in much the same way. There are some that teach simple people from the Christian world and lead them on the way to heaven, and there are some that do the same for various non-Christian peoples. There are some that protect new spirits, just arrived from the world, from the attacks of evil spirits; and there are some who attend to people in the lower earth. Then there are some who attend to people in the hells and control them so that they do not torture each other beyond set limits. There are also some who tend to people who are being awakened from their death.

Broadly speaking, angels of all communities are assigned to us to protect us, to lead us away from evil feelings and the evil thoughts that these cause and to instill good feelings to the extent that we are freely open to them. These serve to control our deeds or works by removing our evil intentions to the extent that this can be done. When angels are with us they seem to dwell in our affections, near us to the extent that we are engaged in something good because of truth, and distant to the extent that our life is removed from such engagement.

However, all these tasks are things the Lord does by means of angels, since angels do them not on their own but from the Lord.