

FIRST PART, QUESTION 112

The Mission of the Angels (In Four Articles)

We next consider the mission of the angels. Under this head arise four points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether any angels are sent on works of ministry?
- (2) Whether all are sent?
- (3) Whether those who are sent, assist?
- (4) From what orders they are sent.

Whether the angels are sent on works of ministry?

Ia q. 112 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that the angels are not sent on works of ministry. For every mission is to some determinate place. But intellectual actions do not determine a place, for intellect abstracts from the “here” and “now.” Since therefore the angelic actions are intellectual, it appears that the angels are not sent to perform their own actions.

Objection 2. Further, the empyrean heaven is the place that beseems the angelic dignity. Therefore if they are sent to us in ministry, it seems that something of their dignity would be lost; which is unseemly.

Objection 3. Further, external occupation hinders the contemplation of wisdom; hence it is said: “He that is less in action, shall receive wisdom” (Ecclus. 38:25). So if some angels are sent on external ministrations, they would seemingly be hindered from contemplation. But the whole of their beatitude consists in the contemplation of God. So if they were sent, their beatitude would be lessened; which is unfitting.

Objection 4. Further, to minister is the part of an inferior; hence it is written (Lk. 22:27): “Which is the greater, he that sitteth at table, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at table?” But the angels are naturally greater than we are. Therefore they are not sent to administer to us.

On the contrary, It is written (Ex. 23:20): “Behold I will send My angels who shall go before thee.”

I answer that, From what has been said above (q. 108, a. 6), it may be shown that some angels are sent in ministry by God. For, as we have already stated (q. 43, a. 1), in treating of the mission of the Divine Persons, he is said to be sent who in any way proceeds from another so as to begin to be where he was not, or to be in another way, where he already was. Thus the Son, or the Holy Ghost is said to be sent as proceeding from the Father by origin; and begins to be in a new way, by grace or by the nature assumed, where He was before by the presence of His Godhead; for it belongs to God to be present everywhere, because, since He is the universal agent, His power reaches to all being, and hence He exists in all things (q. 8, a. 1). An angel’s power, however, as a particular agent,

does not reach to the whole universe, but reaches to one thing in such a way as not to reach another; and so he is “here” in such a manner as not to be “there.” But it is clear from what was above stated (q. 110, a. 1), that the corporeal creature is governed by the angels. Hence, whenever an angel has to perform any work concerning a corporeal creature, the angel applies himself anew to that body by his power; and in that way begins to be there afresh. Now all this takes place by Divine command. Hence it follows that an angel is sent by God.

Yet the action performed by the angel who is sent, proceeds from God as from its first principle, at Whose nod and by Whose authority the angels work; and is reduced to God as to its last end. Now this is what is meant by a minister: for a minister is an intelligent instrument; while an instrument is moved by another, and its action is ordered to another. Hence angels’ actions are called ‘ministries’; and for this reason they are said to be sent in ministry.

Reply to Objection 1. An operation can be intellectual in two ways. In one way, as dwelling in the intellect itself, as contemplation; such an operation does not demand to occupy a place; indeed, as Augustine says (De Trin. iv, 20): “Even we ourselves as mentally tasting something eternal, are not in this world.” In another sense an action is said to be intellectual because it is regulated and commanded by some intellect; in that sense the intellectual operations evidently have sometimes a determinate place.

Reply to Objection 2. The empyrean heaven belongs to the angelic dignity by way of congruity; forasmuch as it is congruous that the higher body should be attributed to that nature which occupies a rank above bodies. Yet an angel does not derive his dignity from the empyrean heaven; so when he is not actually in the empyrean heaven, nothing of his dignity is lost, as neither does a king lessen his dignity when not actually sitting on his regal throne, which suits his dignity.

Reply to Objection 3. In ourselves the purity of contemplation is obscured by exterior occupation; because we give ourselves to action through the sensitive faculties,

the action of which when intense impedes the action of the intellectual powers. An angel, on the contrary, regulates his exterior actions by intellectual operation alone. Hence it follows that his external occupations in no respect impede his contemplation; because given two actions, one of which is the rule and the reason of the other, one does not hinder but helps the other. Wherefore Gregory says (Moral. ii) that “the angels do not go abroad in such a

manner as to lose the delights of inward contemplation.”

Reply to Objection 4. In their external actions the angels chiefly minister to God, and secondarily to us; not because we are superior to them, absolutely speaking, but because, since every man or angel by cleaving to God is made one spirit with God, he is thereby superior to every creature. Hence the Apostle says (Phil. 2:3): “Esteeming others better than themselves.”

Whether all the angels are sent in ministry?

Ia q. 112 a. 2

Objection 1. It would seem that all the angels are sent in ministry. For the Apostle says (Heb. 1:14): “All are ministering spirits, sent to minister” [Vulg. ‘Are they not all...?’].

Objection 2. Further, among the orders, the highest is that of the Seraphim, as stated above (q. 108, a. 6). But a Seraph was sent to purify the lips of the prophet (Is. 6:6,7). Therefore much more are the inferior orders sent.

Objection 3. Further, the Divine Persons infinitely excel all the angelic orders. But the Divine Persons are sent. Therefore much more are even the highest angels sent.

Objection 4. Further, if the superior angels are not sent to the external ministries, this can only be because the superior angels execute the Divine ministries by means of the inferior angels. But as all the angels are unequal, as stated above (q. 50, a. 4), each angel has an angel inferior to himself except the last one. Therefore only the last angel would be sent in ministry; which contradicts the words, “Thousands of thousands ministered to Him” (Dan. 7:10).

On the contrary, Gregory says (Hom. xxxiv in Evang.), quoting the statement of Dionysius (Coel. Hier. xiii), that “the higher ranks fulfil no exterior service.”

I answer that, As appears from what has been said above (q. 106, a. 3; q. 110, a. 1), the order of Divine Providence has so disposed not only among the angels, but also in the whole universe, that inferior things are administered by the superior. But the Divine dispensation, however, this order is sometimes departed from as regards corporeal things, for the sake of a higher order, that is, according as it is suitable for the manifestation of grace. That the man born blind was enlightened, that Lazarus was raised from the dead, was accomplished immediately by God without the action of the heavenly bodies. Moreover both good and bad angels can work some effect in these bodies independently of the heavenly bodies, by the

condensation of the clouds to rain, and by producing some such effects. Nor can anyone doubt that God can immediately reveal things to men without the help of the angels, and the superior angels without the inferior. From this standpoint some have said that according to the general law the superior angels are not sent, but only the inferior; yet that sometimes, by Divine dispensation, the superior angels also are sent.

It may also be said that the Apostle wishes to prove that Christ is greater than the angels who were chosen as the messengers of the law; in order that He might show the excellence of the new over the old law. Hence there is no need to apply this to any other angels besides those who were sent to give the law.

Reply to Objection 2. According to Dionysius (Coel. Hier. xiii), the angel who was sent to purify the prophet’s lips was one of the inferior order; but was called a “Seraph,” that is, “kindling” in an equivocal sense, because he came to “kindle” the lips of the prophet. It may also be said that the superior angels communicate their own proper gifts whereby they are denominated, through the ministry of the inferior angels. Thus one of the Seraphim is described as purifying by fire the prophet’s lips, not as if he did so immediately, but because an inferior angel did so by his power; as the Pope is said to absolve a man when he gives absolution by means of someone else.

Reply to Objection 3. The Divine Persons are not sent in ministry, but are said to be sent in an equivocal sense, as appears from what has been said (q. 43, a. 1).

Reply to Objection 4. A manifold grade exists in the Divine ministries. Hence there is nothing to prevent angels though unequal from being sent immediately in ministry, in such a manner however that the superior are sent to the higher ministries, and the lower to the inferior ministries.

Objection 1. It would seem that the angels who are sent also assist. For Gregory says (Hom. xxxiv in Evang.): “So the angels are sent, and assist; for, though the angelic spirit is limited, yet the supreme Spirit, God, is not limited.”

Objection 2. Further, the angel was sent to administer to Tobias. Yet he said, “I am the angel Raphael, one of the seven who stand before the Lord” (Tob. 12:15). Therefore the angels who are sent, assist.

Objection 3. Further, every holy angel is nearer to God than Satan is. Yet Satan assisted God, according to Job 1:6: “When the sons of God came to stand before the Lord, Satan also was present among them.” Therefore much more do the angels, who are sent to minister, assist.

Objection 4. Further, if the inferior angels do not assist, the reason is because they receive the Divine enlightenment, not immediately, but through the superior angels. But every angel receives the Divine enlightenment from a superior, except the one who is highest of all. Therefore only the highest angel would assist; which is contrary to the text of Dan. 7:10: “Ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before Him.” Therefore the angels who are sent also assist.

On the contrary, Gregory says, on Job 25:3: “Is there any numbering of His soldiers?” (Moral. xvii): “Those powers assist, who do not go forth as messengers to men.” Therefore those who are sent in ministry do not assist.

I answer that, The angels are spoken of as “assisting” and “administering,” after the likeness of those who attend upon a king; some of whom ever wait upon him, and hear his commands immediately; while others there are

to whom the royal commands are conveyed by those who are in attendance—for instance, those who are placed at the head of the administration of various cities; these are said to administer, not to assist.

We must therefore observe that all the angels gaze upon the Divine Essence immediately; in regard to which all, even those who minister, are said to assist. Hence Gregory says (Moral. ii) that “those who are sent on the external ministry of our salvation can always assist and see the face of the Father.” Yet not all the angels can perceive the secrets of the Divine mysteries in the clearness itself of the Divine Essence; but only the superior angels who announce them to the inferior: and in that respect only the superior angels belonging to the highest hierarchy are said to assist, whose special prerogative it is to be enlightened immediately by God.

From this may be deduced the reply to the first and second objections, which are based on the first mode of assisting.

Reply to Objection 3. Satan is not described as having assisted, but as present among the assistants; for, as Gregory says (Moral. ii), “though he has lost beatitude, still he has retained a nature like to the angels.”

Reply to Objection 4. All the assistants see some things immediately in the glory of the Divine Essence; and so it may be said that it is the prerogative of the whole of the highest hierarchy to be immediately enlightened by God; while the higher ones among them see more than is seen by the inferior; some of whom enlighten others: as also among those who assist the king, one knows more of the king’s secrets than another.

Objection 1. It would seem that all the angels of the second hierarchy are sent. For all the angels either assist, or minister, according to Dan. 7:10. But the angels of the second hierarchy do not assist; for they are enlightened by the angels of the first hierarchy, as Dionysius says (Coel. Hier. viii). Therefore all the angels of the second hierarchy are sent in ministry.

Objection 2. Further, Gregory says (Moral. xvii) that “there are more who minister than who assist.” This would not be the case if the angels of the second hierarchy were not sent in ministry. Therefore all the angels of the second hierarchy are sent to minister.

On the contrary, Dionysius says (Coel. Hier. viii) that the “Dominations are above all subjection.” But to be sent implies subjection. Therefore the dominations are not sent to minister.

I answer that, As above stated (a. 1), to be sent to

external ministry properly belongs to an angel according as he acts by Divine command in respect of any corporeal creature; which is part of the execution of the Divine ministry. Now the angelic properties are manifested by their names, as Dionysius says (Coel. Hier. vii); and therefore the angels of those orders are sent to external ministry whose names signify some kind of administration. But the name “dominations” does not signify any such administration, but only disposition and command in administering. On the other hand, the names of the inferior orders imply administration, for the “Angels” and “Archangels” are so called from “announcing”; the “Virtues” and “Powers” are so called in respect of some act; and it is right that the “Prince,” according to what Gregory says (Hom. xxxiv in Evang.), “be first among the workers.” Hence it belongs to these five orders to be sent to external ministry; not to the four superior orders.

Reply to Objection 1. The Dominations are reckoned among the ministering angels, not as exercising but as disposing and commanding what is to be done by others; thus an architect does not put his hands to the production of his art, but only disposes and orders what others are to do.

Reply to Objection 2. A twofold reason may be given in assigning the number of the assisting and ministering angels. For Gregory says that those who minister are more numerous than those who assist; because he takes the words (Dan. 7:10) “thousands of thousands ministered to Him,” not in a multiple but in a partitive sense, to mean “thousands out of thousands”; thus the number of those who minister is indefinite, and signifies excess; while the number of assistants is finite as in the words added, “and ten thousand times a hundred thousand assisted Him.” This explanation rests on the opinion of the Platonists, who said that the nearer things are to the one first principle, the smaller they are in number; as the nearer a number is to unity, the lesser it is than multitude. This opinion is verified as regards the number of orders, as six administer and three assist.

Dionysius, however, (Coel. Hier. xiv) declares that the multitude of angels surpasses all the multitude of material things; so that, as the superior bodies exceed the inferior in magnitude to an immeasurable degree, so the superior incorporeal natures surpass all corporeal natures in multitude; because whatever is better is more intended and more multiplied by God. Hence, as the assistants are superior to the ministers there will be more assistants than ministers. In this way, the words “thousands of thousands” are taken by way of multiplication, to signify “a thousand times a thousand.” And because ten times a hundred is a thousand, if it were said “ten times a hundred thousand” it would mean that there are as many assistants as ministers: but since it is written “ten thousand times a hundred thousand,” we are given to understand that the assistants are much more numerous than the ministers. Nor is this said to signify that this is the precise number of angels, but rather that it is much greater, in that it exceeds all material multitude. This is signified by the multiplication together of all the greatest numbers, namely ten, a hundred, and a thousand, as Dionysius remarks in the same passage.