



# Angelology in the *Letters* of St. Ambrose of Milan

## Angelologia w *Listach* św. Ambrożego z Mediolanu

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**Abstract:** In the letters of St. Ambrose of Milan, one can find many interesting theological topics, including motifs related to angelology. According to the bishop, angels were sent by God. They serve God and people, if only for the reason that man is the most important work of the Creator. Angels play an important role as guardians and protectors of people. Although the angelology contained in the letters of the Bishop of Milan is not one of his key topics, it reveals how he perceived the world of angels.

**Keywords:** Ambrose; angel; letters; guardian; protector

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In his teaching, St. Ambrose of Milan addresses many theological themes. Among these, there are also interesting motifs related to angelology, especially in his correspondence. The letters of the Bishop of Milan certainly provide a picture of his pastoral and social activities<sup>2</sup>. Some deal with biblical issues, others with moral questions or describe events that took place in the life of the Church and the Empire of the fourth century<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. L. Małunowiczówna, *Ambroży*, EK I 413. There is a correct view that Ambrose's letters are the most interesting part of his writing, as they are a reflection and fruit of his pastoral activity. Cf. G. Ostrowski, *Co św. Ambroży pisze w „Listach” na temat małżeństwa?* WST 28/4 (2015) p. 79. The variety of themes that appear in St. Ambrose's letters is evidenced by studies in which various theological issues are addressed, including P.J. Nowak, *Pojęcie nadziei w „Listach” św. Ambrożego z Mediolanu*, VoxP 52/2 (2008) p. 743-760; M. Wysocki, „*Któryż to napój, jeśli nie napój mądrości, jest radością serca?*” (*Ep. 1,7*), czyli jak opisuje radość św. Ambroży w swoich listach, VoxP 58 (2012) p. 289-305; M. Wysocki, *Obraz chrześcijańskiego władcy w Listach św. Ambrożego*, VoxP 62 (2014) p. 171-177; M. Wysocki, „*Jesteśmy pośrednikami wiary*” (*Epistula 10 [extra coll.]*, 8). *Wiara i jej pośrednicy na podstawie listów św. Ambrożego*, VoxP 61 (2014) p. 373-385.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. Naumowicz, *Wstęp*, in: *Ambroży z Mediolanu, Listy*, vol. 1: *Listy 1-35*, transl. P. Nowak, BOK 9, Kraków 1997, p. 14.

Some of Ambrose's letters can be called treatises, speeches or documents<sup>4</sup>, and the angelology that appears in them is not a systematic doctrine of any kind; rather, they are loose statements related to other theological and social topics discussed.

This study will use a collection of the letters of St. Ambrose, which consists of three parts. The first is a collection of 77 letters composed by the author himself. He personally collected his correspondence and published it in the last years of his life. The second part of the letters, of which there are 15, are so-called extra-collection letters (*extra collectionem*), since they were not included by Ambrose in the aforementioned collection and were only found in the archives after his death<sup>5</sup>. Finally, the third part of the correspondence is the *Acts* of the synod held in Aquileia in 381 and two letters of this assembly. We shall not use these documents as they do not contain references to angels. There is also a correct belief that St. Ambrose was the author of more letters, but unfortunately these have not survived to our time<sup>6</sup>.

St. Ambrose emphasises in his correspondence that the role of angels is one of servitude towards both God and men. He recognises them as spirits who „have the intangible form of angels to our eyes (*angelorum speciem*)”<sup>7</sup>. In a letter to the priest Honorantius, on the other hand, he points out that they perform „various functions (*sustinent diversa ministeria*) amid the toils of this world”<sup>8</sup>. We will therefore look at the statements of the Bishop of Milan in which he defines what the said ministries of angels consist in.

## 1. The ministry of angels towards God

When we think of the tasks of angels in relation to God, we usually place worshiping Him first. Bishop Ambrose is not alone in this. Writing

<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. Santorski, *Ambroży*, NSWP, p. 50-59.

<sup>5</sup> Ambrosius, *Epistulae et Acta*, CSEL 82/1: *Epistularum libri I-IV*, ed. O. Faller, Vienna 1968. *Ambroży z Mediolanu, Listy*, vol. 1; Ambrosius, *Epistulae et Acta*, CSEL 82/2: Ambrosius, *Epistularum libri VII-IX*, eds. O. Faller – M. Zelcer, Vienna 1990; Ambrosius, *Epistulae et Acta*, CSEL 82/3: Ambrosius, *Epistularum liber X; Epistulae extra collectionem; Gesta*, ed. M. Zelcer, Vienna 1982; English transl. M.M. Beyenka: Saint Ambrose, *Letters*, The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation 26, New York 1954 (hereafter: FCNT).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Naumowicz, *Wstęp*, p. 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 75a, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 21, 10, FCNT 26, p. 276.

to the faithful of the Church of Vercelli, he draws attention to monks who, having reached perfection, praise God with hymns. Ambrose recognises this as a service worthy of „angels, to be always occupied with the praises of God, to propitiate and beseech the Lord with frequent prayers”<sup>9</sup>.

In the letters of St. Ambrose, we encounter several texts where we can read what the ministry of angels with regard to God consists in. In addition to praising Him, as has already been mentioned, there is a theme connected with the angels’ proclamation of the Christ foretold by the prophets. In his letter to Irenaeus, the Bishop of Milan, referring to texts of Sacred Scripture, writes that „Lord Jesus Himself, therefore, is the Highest Good whom the Prophets announced (*nobis annuntiatum*) (cf. Heb. 1:1; Luke 1:70), the angels made known (*praedicatum ab angelis*) (cf. Luke 2:9-14; 1Tim. 3:16)”<sup>10</sup>. The angels thus perform the task of announcing, in this case, the coming of the Saviour to earth, which the prophets had previously foretold. The difference between foretelling and announcing is that the prophets speak of what is to come (the foretelling of Christ’s birth - Luke 1:70), while the angels inform of a fact that has occurred (the announcement to the shepherds that Christ has been born in Bethlehem - Luke 2:9-14).

When the Bishop of Milan speaks of the task of announcing God’s mysteries through angels, he does not limit it solely to notifying people of them after they have already been fulfilled. The heavenly beings are also, in a sense, prophets and foretell what is yet to be fulfilled. For Ambrose, the story of the biblical Samson is an example of this. In a letter to the third Bishop of Trent, Vigilius, he recalls that Samson’s father was a God-fearing man and came from a distinguished family. Samson’s mother, on the other hand, although infertile in body, was rich in the virtues of the spirit and therefore deserved to „receive into the dwelling of her soul the vision of an angel”. Being a person of great integrity, she „did not permit herself to know even the secrets of God without her husband’s sharing of them” and so she told him „that a man of God had appeared to her, of wondrous beauty, bringing her a prophecy that a child would be born”<sup>11</sup>. Samson’s father therefore prayed for an angel of the Lord to come to him, as to his wife, and tell him the will of God (cf. Judg. 13:2-8). The request of Samson’s father, who „wished to share the benefit of the heavenly vision”, was granted, for „an angel would return to his house” and „give the admonition which the fulfilling of the prophecy entailed, be suddenly raised in

<sup>9</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 14\*, 82 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 351.

<sup>10</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 11, 8, FCNT 26, p. 440.

<sup>11</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 62, 11, FCNT 26, p. 178.

the form of a glowing flame, and depart. This vision, which so frightened the husband, the wife interpreted more auspiciously, turning it to joy and removing his anxiety. She said that to see God was a proof of favor, not of ill-will. (cf. Judg. 13:11-23)<sup>12</sup>. St. Ambrose, using the narrative of the story of Samson's birth, draws attention to the role of the angel in this event. He is, on the one hand, God's messenger and, on the other, is to announce His will to the people. It is also worth noting the final words of the passage quoted from the letter. There, it is said that the angel brings good news for man, unlike what we will see in further statements by Ambrose, when it is mentioned that angels also foretell misfortunes in the form of punishments and plagues.

The theme of faith in the words of angels recurs in the letter to Pope Siricius. For they are the true heralds of the words of God. One can disbelieve the teaching of the bishops, writes St. Ambrose, but one should not disbelieve the „the instruction of the angels (*monitis angelorum*)”. He also gives a biblical example from the scene of the Annunciation, in which the angel, speaking to Mary of the conception of a child by her relative Elizabeth, states that „for nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). Ambrose is convinced that Mary cannot be accused of lacking faith in the birth of the Son of God from her, because she „later replied: «Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word» (Luke 1:38)”<sup>13</sup>.

Continuing with the story of Samson, Ambrose points out that the proclamations of God's mysteries, of which angels are the heralds, involve the transmission of words. The materialisation of these foretellings testifies to the credibility of what the angels are saying and demonstrates that they are authentic messengers of God. In the letter to Vigilius already quoted, Ambrose writes that the birth of Samson was preceded by an angel who came down „to foretell to his parents (*parentibus annuntiaretur*) his unexpected birth, the leadership he would hold, and the protection he would give his people who had been tormented so long by the oppressive rule of the Philistines (cf. Judg. 13:3-5)”<sup>14</sup>. The angel foretold the birth of Samson and indicated that his coming into the world has a specific purpose, and that is the liberation of the Israelites from the rule of the Philistines. The messenger of God thus becomes the harbinger of hopeful prophecies.

<sup>12</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 62, 12, FCNT 26, p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 15\*, 5 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 227.

<sup>14</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 62, 10, FCNT 26, p. 178.

St. Ambrose's statements in which he refers to the biblical story of the fortune-teller Balaam<sup>15</sup> described in the Book of Numbers (cf. Num. 22:1-41) are interesting. He was supposed to curse the people of Israel (cf. Num. 22:13.18), which he was prevented from doing because, as Ambrose writes in a letter to the Bishop of Aquileia, Chromatius, „he went and an angel of the Lord met him who told him to go no farther and stood in the path of the ass which he was riding (cf. Num. 22:22-34)”<sup>16</sup>. The aforementioned theme of God acting through an angel is addressed by the Bishop of Milan later in the quoted letter. When Balaam set out to curse the people of Israel, „an angel met him in a narrow place, and revealed himself to the ass, not to the diviner. He revealed himself to the one; he scorned the other. (cf. Num. 22:21-27)”<sup>17</sup>. Ambrose points out that the angel does not speak for himself and does not communicate his own words to others. He resembles a prophet in that he hears a command from God: “Go and speak what I shall command you, that is, not what you wish, but what you are forced to say”<sup>18</sup>.

When speaking of God acting through the angel, St. Ambrose points out that the angel is solely His instrument. The same applies to salvation, which is not the work of the angel, but of God. That is why, in his letter to Sabinus, Bishop of Piacenza, he emphatically writes that “for no ambassador or messenger (Isa. 63:9), but the Lord Himself alone, saved His people”<sup>19</sup>. He repeats the same thought in the context of the Gospel scene in which we meet Jesus and the adulterous woman (cf. John 8:1-11). It was only Jesus who could forgive her sins, and “no herald or messenger, but the Lord Himself, saved His people (Isa. 63:9; Mt 1:21). He remains alone, because no one among men can share with Christ the forgiveness of sins. This task belongs to Christ himself, who took away the sin of the world (John 1:29; cf. Isa. 53:4.7)”<sup>20</sup>. A similar theme appears in a letter to the Emperor Theodosius, who carried out the famous massacre of Thessalonica for killing the commander of the army, Butheric. Ambrose admonishes the emperor and persuades him to undertake penance for his act: “Sin is not removed except by tears and penance. No angel or archangel can remove it; it is God Himself who alone can say: «I am with you» (Matt. 28:20) if

<sup>15</sup> The life story of this fortune-teller or magician is told on the basis of Scripture by: P.C. Bosak, *Leksykon wszystkich postaci biblijnych*, Kraków 2015, p. 225-226.

<sup>16</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 28, 4, FCNT 26, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 28, 7, FCNT 26, p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 28, 8, FCNT 26, p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 33, 5, FCNT 26, p. 136.

<sup>20</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 68, 16, FCNT 26, p. 473.

we have sinned, He does not forgive us unless we do penance”<sup>21</sup>. Angels therefore fulfil the role of carrying out the saving will of God<sup>22</sup>.

Soteriology in the context of angelology also appears in Ambrose in connection with Mariology. In a letter to the aforementioned Bishop of Piacenza, Sabinus, he says that Mary accomplished the salvation of the world: “Mary was alone when she spoke with an angel (cf. Luke 1:28.34). She was alone when the Holy Spirit came to her and the power of the Most High overshadowed her (cf. Luke 1:35). She was alone and she worked the salvation of the world (*operata est mundi salutem*) and conceived the redemption of all men”<sup>23</sup>. How should this statement by the Bishop of Milan be understood? It certainly cannot be taken literally. For in the same letter Ambrose argues emphatically, as mentioned earlier, that “The Lord Jesus was alone when He redeemed the world, for «no ambassador or messenger» (Isa. 63:9), but the Lord Himself alone, saved His people”<sup>24</sup>. He also explains what it means for someone to be alone: “when we are alone we offer ourselves to God, then we lay open to Him our hearts”<sup>25</sup>. In Mary’s case, therefore, it was about her readiness to receive the Son of God, her consent to be his mother so that, taking human flesh from her, he could effect salvation<sup>26</sup>.

## 2. Tasks of angels with regard to humans

St. Ambrose points to the relationship that exists between humans and angels. It can be described as a spiritual affinity<sup>27</sup> consisting in knowing the inner mystery of Christ and His divine nature<sup>28</sup>. In turn, the Angels also admire people for their faith. In a letter to the faithful of the Church of Vercelli, he refers to the local Bishop Eusebius, about whom he attests that “surely he was worthy of being observed by angels, while he was striving

<sup>21</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 11\*, 11 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. B. Altaner – A. Stuiber, *Patrologia*, tr. P. Pachciarek, Warsaw 1990, p. 511.

<sup>23</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 33, 2, FCNT 26, p. 134-135.

<sup>24</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 33, 5, FCNT 26, p. 136.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. B. Czyżewski, *Wątki mariologiczne w Listach św. Ambrożego z Mediolanu*, in: *Maryja w Biblii i refleksji ojców Kościoła*, ed. P. Wygralak, TPatr 17, Poznań 2020, p. 140.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Altaner – Stuiber, *Patrologia*, p. 511.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ambrosius, *Ep.* 11, 11.

to reach the goal of Christ (cf. 1Cor. 9:24), while he strove to lead the life of angels on earth and overcome the spiritual wickedness on high, for he wrestled with spiritual forces of wickedness”<sup>29</sup>.

At several points in his correspondence, St. Ambrose of Milan draws attention to the ministries angels perform with regard to human beings. This includes, among other things, although thankless, the task assigned to them by God “for they are made the ministers of penalties and destruction (*poenarum et excidiorum ministri*)”<sup>30</sup>. The Bishop of Milan, following the thought of Origen in his *Commentary on the St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*<sup>31</sup>, laments the fate of the angels, “who enjoy the life of beatitude would surely prefer to return to that high state of peace rather than be involved in avenging the punishment of our sins. They who rejoice over the repentance of one sinner (cf. Luke 15:10) surely lament the hardships of so many sinners”<sup>32</sup>. St. Ambrose writes about the role of angels involved in the punishment of people in a letter to the Emperor Theodosius. He mentions King David, who decided to count the people of Israel and Judah, which did not please God, and He sent his angel to inflict punishment on the people. David, in turn, “saw the angel striking the people, he said: «I have sinned, I, the shepherd, have done evil and this flock, what has it done? Let your hand be upon me, and upon my father’s house». (2Sam. 24:15.17). So the Lord repented and He bade the angel to spare the people, but David to offer sacrifice, for sacrifices were then offered for sin, but now they are sacrifices of penance”<sup>33</sup>.

Angels perform with regard to human beings not only the task of punishing them for their sins. Their relations to mankind predominantly, as mentioned earlier, concern the positive. According to Ambrose, God’s sending of angels to humanity is due to the dignity they possess in the whole of creation. For man was created by God as the last one, and consequently, “like the cause of the world for which were made all things, dwells, so to speak, in all the elements - lives amid beasts, swims with fish, flies above the birds, talks with angels, dwells on earth, wars in heaven”<sup>34</sup>. How do we explain Ambrose’s statement that all things were created for man, when it is known that the motive, the purpose and the whole reason

<sup>29</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 14\*, 71 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 348.

<sup>30</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 21, 10, FCNT 26, p. 276.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Epistulam ad Romanos* VII 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 21, 10, FCNT 26, p. 276.

<sup>33</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 11\*, 9 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 29, 19, FCNT 26, p. 263.

for creation is Jesus Christ, in line with what St. Paul says that “all things were created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16)? The Bishop of Milan explains this question in the context of the words spoken by God to man to make the earth subject to himself (cf. Gen. 1:28). This is illustrated by the statement that man “flies above the birds”. Ambrose here refers to the chariot of Elijah “in which he was carried through the air (cf. 2Kings 2:11)”<sup>35</sup>. He also says that man has been given “an invisible intelligence, clothed in human form”, through which he “sees all things, [...] penetrates the secrets of the sea and the deep recesses of all the earth [...], raises herself into the air and treads above the regions of the clouds”<sup>36</sup>. Man’s dominion over the world is also exemplified in the words that he fights in the sky. Ambrose explains that this refers to hunting (*auceps*) in the air for birds, but he also points to Elijah, who “conquered on earth and had his triumph in heaven (cf. 2Kings 1:3-17; 2:11)”<sup>37</sup>, because he did not succumb to the troops of soldiers calling on him to yield to King Ahaziah, and at the end he was taken in a fiery chariot to heaven.

Human beings’ relationship with the angels continues after their earthly life is over. In a letter addressed to the bishops of Macedonia after the death of the Bishop of Thessalonica, Acholius, Ambrose with consolation refers to him as “having received the everlasting reward of his labors, and being set free from the chains of the body, fast by the side of Christ amid the ministry of angels”. He also firmly believes that he is the “one to whom the rewards of eternal life were already being given”<sup>38</sup>. He even compares him to the great prophet Elijah. Ambrose, using rhetoric to make his point, says that the aforementioned Bishop Acholius was taken up to heaven, although not, like Elijah, “in a fiery chariot, or by fiery steeds (cf. 2Kings 2:11) - unless, perchance, we did not see them - or in a fiery whirlwind, but by the will and favor of our God, and with the joy of all the holy angels who rejoiced that one so great had come to them”<sup>39</sup>.

In Ambrose’s view, every person deserves to be recognised not only for the prominent position holding in the work of creation. Based on Scripture, the Bishop of Milan mentions the likeness of human beings to angels three times. The first time is when he refers to the Lord Jesus’ statement on the resurrection, which he gave to the Sadducees (cf. Luke 20:27-40).

<sup>35</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 29, 18, FCNT 26, p. 263.

<sup>36</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 29, 14, FCNT 26, p. 261.

<sup>37</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 29, 20, FCNT 26, p. 264.

<sup>38</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 51, 2, FCNT 26, p. 201.

<sup>39</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 51, 8, FCNT 26, p. 203.



In a letter to the Bishop of Verona, Syagrius, in which he defends the innocence of the consecrated virgin Indicia, accused of breaking her vow of chastity<sup>40</sup>, he states that “no harm ought to be inflicted upon holy virgins, for those who do not marry and men who do not take to wife are accounted as the angels of God in heaven (cf. Luke 20:35-36)”<sup>41</sup>. Is it only in the case of those who take up a particular kind of life, such as virginity, that can one speak of the likeness of human beings to angels? Certainly not, for in another statement by Ambrose, this time contained in his letter to Irenaeus, we read: “With the removal of those enmities which formerly existed in the flesh, peace (cf. Eph. 2:11.14) with the universe has been made in heaven (Eph. 1:10), that men might be like angels (Matt. 22:30) on earth”<sup>42</sup>. The dignity of angels can therefore be shared by all men, because they have been saved by Christ. Ambrose here develops St. Paul’s thought expressed in his letter to the Ephesians that both Gentiles and Jews, redeemed from their sins and reconciled to the Father, receive new life in Christ and can therefore be compared to angels. Ambrose also compares people to angels a third time when he mentions the figure of John the Baptist. It was “he who was the teacher of abstinence and, as it were, a new angel on earth (cf. Matt. 3:4.11)”<sup>43</sup>.

Although Ambrose appreciates the role and tasks of angels, both in relation to God and humans, he does not always put them first. In a letter to Emperor Valerian, defending the temples of Milan against their surrender to the Arian bishop Auxentius, he writes the following words to the ruler: “If Auxentius appeals to a synod to dispute the faith (please God it may not be necessary for so many bishops to be wearied on account of one man, for, even if he were an angel from heaven (cf. Gal. 1:8), he must not be esteemed above the peace of the Church), when I shall hear that the synod is gathering, I myself will not be missing”<sup>44</sup>. The reference to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians in this context is not accidental. For the Apostle to the Nations speaks of the need to preach the true, unadulterated Gospel, but should there be anyone, in this case also an angel, who is not up to this task, he should be excluded from the community (cf. Gal. 1:8). In Ambrose’s view, the truth of the Gospel cannot be undermined, as he reproaches the

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of this letter, see G. Ostrowski (*Obrona dziewicy Indycji okazją do pouczenia o cnocie dziewictwa*, VoxP 52 (2008) p. 785-795).

<sup>41</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 57, 19, FCNT 26, p. 171.

<sup>42</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 16, 9, FCNT 26, p. 478.

<sup>43</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 14\*, 29 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 331.

<sup>44</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 75, 16, FCNT 26, p. 55-56.

Arian Bishop Auxentius. He would even contradict an angel if the latter committed the preaching of words contrary to the spirit of the Good News of salvation. It should also be added that Ambrose takes a negative view of Auxentius' behaviour, comparing him to Satan, who "transforms himself into «an angel of light» (2Cor. 11:14) and imitates his power to [do] evil"<sup>45</sup>. St. Paul, quoted here, who warned the Corinthians against false apostles, accusing them of impersonating "angels of light", becomes another argument for the Bishop of Milan to oppose the surrender of the churches of Milan to the Arian Auxentius. For, according to Ambrose, it is necessary to look carefully at what others preach, even if outwardly they resemble angels.

Ambrose also writes about the spiritual support of people by angels. He speaks of this in the context of the events following the burning of the synagogue at Callinicum in Syria by Christians. On the other hand, the monks there destroyed the house where the Valentinians met. The emperor Theodosius wanted to punish the monks for this act, and charge the bishop of Callinicum with the cost of rebuilding the temple. Ambrose reacted to this difficult situation and, in a letter addressed to the Emperor, urged him to be merciful, to "pay honor to the least [of men]. Thus, angels may be gladdened by the forgiveness of these, as over one sinner doing penance; the Apostles may rejoice, the Prophets may delight! (cf. Luke 15:10)"<sup>46</sup>. According to Ambrose, the angels themselves are to be worshipped on the part of people or God is to be worshipped by them, as exemplified by Abraham under the oaks of Mamre<sup>47</sup>. Accepting them and showing hospitality bore fruit in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, who, despite their old age, lived to have a son. The same was true of Lot, who "escaped the destructive fire of Sodom (cf. Gen. 19:2-3.12-25)"<sup>48</sup>. The reference to these biblical figures was used by Ambrose to encourage us to show hospitality to strangers, as there may be angels in their midst. They in turn, as the examples show, always express gratitude to people, as Abraham, Sarah and Lot experienced.

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<sup>45</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 75a, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 1\*, 26 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 396.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Ambrosius, *Ep.* 12\*, 3 (extra coll.).

<sup>48</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 14\*, 105 (extra coll.), FCNT 26, p. 361.

### 3. The role of guardian angels

In his correspondence, in addition to identifying the tasks that angels perform in relation to people, St. Ambrose also expresses faith in angels watching over people and accepts the existence of angels who are guardians of individual people. They do this by the Lord's command and fight against all kinds of opponents as if they were His athletes<sup>49</sup>. The Bishop of Milan is not the precursor of this belief, which appears in the oldest Christian texts<sup>50</sup>, such as those of Pseudo-Barnabas<sup>51</sup>, Hermas<sup>52</sup> or Clement of Alexandria<sup>53</sup>. Origen stated in his work *On the First Principles* that specific angels were assigned to individual members of the Church to look after them<sup>54</sup>. Ambrose, referring to Eliseus sought by the king of Syria, states that the prophet asked that the eyes of his servant Giezi, who was frightened at the sight of the numerous Syrian army, be opened:

“Because”, he said, “there are more with us than against us”. To prove this he prayed that the eyes of Giezi be opened, and, when they were opened, he [Giezi] saw countless hosts of angels (*vidit angelorum milia*) (cf. 2Kings 6:12-17). You understand, then, that the servants of Christ are more guarded by those (*hi custodiant*) who are invisible than by those who are visible. But they also, if they guard you (*custodiunt vestris*), guard [you because they are] called by your prayers (*custodiunt orationibus advocati*)<sup>55</sup>.

Angels therefore come to the aid of people when they ask them to do so. A similar theme and reference to Eliseus also appears in the letter to Sister Marcellina. Ambrose confirms the belief in guardian angels when he once again mentions the servant Giezi, who saw “saw countless hosts of angels (*innumeros exercitus angelorum*)”<sup>56</sup>. It is the same with us,

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. M.C. Paczkowski, *Interpretacja angelologiczna Rdz 6,1-4 w patrystyce przednicejskiej*, CT 83/4 (2013) p. 153.

<sup>50</sup> The subject of guardian angels appearing in the writings of the early centuries of the Church is addressed in: J. Daniélou, *Aniolowie i ich misja*, tr. K. Kubaszczyk, Warsaw – Ząbki 2006, p. 103-123.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *Epistula Barnabae* XVIII 1.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Pastor Hermae* V 1-4.

<sup>53</sup> Clemens Alexandrinus, *Eclogae propheticae* 41-48.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Origenes, *De principiis* I 8, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 75a, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ambrosius, *Ep.* 77, 11, FCNT 26, p. 380.

although we cannot see them, we feel that they are present (*nos etsi eos videre non possumus sentimus tamen*). Our eyes were closed as long as the bodies of the saints lay hidden under cover. The Lord has opened our eyes; we have seen His troops (*videmus auxilia*) which have so often protected us (*sumus saepe defensi*); formerly, we did not see them, although we had them (*non videbamus haec sed habebamus tamen*)<sup>57</sup>.

The guardian angel also looked after the imprisoned Peter: “The Church prayed for him, but the Apostle in prison slept - which is proof that he was not afraid. An angel (*missus est angelus*) was sent to awaken the sleeping man; through him Peter, led out of prison for the time being, avoided death (cf. Acts 12:3-10)”<sup>58</sup>. The ministry of guardian angels is thus manifold: they guard people, come to their aid in times of need, defend them from dangers, in a word, they are called upon to be constantly present with them.

The angelology presented in St. Ambrose’s letters cannot be said to be complete, for these are occasional statements, sometimes very brief and perfunctory, but they are enough to convince us that the bishop believes in the real world of angels. They were called by God to fulfil specific tasks with regard to Him and people. It is certainly interesting to note the passages that speak of guardian angels acting as protectors, both of a particular human community and of an individual person. It should also be added that when Ambrose speaks of angels and their tasks with regard to God and people, he most often refers to examples from Scripture. It undoubtedly constitutes for him the foundation of his pastoral teaching.

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