



Art of the day:

St. Michael, Lucca, Italy

Thousands of people are standing in the square outside of the church. It's a breezy day at the end of September, but warm and sunny, and everyone is in a holiday mood. Old women are murmuring prayers. Little children try to get loose from their mamas and run about, but the older children are hushed, waiting. You are waiting too.

Suddenly, at a sign from an altar boy stationed at the great door to the Church of Saint Michael, everyone falls to his knees. It is the consecration of the Mass. The priest inside the church, packed with worshipers on this great feast day, is calling upon the Holy Spirit, to bless the bread and wine. You start to count, in your mind. It won't be long now.

The moment comes.

Inside, in the sanctuary, the priest has said the great words: HOC EST ENIM CORPUS MEUM – FOR THIS IS MY BODY, and he raises the host, which is now the Body, the Blood, the Soul, and the Divinity of Jesus Christ. The altar boy rings the bell, but that is not all. In the tower above you, the bell begins to toll, and everyone looks up – and fathers put

their small children on their shoulders and point to the top of the church, whispering, “Look, look! Saint Michael is moving his wings!”

For high above you, at the pinnacle, stands a statue of Saint Michael the Archangel, and sure enough, his wings are moving back and forth, as if to say, “See, I also know that Jesus Christ is here among you.”

Oh, it isn't a miracle. The miracle is what is happening at Mass. But how can a statue move its wings?

The man who sculpted the figure of the archangel, to stand at the top of the church of Saint Michael, in the city of Lucca, in northern Italy, knew that he had better do something special for the wings. You see, the statue was so high off the ground, unless he made Michael very big, you wouldn't be able to see him clearly from far away. So Saint Michael is big – he is thirteen feet tall. Imagine somebody nine or



ten feet tall, whose head would brush up against the ceiling in your living room. That person would be a midget, a dwarf, compared with this Saint Michael. Now then, a thirteen foot high Saint Michael is going to have enormous wings. It would look silly otherwise. But what happens when the wind would hit those wings, the high winds blowing from the sea to the west? They

might crack. And what good would be a statue of Saint Michael, with stumps where his wings should have been?

So the sculptor made the wings *flexible*. He made them of bronze, which doesn't crack, and he attached them to the body of the statue by means of metal rods. That way, when the wind came, the wings would be able to take the force; the rods acted as a kind of cushion.

It meant something else, too. They attached levers to the rods, extending down into the top story of the church. Someone could then be in a little chamber, up in the loft, working the wings by moving the levers. And once a year, on the feast of Saint Michael, that is what somebody would do, much to the delight of everyone, especially the children, and Saint Michael would flap his wings!

You will notice two other things about this big statue. Saint Michael is holding a long green spear in his right hand, pointing down, and a green globe in his left hand, held high. They are green because they are not made of marble – something skinny like that spear, if it was only made of stone, might not be able to survive the bad weather over many winters. They are made of bronze. The globe is a sign of power and authority. If you are holding a globe, it means that you have the whole earth in your hand, in your power – because, as

everybody knew, the earth is round. Saint Michael is holding the spear, because that is the weapon he is going to use at the end of time, to thrust Satan back into hell forever. Saint Michael is a warrior.

It's good to remember that. Most of the time these days, when you see a picture of an angel, it looks like he's a girl with long hair, playing a harp. That is not how the people of Israel thought of angels, and it is not what Jesus is talking about, either, when he says that he could, if he wished, call upon twelve legions of angels to protect him from Pontius Pilate and the Romans.

Legions are made up of soldiers – fighters. The word *angel* means *messenger* or *herald*: think of a general giving a colonel a message to deliver, or saying to him, "Take your men to the other side of that hill, and when you see the enemy cross the river, pour down on them from the west, while I block them from the east."

Michael is the chief of all the angels, and I think he has the best and most powerful name of all the angels, too. His name in Hebrew is *Mi-che-EL* – say the *ch* like a very hard *hhh*. It is a question: "Who is like God?" We don't have to be told the answer. No one is like God.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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