

DAY 1



What is the Supernatural?



By Genevieve Cunningham

In today's lesson, we are going to learn about supernatural realities in the light of truth, as revealed to us by Christ and His Church.

It is Sunday. The parish priest has just finished his homily. He steps away from the lectern, and takes his place in front of the celebrant's chair. You, along with the rest of the congregation, rise to recite the Nicene Creed. There is banging and thudding of kneelers, shuffling of feet, and scattered coughing.

"I believe," Father begins, and everyone joins him.

"...in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible **and invisible.**"

Pause right there.

You have just affirmed personal belief in created things that are not observable to the human eye, things most of us have never encountered or experienced, and most likely never will in this earthly life.

It is easy to overlook the deeper meaning behind these words of the Creed. Many of us recite them without giving intense thought to what they contain. We simply accept them as true, and then direct our attention to the next part of the Holy Mass.

We ought to ask ourselves: why is belief in the invisible so essential to our Catholic faith that we profess it in the Creed?

It's important because the supernatural is a real part of our world. It's no less real just because it's invisible. The Creed reminds us that both the material and spiritual exist together as God's creation.

Since these invisible things, which we affirm by faith, are indeed a real part of our world—and, as we will see, something that

influences us every day—we ought to have an understanding of them.

That is why this series will focus on that particular, mysterious article of the Creed: the invisible which we are bound by faith to acknowledge.

What is the Supernatural?

When we speak about invisible realities, we don't usually refer to them as "the invisible." Instead, the words most commonly used are "supernatural" or occasionally "paranormal." Since there are varying opinions as to what is meant by "the supernatural," we will begin by defining our terms.

"Supernatural" originates in the Latin root words *super* (which means "above, beyond, in addition") and *natura* (which is derived from *natus* "to be born" and refers to the material world).

Then there is the word "preternatural." The Latin word *praeter* translates as "beyond," so "preternatural" means "beyond nature."

Theologically speaking, the word "supernatural" refers most properly to God—who is above all created things—while the word "preternatural" refers most properly to angelic characteristics that are above the nature of fallen man. For the purposes of this series' title we have allowed the word "supernatural" to also connote preternatural realities, as it does in everyday usage, so that we can address the Church's teaching on angels, demons, and disembodied souls.

In short, "the supernatural" refers to realities that do not belong to man or the material world by nature. These realities include active living beings that we can't naturally see, hear, or touch.

Yes, Supernatural Beings Exist

As human beings, we experience everything in this life through a physical body. This makes the very concept of a bodiless creature seem either fascinating, irrelevant, or preposterous.

Interestingly enough, most of us are quite comfortable with the idea of God being a pure spirit; it seems fitting for an all-knowing, all-powerful deity to be mysterious, elusive, and invisible. But the idea of fellow creatures existing without bodies—without physical senses—without fluctuating human emotions—is disconcerting for most people.

Yet it shouldn't be, if we really think about it. We ourselves are a composite of body and spirit.

*The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal **and** spiritual... The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body... spirit and matter... [form] a single nature.*
—Catechism of the Catholic Church 362

Man is unique in that he "straddles" two domains: the material and the spiritual. These realities are united in us through the mysterious and beautiful creativity of God. We are unique among God's creatures and this uniqueness gives a particular dignity to mankind.

But we are not alone among God's creatures. We are not even first. He created immaterial, invisible beings before us.

How do we know that they exist? These invisible beings have revealed themselves to certain men and women throughout the course of history. But their witness alone is not the foundation for our belief.

We believe in spiritual beings—who, like ourselves, have been created by God—because He has revealed their existence to us. How has He revealed them? Primarily through Sacred Scripture and Church teaching, which tell us that the realm of creation is made up of three categories:

*Catholic tradition has identified three great divisions of creation, all directed to the Most Holy Trinity: **the world of purely material creation**, including the animal kingdom; **the world of man**, defined as beings of both matter and spirit, body and soul; and **the world of the angels**, who are spiritual persons of intellect, memory, and will, like ourselves, but have **no material nature**.*
—Fr. John Horgan

Although we human beings have a spiritual soul, it does not give our bodily senses the natural ability to perceive the supernatural. Hence its “invisibility.”

In addition to this, the beings in this invisible realm (both good and bad) are not able to manifest themselves to us unless God permits them to do so. They may be superior to us in nature and abilities, but they are still mere creatures who are subject to the will of their Creator, as we are.

In all cases, experiences of the supernatural can work for our good—even if they involve brushes with the devil—so long as we keep our focus on God and lead good lives.

As St. Paul writes:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God...
—Romans 8:28

Correcting Our Perspective on the Supernatural

As we begin this study on supernatural realities, there is something we must be careful to avoid. *We must not approach this subject with vain curiosity or superstitious fear.* As with all aspects of God's creation, we should approach these realities with great humility and respect. Doing otherwise has a harmful effect on our spiritual lives.

If the idea of the “supernatural” continues to feel like an object of curiosity, remember that the Church itself, as a divine institution, is “supernatural.” We encounter supernatural realities in the sacraments—that is, we receive supernatural life through them. The more we increase in faith, hope, and charity, the more our souls are filled with supernatural life, which is what we need to enter heaven. So we shouldn't think of the “supernatural” as being foreign to us.

Knowing all this, how can we make sure that our personal attitude toward invisible beings is solidly informed by our Catholic faith? We will examine the answer in tomorrow's lesson.

Coming in Day 2...

The Catholic Attitude Toward Things Unseen

