

What are the choirs of angels?

A whole book could be devoted to this important question. But for now, however, we will try to give a brief overview that will cover the basics. Recall that Pope John Paul II. affirmed the existence of the angelic choirs in his General Audience on August 6, 1986, when he stated, “We can deduce [from Sacred Scripture that the angels], as it were grouped together in society, are divided into orders and grades, corresponding to the measure of their perfection and to the tasks entrusted to them. The ancient authors and the liturgy itself speak also of the “angelic choirs” (nine, according to Dionysius the Areopagite).”

Before going further, we should know that the word “choir” is a modern designation for the nine fundamental groups of angels. In classical theology they spoke of nine “orders”! Here is the beginning of the term “holy orders”, that means, the angels had their “ordination” or ministerial power from grace, indeed, from the light of glory! The word “hierarchy” was originally applied to the angels and only in a secondary sense to the “hierarchy of the Church”. It literally refers to the ordering of the sacred ministries in the service of God. These ministries cover every aspect of the life of the City of God, which includes both angels and men.

The whole point of this discussion about the make up of the angelic choirs, then, is to stress the fact that the angels are organized along the lines of a highly structured unit of sacred ministers. Unfortunately, many have the false impression that the holy angels are just a big bunch of faceless persons that occupy space in an anonymous crowd. Rather, each angel is not only a unique person, but also someone who fulfills an irreplaceable role in a tightly knit organization.

It makes good sense, then, that the angels would be organized and divided into different groups according to their duties and responsibilities, so that they could carry out God’s will in an orderly and systematic way. Because just as in any big city, not everyone can be on the city council, so too, in the heavenly City of Jerusalem there must be a distinction of duties and responsibilities with a clear cut chain of command.

This difficulty with any paradigm taken from human society, is that all human beings are essentially equal and that all the tasks are formally proportionate to our nature. In the world of the spirits this is not the case. The very purpose of the hierarchy is the assimilation of sanctified mankind to God through the light of grace. The higher angels see God and receive His light and power in an intensity and measure that vastly exceeds the capacity of the lower angels, to say nothing of mankind upon earth. In virtue of their greater light and vision, the higher angels have a more perfect understanding of the Divine Plan which embraces the entire universe from its first to last moment. Moreover the angels have been created and elevated by God to be His heavenly, sacred ministers in the execution of this plan.

All of this discussion, though, raises for us the question of just how many of these so called choirs of angels there might be? Well, it has been believed since the days of the early Church that there are a total of nine choirs. And the basis for this belief is the fact that we can find the names of nine different choirs revealed to us in various parts of the Bible. The names of the individual choirs, however, are never listed in any kind of sequential order in any one place in the Scriptures, like we can find a detailed list of the names of the Twelve Apostles in the Gospels.

Rather, the names of the different choirs are scattered about in the Scriptures, mainly in the Letters of St. Paul. He mentions eight out of the nine choirs, leaving to the Prophet Isaiah the singular distinction of being the only writer in all of the Bible to mention the Choir of the Seraphim, the highest ranking choir.

The names of the nine choirs, the place where they can be found in the Scriptures, and their traditional ordering are as follows: Seraphim (Is 6:2), Cherubim (Gen 3:24; Ex 25:18ff; Ps 18:10; Ez 10:1-22; Heb 9:5), Thrones (Col 1:16), Dominions (Col 1:16; Eph 1:21; 1 Pt 3:22), Powers (Col 1:16; Eph 1:21; Rom 8:38; 1 Pt 3:22), Principalities (Col 1:16; Eph 1:21; Rom 8:38), Virtues (Eph 1:21, Col 1:16), Archangels (1 Thess 4:16; Jud 9), and Angels (Rom 8:38; 1 Pt 3:22).

In fact, there are three groups of three choirs each of the angels. The common task of all the choirs is our assimilation to the Triune God. The fact that we are created in the imitation and likeness of God, therefore, is the starting point of the angelic mission. St. Thomas points out that this triadic mission of assimilation deals with our sanctification and divinization by grace. This is threefold, as it were in a reverse image of the Trinity. The first transformation is according to the life of grace, and this is ordered to the FATHER. In the upper choir, this is the ministry of the Thrones. The second transformation is through contemplation of the Divine Word in wisdom, which is ordered to the Son, the Word of God; this ministry begins with the Cherubim. The third transformation is through the fire of Divine Love; this begins in the Choir of the Seraphim and is appropriated to the Holy Spirit. This is the ordering of the first and highest hierarchy.

The second and third hierarchies are modeled after this original grouping. Hence, the Dominations—in the suavity of the Holy Spirit—administer, for example, His Gifts under the Seraphim. The Powers carry the sword of battle under the Cherubim in the efficacy of the Word, which is sharper than any two-edged sword, and the Principalities watch over the discreet divisions of the Kingdom of God under the Thrones throughout the universe (In the Apocalypse the throne is the symbol of the power and stability of the Father).

In the third and lowest hierarchy which is focused upon our life in the Church on earth, the Virtues, under the Seraphim and Dominations, in the efficacy of the Holy Spirit order the living life within the Church to perfection in the beauty of the liturgy, in the great charism which manifests the love of God made man. The Archangels, bearing the sword beneath the Cherubim and Powers, defend the Church against her spiritual enemies. And the ninth choir of angels—under the Thrones and Principalities—look after the least units of God Kingdom, the individual human heart and the family, where the life of faith needs to be consolidated and cultivated.

Knowledge about the nine choirs of angels can significantly broaden and widen our horizons about the help that is available to us in the angelic world. Imagine a highly organized and disciplined army of angels that are ready and willing to come to our assistance at a moment's notice any time of the day or night. The only thing holding them back is our lack of interest and devotion to them. For this is what the Lord has given to us for our protection and defense against the onslaughts of the world, the flesh, and the devil in these dangerous times in which we live.

God surely did not reveal the existence of the angelic choirs to us so that we could simply ignore them. For they form an important part of His providential plan for the government of the universe. He therefore expects us to call upon their help and to take full advantage of the tremendous powers of light and strength that they have at their disposal. For we need their help more today than ever before.

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