

# A Beginner's Guide to the Heavenly Hierarchy: The Nine Choirs of Angels

## Introduction: Understanding the Angelic Nature

Welcome to the intricate and beautiful world of angels. To begin our exploration, we must first answer a foundational question: "What is an Angel?" The very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, tells us that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This reveals that God created two distinct realms: the heavens, which are spiritual, and the earth, which is material. Angels are the inhabitants of the spiritual realm—they are purely spiritual beings, without physical bodies, who exist to carry out God's will.

The term for what they *do* is often used to describe what they *are*. St. Augustine noted that the word 'angel' comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means "messenger." This describes their primary office, not their nature. An angel's proper name is spirit; they are called 'angels' because they bring a message from God.

It's crucial to clarify a common misconception: human beings do not become angels when they die. Humans who are in heaven are called saints. Angels are an entirely different order of being, created by God to be pure spirits from the beginning. To suggest a human could become an angel is like saying a dog could become a grizzly bear; they are simply different kinds of beings.

The angelic world is not a random collection of spirits but a beautifully structured and orderly reality. This guide will explore that divine order, known as the nine choirs of angels, to better understand their roles in God's creation.

## 1. The Three Spheres: A Map of Heaven's Order

The angelic world is traditionally divided into an orderly structure of nine "choirs." These nine choirs are further grouped into three distinct spheres, with each sphere defined by its primary function and its proximity to God. This hierarchy helps us understand the different ways angels participate in God's governance of the universe.

The three spheres provide a clear map of heaven's order:

- **The First Sphere:** Angels whose sole purpose is to contemplate and glorify God directly.
- **The Second Sphere:** Angels who govern the laws of the cosmos and the created order.
- **The Third Sphere:** Angels who are most involved with humanity and God's plan for salvation.

Let us now explore the first and highest sphere, where the angels exist in the most direct presence of the Divine.

## 2. The First Sphere: Contemplating the Divine

The three choirs of the First Sphere are the closest to God. They are not directly involved with humanity but are instead exclusively focused on knowing, loving, and glorifying the perfection of God for all eternity.

**2.1 Seraphim** The Seraphim are the highest choir of angels. Their name means "**burning ones**," reflecting their vocation: to contemplate the fire of God's love. In the vision of the prophet Isaiah, the Seraphim surround God's throne, on fire with love and continually singing the hymn, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts," a prayer that has been adopted into the liturgy of the Mass.

**2.2 Cherubim** The second choir is the Cherubim, whose name means something akin to "**all-knowing ones**." Their primary function is to contemplate and glorify God's infinite wisdom and knowledge. They exist to rejoice in the perfection of what God knows.

**2.3 Thrones** The Thrones represent the stability of God's power and authority. As their name suggests, they glorify the fact that God reigns as a supreme and sovereign King. Their vocation is to contemplate the unshakable foundation of His rule over all creation.

Having looked at the angels who contemplate God, we now turn to those who govern His creation.

## 3. The Second Sphere: Governing the Cosmos

The angels of the Second Sphere are tasked with overseeing the "principal causes in creation." They maintain the orderly laws of the universe that God established, ensuring that the cosmos functions according to His divine plan.

**3.1 Dominations** The Dominations are concerned with the government of the universe. They act as the "managers" of the angelic world, directing the lower choirs of angels to ensure God's commands are carried out. They understand the divine order and illuminate the angels below them, sharing God's plan for creation.

**3.2 Virtues** The Virtues are tasked with governing causality and the laws of nature. They are the instruments of God's power in the physical world. To make this concept more tangible, one might speculate that there could be an "angel of gravity" or an "angel of fire" within this choir, tasked with overseeing the very laws that keep our world in motion.

**3.3 Powers** The final choir in this sphere is the Powers. Their special task is to fight against the attacks that demons make upon the created order. While demons seek to introduce chaos and hatred into the world God made, the Powers work to protect creation and keep things in line with God's will.

From this cosmic level of governance, we now descend to the final sphere, where the angels interact directly with us.

## 4. The Third Sphere: Messengers to Humanity

These are the angels most deeply involved in human affairs and salvation history, making them the most familiar to us from Scripture and tradition. Their work directly impacts our lives and our journey toward God.

**4.1 Principalities** The Principalities are the guardians of particular nations, cities, and peoples. They are assigned to protect and guide large groups and cultures. The Book of Daniel, for instance, mentions a "prince of Persia," understood to be a principality overseeing that nation.

**4.2 Archangels** The Archangels are the "**chief messengers**," tasked with delivering God's most important announcements to humanity. Scripture names three of these powerful messengers, and their names reveal their unique missions.

Name	Meaning	Primary Role
Michael	"Who is like God?"	Prince of the angelic armies; protector of the Church
Gabriel	"Strength of God"	Proclaims God's most important messages
Raphael	"Healing of God"	Brings God's healing to humanity

**4.3 Angels** This is the lowest and most numerous choir. The Angels are the messengers for God's everyday business with humanity. Whenever Scripture mentions an "angel of the Lord" without a specific name, it is likely an angel from this choir. Most importantly, our Guardian Angels come from this rank. Every believer is assigned a Guardian Angel whose entire life mission is to help them get to heaven.

After this journey through the celestial ranks, we can now reflect on the profound beauty this order reveals.

## 5. Conclusion: The Beauty of Divine Order

The nine choirs of angels reveal a universe that is divinely ordered, intricate, and purposeful—not random or haphazard. This heavenly hierarchy is a magnificent reflection of God's wisdom and His desire for His creatures to participate in the governance of His creation.

From the Seraphim, who burn with love contemplating God directly, down to our own Guardian Angels, who provide personal aid in our daily spiritual battles, every angel has a role in this grand, cooperative plan. This structure invites us to appreciate the vast, unseen spiritual reality around us and to remember the many helpers God has given us on our journey.