

The Angelus

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Choirs of Angels? Part One

I write this article as the Church prepares to observe the feast of St Michael and All Angels on September 29. Because one of our members attends a Bible study with women associated with one of Akron's megachurches where the subject of angelology has been discussed, the subject has come up during coffee hour the last couple of Sunday's. Some elucidation seems in order.

First, what do we mean by *choirs* of angels. We most often associate the word *choir* with a collection of singers who assist and enhance worship in a church. The term is also used in ecclesiastical architecture to refer to the area of a church where choristers sit between the *nave* (where the people sit) and the *chancel* (where the clergy sit) before the high altar. But the term *choir* can be used to refer to groups, divisions or ranks of persons or things in general without reference to singing or music or churches.

Second, what do we mean by *angels*. The existence of spiritual beings we commonly call *angels* is assumed in the Bible rather than explained. Many opine that the choirs of angels were created along with the heavens and the earth *in the beginning* as described in *Genesis*. As St Paul notes concerning Christ's role in creation as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, *By him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him*. (*Colossians* 1:16) The Scriptures also suggest that the unseen realm inhabited by these spiritual beings is a very busy place; that it is all around us; that we experience the effects of this unseen spiritual activity on the visible world of space and time whether we recognize it or not. We see it reflected in the rise and fall of nations and empires, in the life and growth of the Church, the Kingdom of God on earth, as it proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world overshadowed by the darkness of death, in the lives of individuals, and indeed in our own lives. The Scriptures record instances where prophets, priests, and kings, and even ordinary folk, have been given a glimpse of this unseen realm, a glimpse into heaven itself. Though we cannot describe better than the prophets and apostles the nature of these beings, a nature radically different from our own or that of anything else on earth, they are referred to in the Scriptures in such earthly terms as *winds*, *spirits, flames of fire* and as men. (*Psalm* 104:4; *Hebrews* 1:7; see also *Psalm* 18:10; *Ezekiel* 1:4-14; 10:8-22) As we will explore briefly below, the Scriptures also suggest there is a great deal of diversity within this unseen realm in terms of nature and function. These personal spiritual beings are active in the affairs of this world "behind the scenes," at least from our both limited and earthly perspective. They all serve as God's ministers; and as we read in both the Old and the New Testaments, by God's appointment, angels proper specifically minister to earthly beings made in the image of God to be the children of God, specifically His *elect* or chosen.

But we must always keep angels, along with all heavenly and earthly creatures, in their proper place subordinate to the Triune God and His sovereign will and purpose. (*Romans* 8:38; *1 Corinthians* 13:1; *Galatians* 1:8; *Colossians* 2:18; *Revelation* 19:10; 22:9) As in all matters of faith and practice, the Church must base its doctrine of angels and the spiritual realm upon the Word of God written in both the Old and New Testaments. Angels are not gods or minor gods; they should never be worshipped or invoked as such.

Perhaps the most influential extra-biblical authorities on angelology were Dionysius (or Denys) the Areopagite, an anonymous writer erroneously identified with the disciple and fellow-worker of the Apostle Paul referred to in the New Testament (*Acts* 17:34), Gregory I, Bishop of Rome, and Thomas Aquinas, Dominican theologian of the later middle ages. The scheme they developed is based, to a degree, on the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, though most Anglican theologians after the Reformation assume this angelic or spiritual hierarchy, they caution that pseudo-Dionysius' elaborate angelology cannot be required as articles of faith necessary for salvation. (See Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion bound with The Book of Common Prayer) Hymn 599, *Ye watchers and ye holy ones*, also refers to this spiritual or angelic hierarchy.

According to common tradition. There are nine choirs or ranks of spiritual beings referred to generically as *angels* arranged hierarchically into three groups of ranks relative to their proximity to the Divine Presence—the Most Holy Trinity. These are the elect and holy angels (*1 Timothy* 5:21)

as opposed to rebellious and unclean spirits. The highest group consists of *Cherubim*, *Seraphim*, and *Thrones*. The second consists of *Dominions*, *Virtues*, and *Powers*. The third consists of *Principalities*, *Archangels*, and *Angels*. We find the clearest biblical references to the first two of the nine choirs, the Seraphim and Cherubim, and to the lowest two, the Archangels and Angels.

At the top of the angelic hierarchy are the *Seraphim*, whose name means "burning ones." The Prophet Isaiah received a vision of the LORD on His throne flanked by these "fiery ones" associated with God's holiness and the purification required to enter God's presence.

> *In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory…. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.* (*Isaiah* 6:1-3)

The Apostle John refers to similar creatures in his vision recorded in chapter four of The Apocalypse or Book of Revelation. *And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.* (*Revelation* 4:8)

The second choir within the first of three ranks of angels are the *Cherubim*, which figure prominently in the Prophet Ezekeil's visions, which resemble the four creatures of St John's *Revelation* functioning as *Seraphim* described above. (See esp *Ezekiel* 10; *Revelation* 4:6-11) Contrary to our common image taken from post-Renaissance art, a *cherub* is one of heaven's "mighty ones." As we read at the end of the third chapter of *Genesis*, after the fall of man in the garden of Eden, the LORD *drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life*. (*Genesis* 3:24) *Cherubim* function as the guardians and gate-keepers of God's presence. In an apparent departure from the Second Commandment, The Book of Exodus tells us that God directed Moses to include images of *cherubim* both on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant and woven into the fabric of the curtains of the tabernacle in which the Ark of the Covenant was kept. (*Exodus* 26:1) On at least one occasion, Moses heard the voice of the LORD coming from between the two *cherubim* positioned over the Ark. (*Numbers* 7:89) After Solomon had a temple built to house the Ark, he included images of two huge *cherubim* standing on either side of the Ark. (*1 Kings* 6:23-28) We do not know precisely what these *cherubim* looked like, other than they had a pair of large wings. For the Israelites, the Ark was the most powerful earthly manifestation of God's presence. The gold-carved cherubim represent heaven, where God dwells among living cherubim. The Book of Psalms repeatedly evokes the image of God enthroned upon or above the cherubim, as does the Prophet Ezekiel in his visions. This cherubic imagery is also part King Hezekiah' invocation during the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians, *O LORD God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth. LORD, bow down thine ear, and hear: open, LORD, thine eyes, and see….* (*2 Kings* 19:15) The Song of the Three Holy Children, sung as a canticle at Morning Prayer, also praises the ONE *that beholdest the depths, and dwellest between the cherubim*. (1928 BCP, 11)

The following ranks and choirs of angels are only mentioned in Scripture. Saint Paul mentions them in his epistles. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul tells us that God raised Christ from the dead *and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.* (*Ephesians* 1:18, 20-21) The Archangels and Angels, the two lowest choirs or ranks, enter most directly as God appointed mediators between God and man; and we will examine these in the next instalment in November.

Schedule for October 2026

Sunday, October 4, Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity
9:30am: Morning Prayer
10:00am: Holy Communion

Sunday, October 11, Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity
9:30am: Morning Prayer
10:00am: Holy Communion

Sunday, October 18, St Luke to Evangelist (observed)
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity (commemorated)
9:30am: Morning Prayer
10:00am: Holy Communion

Sunday, October 25, Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity
9:30am: Morning Prayer
10:00am: Holy Communion

Wednesday, October 28, SS Simon & Jude, Apostles
6:15pm Holy Communion