

# Angelic Hierarchy

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Thomas Aquinas, in the Summa Theologica, organizes angels into three hierarchies, each with three choirs, based on their proximity to God and functions. The following information was compiled from Grok and the NIV version of the Bible.

## Contents

- Executive Summary ..... 2
- First Hierarchy ..... 3
  - Seraphim ..... 4
  - Cherubim ..... 5
  - Thrones ..... 6
- Second Hierarchy ..... 7
  - Dominions ..... 8
  - Virtues ..... 9
  - Powers ..... 10
- Third Hierarchy ..... 11
  - Principalities ..... 12
  - Archangels ..... 13
    - Commonly Recognized Archangels ..... 13
  - Angels ..... 14

## Executive Summary

### 1. First Hierarchy

- Closest hierarchy to God, focused on contemplation

#### 1.1. Seraphim

Closest to God, their role is to burn with divine charity and inspire lower orders. They also perpetually sing praises to God.

#### 1.2. Cherubim

Their role emphasizes knowing and understanding divine mysteries. Often misunderstood as sweet, childlike beings but are guardians of sacred space.

#### 1.3. Thrones

Their role involves upholding divine order with their all-seeing, all-knowing nature. They are "wheels within wheels", full of eyes, as described in Ezekiel's vision.

### 2. Second Hierarchy

- Governing cosmic order and divine will

#### 2.1. Dominions

Their role is to maintain cosmic order and ensure that divine plans are carried out efficiently. They oversee the lower angels.

#### 2.2. Virtues

Their work ensures harmony in creation under God's will. These angels govern the natural world.

#### 2.3. Powers

Their role involves vigilance and strength, defending creation against chaos and rebellion. These angels stand at the threshold between Heaven and Earth and guard Heaven's gates, preventing demonic forces from entering.

### 3. Third Hierarchy

- Interacting with humanity

#### 3.1. Principalities

Their role involves broad oversight of collective human affairs. They guide and protect the leaders of nations, ensuring that divine will is reflected in the governance of the world.

#### 3.2. Archangels

Serve as God's chief messengers – most famous are Michael & Gabriel.

#### 3.3. Angels

Often called guardian angels, these angels are assigned to individual humans to guide, protect, and inspire them toward salvation.

## First Hierarchy

Closest to God, focused on contemplation

Thomas Aquinas describes the First Hierarchy of angels as the highest of three angelic hierarchies, closest to God and primarily focused on contemplating and adoring Him. This hierarchy includes three choirs, each with distinct roles reflecting their proximity to divine perfection:

1. **Seraphim:** The highest choir, meaning "burning ones," they are consumed with intense love for God. They perpetually worship and contemplate His essence, encircling His throne and praising Him. Their role is to burn with divine charity and inspire lower orders.

Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

*Isaiah 6:2-3*

2. **Cherubim:** Meaning "fullness of knowledge," they excel in divine wisdom and intellectual contemplation. They behold God's truth with profound clarity, reflecting His light to others. Their role emphasizes knowing and understanding divine mysteries.
3. **Thrones:** Symbolizing God's justice, they serve as the "seat" of divine judgment. They contemplate and manifest God's will, channeling His authority and stability to lower hierarchies. Their role involves upholding divine order.

The First Hierarchy's angels are purely spiritual, focused on direct communion with God, and mediate divine light and love to the lower hierarchies. Their functions are primarily contemplative, setting them apart from the governing and ministerial roles of the second and third hierarchies.

## Seraphim

Burn with love for God, highest in devotion.

**Seraphim** are the highest choir of angels in the first hierarchy, closest to God. Their name, derived from Hebrew meaning "burning ones," signifies their intense love and zeal for God. They are characterized by:

- **Role:** Seraphim are consumed with divine love, perpetually contemplating and adoring God's essence. They encircle His throne, offering ceaseless praise (inspired by Isaiah 6:2-3, where they cry "Holy, holy, holy").
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual beings, they possess the greatest intensity of charity among angels, reflecting their proximity to divine perfection.
- **Attributes:** Their "burning" nature symbolizes their ardent devotion and purification role, inspiring lower angels and humans toward God.
- **Position:** Above Cherubim and Thrones, they lead the angelic hierarchy in love-driven worship, mediating divine light to others.

Aquinas emphasizes their primacy in the spiritual order, unmatched in their fervent union with God.

## **Cherubim**

**Excel in knowledge and divine wisdom.**

**Cherubim** are the second choir of angels in the First Hierarchy, just below the Seraphim and above the Thrones. Their name, derived from Hebrew meaning "fullness of knowledge" or "wisdom," reflects their primary attribute. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Cherubim excel in contemplating divine truths and possess an unparalleled depth of intellectual insight into God's mysteries. They behold God's essence with clarity, reflecting His wisdom and illuminating lower angelic orders and humanity.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual beings, they are characterized by their extraordinary knowledge, second only to the Seraphim's burning love. Their intellectual capacity allows them to understand and communicate divine realities.
- **Attributes:** Aquinas associates them with the vision of God's truth, emphasizing their role in grasping and sharing divine wisdom. They are often depicted symbolically with multiple faces or eyes (e.g., Ezekiel 10:1-22), signifying their all-seeing knowledge.
- **Position:** Within the First Hierarchy, Cherubim rank below the Seraphim, whose focus is divine love, but above the Thrones, who manifest God's justice. Their primary function is contemplative, centered on knowing God rather than governing or ministering like lower hierarchies.

Aquinas underscores the Cherubim's role as bearers of divine wisdom, mediating God's light to inspire and guide others in the angelic and human realms.

## Thrones

Bear God's justice, serving as His seat of judgment.

**Thrones** are the third choir of angels in the First Hierarchy, ranking below the Seraphim and Cherubim. They are part of the highest angelic order, closest to God, and primarily focused on contemplating and manifesting divine attributes. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Thrones symbolize God's justice and serve as the "seat" or foundation of divine judgment. They reflect God's authority and stability, channeling His will to lower angelic hierarchies and creation. Their role involves upholding divine order and supporting the execution of God's plan.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual, immaterial beings, Thrones possess a profound connection to God's presence. They are characterized by their steadfastness and their function as bearers of divine righteousness.
- **Attributes:** Thrones are associated with stability and serenity, often depicted as fiery wheels or with many eyes (e.g., Ezekiel 1:15-21), symbolizing their role in overseeing divine governance and their constant awareness of God's will. Their contemplation of God's justice makes them a conduit for divine order.
- **Position:** In the First Hierarchy, Thrones rank below the Seraphim (focused on love) and Cherubim (focused on knowledge), but they hold a critical role in bridging divine contemplation with the governance of lower hierarchies. Their work is primarily contemplative, centered on God's justice, rather than direct interaction with the world, like the lower hierarchies.

Aquinas emphasizes the Thrones' role as mediators of God's authority, ensuring that divine justice and order are reflected throughout the angelic ranks and the created universe.

## Second Hierarchy

### Governing cosmic order and divine will

Thomas Aquinas describes the **Second Hierarchy** of angels as the middle tier of the three angelic hierarchies, positioned below the First Hierarchy (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones) and above the Third Hierarchy (Principalities, Archangels, Angels). This hierarchy focuses on governing the cosmos and executing divine will, bridging the contemplative focus of the First Hierarchy with the ministerial duties of the Third. It consists of three choirs:

1. **Dominions** (or Dominations): Dominions regulate the duties of lower angels, ensuring the execution of God's commands across the universe. They oversee the activities of other angelic orders, directing divine will with authority and wisdom. Their role is to maintain cosmic order and ensure that divine plans are carried out efficiently.
2. **Virtues**: Virtues are responsible for controlling natural forces and enabling miracles in the physical world. They govern the movements of celestial bodies (e.g., stars, planets) and facilitate divine interventions that manifest God's power, such as extraordinary events or signs. Their work ensures harmony in creation under God's will.
3. **Powers** (or Authorities): Powers protect the universe from evil forces and maintain spiritual balance. They combat demonic influences, guard the divine order, and ensure that God's providence prevails. Their role involves vigilance and strength, defending creation against chaos and rebellion.

The Second Hierarchy's angels act as intermediaries, translating the contemplative insights of the First Hierarchy into active governance. They focus on implementing God's will in the cosmos, distinct from the First Hierarchy's direct adoration of God and the Third Hierarchy's direct interaction with humanity.

## Dominions

Regulate angelic duties, overseeing lower orders.

**Dominions** (or Dominations) are the first choir of angels in the Second Hierarchy, positioned below the First Hierarchy (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones) and above the Virtues and Powers. Their role is centered on governing and executing divine will across the cosmos. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Dominions regulate the duties of lower angelic orders, ensuring that God's commands are carried out efficiently throughout creation. They act as administrators, overseeing the tasks of angels in the Second and Third Hierarchies to maintain cosmic order and alignment with divine providence.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual beings, Dominions possess authority and wisdom, enabling them to direct the activities of other angels. They channel divine instructions, ensuring that the universe operates according to God's plan.
- **Attributes:** Their name reflects their role in "dominating" or governing angelic functions, not in a coercive sense but as coordinators of divine harmony. They are associated with leadership and the orderly execution of God's will.
- **Position:** Within the Second Hierarchy, Dominions rank above Virtues (who govern natural forces) and Powers (who combat evil). Their focus is on supervisory governance, distinct from the First Hierarchy's contemplation or the Third Hierarchy's direct ministry to humans.

Aquinas emphasizes the Dominions' role as divine overseers, ensuring that angelic activities align with God's universal plan, bridging the contemplative and ministerial functions of the angelic hierarchies.



## Virtues

Control natural forces, enabling miracles.

**Virtues** are the second choir of angels in the Second Hierarchy, positioned below the Dominions and above the Powers, within the angelic order beneath the First Hierarchy (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones) and above the Third Hierarchy (Principalities, Archangels, Angels). Their primary role involves governing natural forces and facilitating divine interventions in the material world. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Virtues are responsible for maintaining the order of the physical universe, governing the movements of celestial bodies (e.g., stars, planets) and natural phenomena. They are also tasked with enabling miracles, manifesting God's power through extraordinary events that transcend natural laws, such as healings or divine signs.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual beings, Virtues possess the ability to interact with the material world in a way that reflects divine will. They channel God's strength to ensure harmony in creation and to demonstrate His providence.
- **Attributes:** Their name, "Virtues," signifies their strength and capacity to execute God's mighty works. They are associated with divine energy and the power to effect change in the physical realm, serving as instruments of God's glory.
- **Position:** Within the Second Hierarchy, Virtues rank below Dominions (who oversee angelic duties) but above Powers (who combat evil forces). Their focus is on active governance of creation, distinct from the First Hierarchy's contemplation or the Third Hierarchy's direct ministry to humans.

Aquinas emphasizes the Virtues' role as mediators of divine power, ensuring the cosmos operates in accordance with God's will and manifesting His presence through miraculous acts.

## Powers

Protect creation, combat evil forces.

**Powers** (or Authorities) are the third choir of angels in the Second Hierarchy, positioned below the Dominions and Virtues and above the Third Hierarchy (Principalities, Archangels, Angels). Their role centers on maintaining spiritual balance and protecting creation from evil forces. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Powers are tasked with defending the universe against demonic influences and preserving the divine order. They combat malevolent forces that seek to disrupt God's plan, ensuring that creation remains aligned with divine providence. They also oversee the spiritual equilibrium of the cosmos.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual beings, Powers possess strength and vigilance, enabling them to resist and overcome evil. They act as guardians of divine harmony, wielding authority to protect both the spiritual and material realms.
- **Attributes:** Their name reflects their role as "powers" or forces of divine strength, emphasizing their protective and combative functions. They are associated with spiritual warfare, standing as sentinels against chaos and rebellion.
- **Position:** Within the Second Hierarchy, Powers rank below Dominions (who regulate angelic duties) and Virtues (who govern natural forces), focusing on defense and stability rather than the First Hierarchy's contemplation or the Third Hierarchy's direct ministry to humans.

Aquinas highlights the Powers' role as protectors of God's order, actively resisting evil to maintain the integrity of creation and support the execution of divine will.

## Third Hierarchy

### Interacting with humanity

Thomas Aquinas describes the Third Hierarchy of angels as the lowest of the three angelic hierarchies, positioned below the First Hierarchy (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones) and the Second Hierarchy (Dominions, Virtues, Powers). This hierarchy focuses on direct interaction with humanity and the execution of God's will in the material world. It consists of three choirs:

1. **Principalities:** Principalities oversee large groups, such as nations, cities, or communities, guiding their spiritual and temporal welfare. They direct human leaders and institutions toward divine purposes, ensuring societies align with God's plan. **Their role involves broad oversight of collective human affairs.**
2. **Archangels:** **Archangels serve as God's chief messengers**, delivering significant divine revelations or announcements to humanity (e.g., the Annunciation to Mary by Gabriel). They also lead angelic hosts in major spiritual tasks, acting as prominent figures in divine-human communication.
3. **Angels:** The lowest choir, **often called guardian angels, these angels are assigned to individual humans to guide, protect, and inspire them toward salvation.** They minister directly to people, offering spiritual guidance and interceding on their behalf.

The Third Hierarchy's angels are primarily ministerial, focusing on direct engagement with the human world, unlike the contemplative First Hierarchy or the governing Second Hierarchy. They execute God's will at the individual and societal levels, serving as the closest angelic link to humanity.

## Principalities

Guide nations, cities, or communities.

**Principalities** are the first choir of angels in the Third Hierarchy, positioned below the Second Hierarchy (Dominions, Virtues, Powers) and above the Archangels and Angels. Their role focuses on guiding large human collectives and executing divine will in the material world. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Principalities oversee nations, cities, communities, or other large groups, guiding their spiritual and temporal welfare. They influence human leaders, institutions, and societies to align with God's plan, ensuring that collective human affairs reflect divine order.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual beings, Principalities possess authority to direct human societies toward divine purposes. They act as intermediaries, channeling God's guidance to human rulers and communities through inspiration or subtle influence.
- **Attributes:** Their name, derived from "prince" or "ruler," reflects their leadership over large-scale human endeavors. They are associated with governance and the protection of societal structures under God's providence.
- **Position:** Within the Third Hierarchy, Principalities rank above Archangels (who deliver major divine messages) and Angels (who guide individuals). Their focus is on collective human guidance, distinct from the Second Hierarchy's cosmic governance or the First Hierarchy's contemplation.

Aquinas emphasizes the Principalities' role as divine overseers of human societies, ensuring that nations and communities are directed toward God's will and spiritual well-being.

## Archangels

Deliver major divine messages, lead angelic hosts.

**Archangels** are the second choir of angels in the Third Hierarchy, positioned below the Principalities and above the Angels, within the angelic order beneath the First Hierarchy (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones) and Second Hierarchy (Dominions, Virtues, Powers). Their role centers on delivering significant divine messages and leading angelic hosts in key spiritual tasks. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Archangels serve as God's chief messengers, tasked with communicating major divine revelations or announcements to humanity (e.g., the Annunciation to Mary by Gabriel). They also lead angelic hosts in significant spiritual endeavors, such as battles against evil forces or executing pivotal divine missions.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual beings, Archangels possess heightened authority and clarity in their interactions with the human world. They bridge the divine and human realms, delivering God's will with precision and prominence.
- **Attributes:** Their name, meaning "chief angels," reflects their leadership among the lower angelic orders. They are often named in Scripture (e.g., Michael, Gabriel, Raphael), highlighting their prominent roles in divine-human communication and spiritual warfare.
- **Position:** Within the Third Hierarchy, Archangels rank below Principalities (who guide nations and communities) but above Angels (who minister to individuals). Their focus is on major divine interventions, distinct from the Second Hierarchy's cosmic governance or the First Hierarchy's contemplation.

Aquinas emphasizes the Archangels' role as key intermediaries, delivering critical messages and leading angelic efforts to fulfill God's plan in the human realm.

### Commonly Recognized Archangels

Based on traditional Christian theology and Scripture the most commonly recognized Archangels are:

1. **Michael:** Known as a leader of angelic hosts and protector against evil, often depicted in spiritual warfare (e.g., Revelation 12:7-9).
2. **Gabriel:** The messenger of major divine announcements, such as the Annunciation to Mary (e.g., Luke 1:26-38).

## Angels

Serve as guardians and messengers to individuals.

**Angels** are the lowest choir in the Third Hierarchy, positioned below the Principalities and Archangels, and beneath the First Hierarchy (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones) and Second Hierarchy (Dominions, Virtues, Powers). Often referred to as guardian angels, they are the closest angelic order to individual humans, with a primary role in direct ministry. Key aspects include:

- **Role:** Angels serve as guardians and guides to individual humans, inspiring, protecting, and aiding them toward salvation. They intercede on behalf of individuals, offer spiritual guidance, and help align personal actions with God's will through subtle influence.
- **Nature:** As purely spiritual, immaterial beings, Angels possess intellect and free will, with a capacity to interact closely with the human world. Each angel is a unique species, differing in essence, and their knowledge is intuitive, though limited compared to higher orders.
- **Attributes:** Their name, meaning "messengers," reflects their role in conveying divine inspiration or warnings to individuals. They are associated with personal care, often assigned to specific humans to guide them through life's spiritual and moral challenges.
- **Position:** Within the Third Hierarchy, Angels rank below Principalities (who oversee communities) and Archangels (who deliver major divine messages). Their focus is on individual ministry, distinct from the Second Hierarchy's cosmic governance or the First Hierarchy's contemplation.

Aquinas emphasizes the Angels' role as intimate protectors and guides, ensuring each person receives divine assistance in their journey toward God.

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