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The Rational Heavenly Powers

The Creation of Heaven and the Establishment of the Angelic World

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Thus begins its narrative the Book of Genesis, the book of life. From ancient times the Church has always understood heaven to mean the "rational heaven," i.e. the angelic world. The first creative act of the Triune God was the creation of "second lights" – the celestial bodiless powers.

Here is how St. Gregory the Theologian pontificates on this subject back in the 4th century: "Since it did not suffice for the grace of God to be engaged solely in the contemplation of its own self, but rather required that this grace be disseminated, spreading out further and further, so that the number of recipients of this grace would be as immense as possible, because such is the nature of this supreme grace, – God first of all thinks of creating the angelic forces; and so the thought becomes deed, implemented by the Word and fulfilled by the Holy Spirit... Insofar as the first creation was pleasing to Him, He then thinks up another world, material and visible, or – what is the same – a harmonious composition of heaven and earth and everything that is between them" (Homily 38).

This is when and why the rational heaven was created. However, the very name angel (which is a Greek word) signifies messenger, i.e. a spirit created for some special service, in order to pass on messages to someone. In fact, Apostle Paul himself calls the angels the ministering spirits: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14).

What awesome and extraordinary words: the celestial powers, besides serving God, are sent to serve the human beings who are to inherit salvation. They are sent to us, frail humans! This service to mankind is performed primarily by the guardian angels, of whom we shall speak later.

What do we know of how the angelic world was created and how it is set up? According to Church teaching, the angels were created before the beginning of our visible world and were all created instantaneously, the same number of them that there is now, with the exception of the fallen angels, whose number is determined by theologians as being one third of the entire angelic assembly, according to the Revelation.

The nature of angels is entirely spiritual. They are bodiless and fleshless. The Church calls them "the second lights." As such, they are participants in the divine light and ineffable glory of God. Having been created free, the angels became so fortified in virtue after their victory over the fallen spirits, in obedience to God and in love for Him, that they lost all propensity for sinning and became entirely established in goodness. In this especially they differ from human beings.



There remains a very complex question: which world is higher in the eyes of God – the angelic world or the world of righteous human beings? The angels' designation as ministering spirits, as well as certain other scriptural texts lead us to believe that human essence transformed by holiness may be higher than the angelic one, but only in the hereafter of course.

Furthermore, only about man was it said that he was created in the image and likeness of God. The Divine Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, became incarnate in order to save and redeem sinful mankind, but did not transform itself into one of the fallen spirits in order to save them. However, there is no established Church teaching on this subject, so it would be wiser for us to humbly bow down before this divine mystery...

What do we know of the structure of the angelic world? For this we have the writing of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, a disciple of Apostle Paul, entitled "The Heavenly Hierarchy." We will briefly present this writing as recounted by a well-known Russian 19th-century religious writer, the reverend G. Dyachenko.

The Heavenly Hierarchy

It is composed of three orders. Each order has three ranks. The highest order is composed of the seraphim, the cherubim, and the thrones; the middle order is composed of dominions, powers, and authorities; the lowest order is composed of principalities, archangels, and angels.

The supreme angelic order are the seraphim. Their name means flaming, fiery. Being directly and continuously in the presence of the One Who is love, Who lives in unassailable light, Whose throne is flaming fire, the seraphim burn with supreme love for God, and this flame of love ignites all the others. The prophet Isaiah describes the seraphim to us in his 6th chapter: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: 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".

The second rank of the highest order is comprised of the cherubim, whose name means comprehension or knowledge. It is for this reason that they are called the many-eyed. Contemplating the glory of God and possessing supreme knowledge and wisdom, they pour forth the wisdom of God upon others. Many places in the Holy Scriptures speak of the cherubim; for example: "So God drove out Adam; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden a cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24). The Book of Ezekiel speaks of the cherubim numerous times: "And there appeared in the cherubim the form of a man's hand under their wings. And when I looked, behold the four wheels by the cherubim; one wheel by one cherubim, and another wheel by another cherubim, and the appearance of the wheels was as the color of a beryl stone" (10:8-9).

The third rank of the highest order consists of the thrones, called God-bearing not by their essence, but by their service, since God blessedly and unfathomably rests upon them. God also shows His majesty and justice through this rank of angels.

Let us now turn to the middle order of the heavenly hierarchy. Its eldest rank is composed of dominions, who dominate the lower ranks of angels. Serving God willing and joyfully, they pass on to those living on earth the power of prudent self-control and wise self-arrangement; they teach men to control their feelings, to restrain unbridled desires and passions, to subordinate the flesh to the spirit, to dominate one's will and conquer temptations.

The rank of dominions is followed by the rank of powers, through whom God produces signs and miracles for the glory of God and to aid and strengthen those who labor and who are burdened. This rank is mentioned to us by Apostle Peter, who says that Christ, ascending into the heavens, was worshipped by angels, and authorities, and powers.

To the lowest rank of the middle order belong the authorities, who have great power over the devil, conquer him, guard men from his wiles, and fortify those who engage in spiritual labors. Some Church Fathers believe that the guardian angel of Apostle Peter, who lead him out of prison, belonged to this angelic rank.

The lower order of the heavenly hierarchy includes the following: the first rank is that of the principalities, who rule over the lower angels, assign tasks, distribute services among them, and rule over kingdoms and communities of men.

The next-to-last rank is composed of the archangels, messengers and heralds of God's mysteries, who communicate God's will to men.

The last rank is called simply angels, the bodiless spirits who are closest to men. It is they who are primarily sent into the world as our guardian angels. This is what we know of the ranks and orders of the heavenly hierarchy.

The Great Seven

Slightly more is revealed to us by the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition concerning the seven supreme archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Salaphiel, Jegudiel, and Barachiel.

The first two archangels have an especially high standing and are also called the supreme commanders of God's forces. They reign over the entire angelic host and are the leaders of all the heavenly bodiless powers.

The name Michael in Hebrew means: "Who is like unto God?" or "Who is equal to God?" "EL" is a short version of the ancient Hebrew word *Elohim*, which in Russian means God.

Michael was second in rank in the heavenly hierarchy to Sataniel, who was also called Lucifer, i.e. morning star or son of dawn. When the latter in his pride rebelled against God, the Lord's divine providence allowed the angels who remained loyal to Him, led by the Archangel Michael, to engage in combat with Lucifer.

It appears that this combat was quite strenuous, because according to the Revelation of St. John the Theologian, they (the bright powers) *"overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death"* (Rev. 12:11). This part of the Revelation gives us to understand that the mystery of redemption through the blood of the Lamb, foreseen in God's plan, was already in action in the world on high, and assisted in the victory of the angels who testified to it in heaven. As to a struggle "until death," this should be understood as the pressure of such a struggle to the very end, a struggle that could end with the spiritual death of some of the heavenly forces.



Angelic host

What else can we say about the Archangel Michael? The prophet Daniel calls him the guardian of the Jewish people. But after the hard-hearted Jews condemned themselves by putting their Saviour and Redeemer to death, thus losing their status as the chosen people, the Archangel Michael became, according to universal Christian belief, the guardian and defender of Christ's Church. For this reason many Church Fathers believe that the Archangels Michael and Gabriel were the two angels who appeared to the myrrh-bearing women and brought them glad tidings of Christ's Resurrection. We can also see the two supreme archangels in many New Testament appearances. The special appearances of the Archangel Gabriel will be mentioned below.

On the day of the Last Judgment it will, of course, be the Archangel Michael who will lead the heavenly host that will come down with Christ. Therefore, this archangel is always depicted in icons in a militant manner, with a sword or spear in his hand. Sometimes the top of the spear is crowned with a white banner bearing the sign of the cross. The white banner represents the archangel's eternal purity and unshakeable loyalty to the Heavenly King, while the cross indicates that the battle with the kingdom of darkness and victory over it are achieved only with the help of Christ's Cross.

The second place in the celestial hierarchy is occupied by Archangel **Gabriel**, whose name means *the power of God*. In view of the fact that the name of each heavenly denizen corresponds to the nature of his service, this archangel is specifically the herald and servitor of God's omnipotence. It was he who foretold Zacharias that by the power of God this barren old man would become the progenitor of the greatest man born of woman – the Forerunner and Baptist John. It was he who announced to Joachim and Anna that they would give birth to a wondrous and Most-blessed Virgin. It was he who visited and reared Her while She was growing up in the temple of Jerusalem, nourishing Her physical strength with heavenly sustenance. It was he who brought Her a branch from paradise on the day of the Annunciation, with the wondrous message that She had been chosen by the Lord to receive God the Word in Her womb. The Archangel Gabriel also appeared several times to the righteous Joseph, giving him necessary advice. Some Church Fathers believe that Gabriel was the angel who fortified the Lord during His anguished night in the garden of Gethsemane. And, as was mentioned above, he and Archangel Michael were the heralds of Christ's resurrection and ascension. And, finally, the same Archangel Gabriel appeared to the Mother of God to announce to Her the day of Her earthly dormition.

In church hymns the Archangel Gabriel is called "the servitor of miracles," being the herald of God's great miracles. For this reason he is iconographically depicted either with a paradisiacal branch in his right hand, or with a lighted lamp in the right hand and a mirror made of jasper in the left. The lamp means that God's destinies are concealed for a time, while the mirror means that through Gabriel they are reflected as in a mirror.

The word of God also made known to us the names of five other archangels.

The third one is called **Raphael**, which means *God's healing*. Raphael is the healer of illness and the helper in sorrow. He is mentioned in the Book of Tobit, which describes how this archangel accompanied Tobit's son Tobias in the guise of a man and freed him from an evil spirit, gave back sight to the old and blind Tobit, and then disappeared after giving the latter various useful advice. This archangel is often depicted with a medicinal vessel in his hand, in the manner of the Great-martyr and healer Panteleimon. He is the one whom all who suffer spiritually and mentally should call upon, fortifying their prayer with deeds of mercy and charity.

The name of the fourth archangel is **Uriel**, which means *the light or fire of God*. Uriel is

depicted with a sword raised upward and held in the right hand at the breast, and with fire in his left hand, turned downward. As the angel of light, Uriel primarily enlightens the minds of men with the revelation of truths in general and divine truths in particular. As the angel of divine fire, he enflames the hearts of those who appeal to him with love of God, and destroys within them all that is unclean, worldly, and sinful. For this reason he is regarded as the protector of all who work at spreading the true faith of Christ, i.e. missionaries, as well as people who have dedicated themselves to pure science. He is the true source of many great scientific discoveries. Those discoveries, of which the discoverers themselves say that they often made them unexpectedly, by inspiration from above. Writers and poets should pray to Archangel Uriel to inspire them, if they wish to be writers and poets by the grace of God. But the archangel should not be asked to reveal the mysteries of nature, which surpass our mind and our human needs, or the prophecies of future events.

Let us hear how Uriel replied to Esdras, a righteous man, but one over-whelmed with excessive curiosity. Esdras wished to learn from the angel the secret of the fate planned for the earth by God, and the reason for the seeming victory of evil in the world. The archangel agreed to reply, but demanded that Esdras first fulfill one of the following three tasks: either weigh the flame of fire, or indicate the beginning of wind, or return the past day. When Esdras said that he was unable to do any of this, the wise archangel replied to him thusly:

"If I were to ask thee, how many dwellings there are in the midst of the sea, or how many springs in the beginning of the deep, or what boundaries hath paradise, thou wouldst perhaps say unto me: I never went down into the deep, nor as yet into hell, neither did I ever climb up into heaven. Nevertheless, now I have asked thee but only of the fire, and wind, and the day which thou hast passed through, that is, of things from which thou canst not be separated, and yet canst thou give me no answer of them." And the angel said to Esdras: "Thine own things, and such as are grown up with thee, canst thou not know; how should thou then be able to comprehend the way of the Highest, and, the world being now outwardly corrupted, to understand the corruption that is evident in my sight?" (3 Esdras 4:7-11).

It would not be amiss for modern scientists to heed the archangel's wise advice and to remember that men of knowledge should primarily be the servitors of the light of truth.

The fifth archangel is called **Salaphiel**, which means *the communicant of God*. He is also mentioned in the same book of Esdras. He is depicted in a prayer-ful pose, with arms folded at the breast and with lowered eyes. Whoever has a hard time praying should ask Archangel Salaphiel to instruct him in proper prayer. How many of us can say that they are able to pray attentively, without distraction, and if not fervently, then at least warmly? And how many people do not know that there is a celestial teacher of prayer, and do not call upon the Archangel Salaphiel for help.

The name of the sixth archangel is **Jegudiel**, which means *the glory or laudation of God*. In his right hand he holds a golden crown, and in his left – a whip made of three thongs. His duty is to guard, advise and defend, together with a host of subordinate angels, in the name of the Holy Trinity and by the power of the Cross, all those who work for the glory of God in various responsible domains of human endeavor, to reward the good laborers and punish the bad. This great celestial denizen should be appealed to with prayer by kings, military and civil leaders, judges, heads of households, etc.

Finally, the last of the sacred group of seven supreme angels – last in order, but not in dignity – is Archangel **Barachiel**, the angel of *God's blessings*, as denoted by his name and by his image on icons. He is depicted with a multitude of rose flowers scattered throughout his raiment. Since God's blessings are varied, so is the service of this archangel quite multifaceted. He is also the supreme leader of all guardian angels, because through him are sent the blessings of a good family life, of seasonable weather and the abundance of the fruits of the earth, of success in trade and all worldly affairs in general, i.e. all the things in which guardian angels provide assistance to people.

The Book of Esdras also mentions the name of Archangel *Jeremiel*, which means *the supremacy of God*, but the Church believes that this is simply another name for Archangel Uriel.

How Angels Live

Little is known to man of how the angelic world lives at present and how it will live when time ends. However, from all that we have said previously, we can already see that the life of the bodiless spirits is quite varied and that their activity is great. If the Mighty Lord saw fit to create an entire hierarchy of angels, entrusting each rank with a certain kind of activity, this in itself shows how busy these ministering spirits are. The guardian angels alone have a great deal of work to do with their protégés – the frivolous and sinful humans. We have many testimonies in the writings of the Holy Fathers of how guardian angels often bitterly weep when they look at the sinful behavior of those whom they have been sent to watch.

However, the celestial world is primarily a world of light and joy, and there is undoubtedly much more joy than sadness in the life of the angels. And their supreme joy consists in contemplating and glorifying the brightly-shining Triune Divinity, in constant attendance upon

God.

If on earth the Divine liturgy is a previous gift from God to sinful humanity, a gift through which it is sanctified and becomes part of Divinity, then one can piously believe that neither did the Lord deprive the bodiless powers of this great gift. We can presume that in the high heavens the angelic host also serves a spiritual Divine liturgy, in which the Lamb of God is pre-eternally sacrificed out of love for His creation.

At this supreme heavenly Eucharist the angels primarily give glory and thanks to the Creator. But the innumerable choirs of heavenly forces also pour forth their prayers. For whom? Obviously not for themselves, since they are living in the fullness of all the bounties that are accessible to them, but for their beloved mankind, which is adulterous and sinful, mired in worldly vanity, and so needful of celestial aid.

The constant participation of the angels in our earthly services, especially the liturgy, serves as a pledge of this.

"Now the powers of heaven invisibly do serve with us," clairvoyantly confirms the Church at the mysterious liturgy of Presanctified Gifts, while in the daily liturgy of St. John Chrysostome the serving priest, as though mentally seeing the angels, proclaims that they sing, exclaim, shout, and say: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts..."

The Church boldly confirms that "The angels in heaven, O Christ our Saviour, sing Thy Resurrection..." There is a multitude of such testimonies, and they are well-known to all Christian believers.

It only remains to speak of the activity of the heavenly forces on earth. It is the guardian angels who are primarily engaged in such activity.

The Guardian Angels

Christ Himself assures us of their existence by saying: "*Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones (children); for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven*" (Matt. 18:10).

There are two opinions in the Church: some Holy Fathers believe that a guardian angel is assigned to each person at his conception, while others feel that only the newly-baptized receive a guardian angel. These two opinions are reconciled in the following manner: a guardian angel is assigned by God to each individual at his conception, but begins to watch over him only after his baptism. This is confirmed by various texts in the Holy Scriptures and church services.

Speaking about guardian angels, let us first of all point out that according to the Scriptures they are assigned not only to individuals, but to entire nations or churches. We have already mentioned that the Archangel Michael was initially the guardian angel of the Hebrew people, but after the latter's loss of their status as the chosen people he became, according to Church belief, the guardian angel of the Christian Church.

The same Prophet Daniel, who was the first to call Archangel Michael *the great prince* of the Jews, talks also about the heavenly princes of the Persian and the Greek peoples. If these pagan peoples were able to have guardian angels as their "princes," then it can be reasonably assumed that other, especially Christian, peoples have not been deprived of such grace.

In the Revelation of St. John the Theologian there is numerous mention of the angels of the seven Churches (Rev. 1:20) as the Lord addresses each of these angels in turn: "*To the angel of the Ephesian Church write that... And to the angel of the Smyrian Church write that...*", etc.

From which rank of the heavenly hierarchy are the guardian angels chosen? It is natural to assume that it is from the lowest rank of plain angels. However, are not all the bodiless powers called ministering spirits? We already know that even the commanders of the angelic host, Michael and Gabriel, were sent into the world to serve, while Michael guards the Holy Church even to this day. Therefore, it would not be wrong to piously believe that the guardianship of individual Orthodox Churches and peoples has been entrusted by the Lord to angels from higher levels of the celestial hierarchy.

But let us talk about the guardian angels of us, plain Christians. The Church prays daily: "For an angel of peace, a faithful guide, a guardian of our souls and bodies, let us beseech the Lord." How should this prayer be understood, when each one of us already has his or her guardian angel, at least from the day of baptism? Our misfortune is that through our sins and evil actions we often chase away our guardian angel. It is for this reason that we must constantly entreat the Lord to return him to us.

We should firmly bear in mind that our guardian angel is our best and truest friend. Therefore, it is very important to mentally converse with him and take his advice as frequently as possible. Whoever does this knows from experience that frequently, after an ardent prayer to one's angel, a bright and excellent idea suddenly comes to one's mind, or a doubt is successfully resolved. That is the guardian angel's answer. It is well to pray to one's angel in times of sorrow, mental anguish, and even business failures, for our angel is "peaceful," and he will help restore peace to our troubled souls. If we learn to constantly feel the presence of our celestial friend,

then it will become awkward for us to engage in sin.

Yes, we must, we really must learn to love our guardian angel. He not only guards and cherishes us in this earthly life, but also takes up our soul immediately upon our death, protects it from the demons, takes it through the terrible heavenly tolls, and carries it up to God for the first and second presentation. Our guardian angel will also intercede for us at the Last Judgment. The Church confirms this in its canon to the guardian angel:

“When my humble soul is unharnessed from my body, may thy bright and most-holy wings enfold it, O my preceptor...”

“When the thrones are set up, and the books are opened, and the Ancient in days takes His place to judge men... then show upon me thy love of mankind, and entreat Christ to deliver me from gehenna...”

Let us look at just a few of the numerous examples taken from life of the help provided to mankind by the guardian angels. Each one of us can complement these examples by events taken from our own lives or the lives of our family members and friends:

- Apostle Peter was miraculously delivered from prison by an angel.

- St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of St. John the Theologian, was miraculously saved from death by his guardian angel. During one of his travels, St. Polycarp and his deacon stopped for the night at a wayside inn. At midnight his guardian angel appeared to him and said: “Polycarp, get up and quickly leave this inn, for it will fall down.” The vision and the warning occurred thrice. And as soon as St. Polycarp went out of the inn, it straightaway fell down.

- When St. Cyril of Belozersk was building his monastery, all his neighbors were amazed at the success of his venture and thought him to be a rich man. Because of this rumor, a certain avaricious landowner gathered his servants and went at night to rob St. Cyril and the monastery. However, when they approached the gates, the evildoers saw a great multitude of warriors walking around the monastery with unsheathed swords. The robbers waited until morning, hoping that the warriors would fall asleep, but they waited in vain and returned home empty-handed. On the second night they came again and noticed the presence of even more warriors, and again they returned home without success. When morning came, the landowner sent a servant to the monastery to find out what kind of regiment was standing at the monastery and how long it would be there. The servant came back and reported to his master that for a whole week there had not even been any pilgrims at the monastery, let alone troops. The landowner then realized that the monastery was being guarded by God’s angels and repented of his evil intent.

- There were once two monks living in the Kievan Caves Lavra – the priest Titus and the deacon Evagrius. For several years they lived in such perfect amity that the other brothers were amazed at their unanimity. But the envious enemy of mankind succeeded in planting hostility and hate between them to such an extent that they could not even look at each other without extreme annoyance. All the brothers’ attempts to reconcile the two were in vain. Soon afterwards the priest Titus became ill. He began weeping over his sin and sent for his enemy Evagrius to ask his forgiveness, but Evagrius did not even wish to listen and began cursing the other monk terribly. The brothers dragged him over by force to Titus’ deathbed. Titus managed to get up and fell to his knees before Evagrius, tearfully begging him for forgiveness, but the inhumane Evagrius cried out: “I do not wish to make peace with you, neither in this life nor the next.” Upon saying these words Evagrius immediately fell dead. At the same time, the priest Titus arose from his bed completely recovered and said: “During my illness I saw angels who had moved away from me and were weeping, and evil spirits who were rejoicing over my perdition. When Evagrius began to curse me, I saw a terrifying angel strike him with a flaming spear, which is why the wretched one fell dead; this same angel gave me his hand and helped me recover from my illness...”

- From the life of St. Seraphim of Sarov we know that when he was 6-7 years old, he fell down from the top of a belfry under construction in the city of Kursk, i.e. from a height roughly equivalent to the 5th or 6th floor of a modern apartment building, and remained completely unharmed. The saint himself testified that he was saved by his guardian angels.

From all that has been said here about the angels, we can divine the mutual involvement of the two worlds – the angelic and the human – and their diunity. As the second creation possessing not only a soul, but also a body created in the image and likeness of God, elevated by Christ to the throne of God, and which had produced from its depths the One Who is more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim, humanity is currently the crown of creation. It does not exist to serve the angelic world, and yet it can be said that the angelic world had been partially created to serve mankind. To Christian believers this concept brings not only joy, but also the realization of their great responsibility before God. And how wonderful and comforting is the thought that in the angels we have loyal friends, preceptors, helpers, and guardians of our souls and bodies. O holy archangels and angels, pray to God for us sinners! Amen.

