



## The Synaxis of Archangel Michael and the entire heavenly host

The synaxis of the holy Archangel Michael and the other bodiless powers, commemorated on November 21st (the 8th, old style), is the major feast in honor of the holy angels, and was already celebrated in the 4th century as an established holiday.

According to tradition, Satan, formerly the brightest of all the heavenly spirits created by God, and usually called Lucifer or *lightbearer*, but who became filled with self-love, pride and evil, - fell from his archangelic power and lured away a multitude of other spirits. Then the Archangel Michael, as God's faithful servant, assembled the entire angelic host that had not been enticed by the ruinous example of satanic pride, and said: "Let us attend and stand aright before our Creator, and let us bear no ill towards Him." Appealing thus to the entire angelic host, he began to glorify the Most-holy, One-in-Essence, Indivisible Trinity – the One God, triumphantly singing: *holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth*.

Such an assembly of holy angels is called a "synaxis of the angels," and expresses attentiveness, like-mindedness, concord, unity. The words of the angels' declaration – "Who is like God?" – mean **MI-CHA-EL** in ancient Hebrew, and have become the name of the greatest of the angels who had remained on the side of good, - the celestial warrior and the leader of the angelic host – the **Archangel Michael**.

The Archangel Michael is mentioned several times in the Holy Scriptures. Besides the Archangel Michael, the names of several other archangels are known to us from the Scriptures.

We know the **Archangel Gabriel**, God's messenger, who announced to the Holy Virgin Mary that She would give birth to the Saviour, and who also announced to Zacharias the birth of St. John the Baptist.

We know the **Archangel Raphael**, whose name means "God's healer," who is the healer of illnesses in mankind, and who is mentioned in the Book of Tobias.

We also know the **Archangel Uriel**, whose name means "the fire or light of God," and who has been referred to in the Book of Ezra.

We know the **Archangel Salaphiel**, "the one who prays to God" and who urges mankind to prayer, also mentioned in the Book of Ezra.

We know the **Archangel Jegudiel**, "the one who glorifies God" and who strengthens those that work for the glory of God.

We also know the **Archangel Barachiel**, "the blessing of God," who intercedes before God to shower His blessings upon men.

Besides these seven archangels, mentioned in the Book of Tobias, we also know the name of the **Archangel Jeremiel**, whose name means "the exaltation of God," who is mentioned by the Prophet Ezra, even though his position in the Heavenly Hierarchy has not been revealed to us. The above-mentioned seven Archangels are those of whom speaks the holy Archangel Raphael: "I am one of the

seven holy angels who lift up the prayers of the saints and who ascend before the glory of the Holy God” (Tobias 12:15).

All these holy angelic ranks live one common life, helping one another in the sacred and joyous process of attaining greater and greater knowledge of God, of becoming more and more like Him. The disciple of the great Apostle Paul, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, to whom the Lord revealed the entire angelic world, writes about it thus: “The heavenly hierarchy is established in such a way that the lesser spiritual beings receive enlightenment from the higher ones, and represent for each other a ladder of ascension to supreme perfection.”

The higher hierarchy and the closest to the Holy Trinity is composed of the **seraphim, cherubim and thrones**. Closest to God are the six-winged fiery seraphim. They are aflame with love for God and arouse in others the same fervent feeling. The very name “seraphim” in Hebrew means “fiery, flaming.” After the seraphim come the many-eyed cherubim, who shine with the knowledge of God’s mysteries and the depth of His wisdom, and who enlighten others with their knowledge. Through the cherubim comes the wisdom and the enlightenment of spiritual eyes that is needed for knowing God. The Lord Himself sits on the thrones and passes His righteous judgment. By serving God’s justice, the thrones instill the sense of justice in earthly judges, and help earthly kings and lords be just in their rulings.

The middle hierarchy is composed of **dominions, forces and powers**. Dominions give strength to God-appointed rulers on earth, to rule over their domains wisely and sensibly. Dominions also teach men to dominate their will and passions, to subjugate flesh to spirit and to rise above all temptations. Forces are filled with God’s strength and carry out His will. They work great miracles and instill the same grace of wonderworking and divination into saints, giving them the power of healing and foreseeing the future. Forces also help men bear their burdens and give them strength to endure sorrows and misfortunes. Powers have power over the devil and are able to curtail the harm that demons do to people. Powers also give strength to ascetics in their struggle against the forces of evil.

The lower hierarchy and the closest to mankind is composed of **principalities, archangels and angels**. Principalities rule over the universe and are the guardians of all earthly kingdoms and peoples. Thus, every kingdom and every people on earth has its own guardian angel. Principalities also teach people to honor their rulers, and rulers to use their power worthily, for the glory of God and the good of their subjects. Archangels are the messengers of great and glorious events, reveal prophecies and the will of God to people, and also fortify them in their faith. Angels are the closest of all to people, instruct them in virtue and righteousness, and guard all the faithful. In the sacrament of baptism, all the newly-baptized receive their own guardian angel, who protects them throughout their entire life on earth and helps them in crossing over to the other world.

The supreme commander of all the angels is the **Archangel Michael** - loyal servant of God, conqueror of demons and protector of Christians. Archangel Michael possesses an extraordinary and unparalleled spiritual strength. Before the creation of the physical world, when the most glorious angel became filled with overweening pride, rebelled against God and incited one third of the heavenly host to follow him, Archangel Michael gathered the remaining angels and led them into battle against the insurgents, conquered them, threw down Satan and his evil spirits into hell, and then assembled all the faithful angels to sing a triumphant hymn of praise to God.

The constant struggle against evil continues to this day. The Scriptures tells us of the antiquity and violence of this war. We are confronted daily by sin and temptation amid our surrounding environment and throughout all the towns and cities of the earth. Nor is this battle against evil confined to the earth, but rather encompasses all of creation. The stern look of the iconographic portrayal of the angelic forces speaks of the seriousness of this confrontation.

We must distinguish between the supreme archangels or celestial warriors, such as the Archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and the other of the seven archangels, whom the Holy Scriptures often simply call angels, and the archangels and angels who form part of the lower heavenly hierarchy. The first ones, being among the highest seraphim, are called angels or archangels in the same sense as in military terms even the highest generals are often simply called soldiers.

Although the establishment of this holiday dates to the 4th century, the worship of the holy angels goes back to the very beginning of Christianity, i.e. to the 1st century A.D. The Church has established the celebration of the feast of the holy Archangel Michael and all the other nine angelic ranks on November 8th for the specific reason that the month of November is the ninth month according to the Paschalion, since the Biblical year began with March 1st, and the Biblical year appeared to be the most precise, since the world began its existence in March. (In the Russian Church, up until 1343 A.D., the New Year came on March 1st). The date of the 8th has been chosen because all the time that has passed from the creation of the physical world is called the 7th day in church parlance, while the time of the angelic life that the righteous will lead after the Last Judgment will be called the 8th day. For this reason the number 8 has been regarded by the divinely-guided establishers of the holiday as being the most appropriate date for the feast of the angelic host.

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