

Angelic Wisdom: Exploring the Dionysian Hierarchy's Pedagogical Mysteries

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Abstract

Hierarchy is the disposition of the different levels of perfection from the closest to the most distant from God. Dionysius depicts reality as a web of connection (συνπάθεια) and proportionality (ἀναλογία), in which the power of God penetrates every being, from the highest angel to the lowest element of the visible realm. The structure described by Dionysius is intrinsic to his understanding of reality, as his aim is the assimilation and union with God. He elaborated on the concept of hierarchy to create a *continuum* between all the levels of reality and to harmonise them. Hence, the concept of hierarchy leads one to think of the sensible world as a receptacle of symbols and figures referring to the intelligible world. How, in this context, the angels have been used by Pseudo-Dionysius as a pedagogical tool for humanity? This article aims to analyse analogies and differences between the angelic and human realms, to underline the specific functions of the celestial hierarchy toward the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

1. Introduction

Hierarchy refers to the arrangement of varying degrees of perfection, ranging from those nearest to God to those farthest from Him. In Dionysius' texts, we read that hierarchy consists of science, order, and perfection (ἐπιστήμη, ἐνέργεια, τελείωσις) that the higher orders exercise over the lower ones. In particular, Dionysius describes this arrangement primarily in relation to the angelic ranks (the celestial hierarchy) and the human community (the ecclesiastical hierarchy).

Most sacred of sacred sons: our hierarchy [i.e. *Eccl. Hier.*] consists of an inspired, divine, and theurgic science [ἐπιστήμη], activity [ἐνέργεια], and perfection [τελειώσεως].¹

The hierarchical structure of creation is formulated on the basis of the perspective of the Pseudo-Dionysius on the connection between creatures and God. In this view, he portrays reality as an intricate network of connections and proportions (ἀναλογία), where the divine power permeates every entity, from the highest angel to the lowest element of the empiric realm, in proportion to their level and mode of contemplation.

Indeed, it cannot be said that the only reason for it to seem appropriate that the forms of the formless and the figures of the figureless are presented is the proportional [ἀναλογίαν]

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¹ Ps.-Dionys., *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, I.1, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Coelesti Hierarchia. De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia. De Mystica Theologia. Epistulae*, ed. G. Heil - A.M. Ritter, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2012, p. 63.3-4: "Ὅτι μὲν ἡ καθ' ἑμᾶς ἱεραρχία, παίδων ἱερῶν ἱερώτατε, τῆς ἐνθέου καὶ θείας ἐστὶ καὶ θεουργικῆς ἐπιστήμης καὶ ἐνέργειας καὶ τελειώσεως. My translation.

communication suitable to our nature, which is incapable of ascending immediately towards spiritual contemplations and requires gradual and natural upward progressions (for these, in fact, present to us accessible displays of shapeless and wondrous visions). It is also highly fitting for the hidden Scriptures that it be concealed through mysterious and sacred enigmas, and that the sacred and secret truth of the supra-mundane intelligences be rendered inaccessible to the majority.²

In Dionysius' conceptual structure, the various levels of existence are intricately interconnected, with the lower levels serving as reflections or representations of the higher ones. Within this framework, I will explore how the Pseudo-Dionysius employs angels as an instructional tool for humanity. This article's primary objective is to emphasize the symbolic significance of the angelic realm, making it the paramount instructional instrument for humanity. To this end, the investigation will commence with a concise overview of the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy as described by Dionysius. This overview aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the two texts on the hierarchies within the Dionysian corpus and their intended purposes. Subsequently, a detailed analysis of the angelic realm's critical role as an intermediary between God and humanity will be conducted, shedding light on its unique educational function. My aim, in this article, is to explore the celestial hierarchy from a pedagogical perspective for humanity, fully acknowledging that the role of angels extends beyond this domain (e.g., the purification of Isaiah by the seraphim).³ Dionysius, in fact, stated that the hierarchical function is twofold: participation and transmission.⁴ Thus, the angelic hosts serve as mediators, being illuminated from above and illuminating those below. Their educational and pedagogical role offers a glimpse into their 'downward' function, as they act as messengers, prophetically instructing humanity on divine decisions – most notably, the announcement of Jesus' birth.⁵ It is within this framework that I interpret the pedagogical function addressed in this article.

The intended outcome of this brief inquiry is to demonstrate how, beginning with the concept of "imitation" (*μίμησις*), the hierarchical system devised by Dionysius is founded on the principle of proportionality, enabling all beings endowed with intellect to perceive, to some extent, God. The processes of imitation and proportionality that are structural, therefore, in shaping the hierarchy itself imply that – between each hierarchical level – there is a degree of separation; otherwise, a state of perpetual identity would ensue between each level. In other words, the article aims to emphasize the ontological necessity of the distance between the various hierarchical orders. This distance, therefore, makes the use of symbols possible and necessary, as they facilitate the return to the One.

Ultimately, in this context, angels appear to function as bridges, intermediary entities between the perfect entity of God and less perfect human beings. The angelic realm itself may be seen as an intellectual and non-empirical symbol, serving as the intermediary connecting God and humanity.

² Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, II.2 p. 11.11-19 Heil-Ritter: "Ὅτι μὲν γὰρ εἰκότως προβέβληται τῶν ἀτυπώτων οἱ τύποι καὶ τὰ σχήματα τῶν ἀσχηματίστων, οὐ μόνην αἰτίαν φαίη τις εἶναι τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἀναλογίαν ἀδυνατοῦσαν ἀμέσως ἐπὶ τὰς νοητὰς ἀνατείνεσθαι θεωρίας καὶ δεομένην οἰκείων καὶ συμφυῶν ἀναγωγίων, αἱ τὰς ἐφικτὰς ἡμῖν μορφώσεις προτείνουσι τῶν ἀμορφώτων καὶ ὑπερφυῶν θεαμάτων, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ τοῦτο τοῖς μυστικοῖς λογίοις ἐστὶ πρεπωδέστατον τὸ δι' ἀπορρήτων καὶ ἱερῶν αἰνιγμάτων ἀποκρύπτεσθαι καὶ ἄβαστον τοῖς πολλοῖς τιθέναι τὴν ἱερὰν καὶ κρυφίαν τῶν ὑπερκοσμίων νοῶν ἀλήθειαν. My translation.

³ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, XIII.

⁴ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, VII.2-3.

⁵ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, IV.4.

2. The Celestial Hierarchy

The structure of the angelic hierarchy is elucidated in the *Celestial Hierarchy*, the inaugural treatise of the Dionysian corpus.⁶ This treatise delineates the celestial realm and the angels' intuitive connection to God.⁷ Nevertheless, it is intriguing to observe that the initial paragraph of the treatise does not directly delve into the angelic realm. Instead, Dionysius initiates his discourse by discussing our perception of the angelic realm and its function in relation to us. Specifically, in the opening of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius reminds us that God bestows His gifts with the intention of bringing all beings back to Himself (ἀφομοίωσις). In doing so, human beings can attain union with God through the imitation of angels. This passage is emblematic of observing that, at the outset of the treatise intended exclusively for angelic orders, the Pseudo-Dionysius prioritizes addressing the imitation of humans to return to God. The true focal point of his interest is the relationship between humans and angels, and therefore, God.

Therefore, that most perfect institution of rituals, deeming our most holy hierarchy worthy of the otherworldly imitation of the celestial hierarchies, and having presented the aforementioned immaterial hierarchies with corporeal figures and figurative compositions, transmitted it so that, proportionally to us, we could ascend from these sacred figures towards the lofty and unfigured heights and towards the likenesses, since it is not at all possible for our mind to ascend to that immaterial imitation and contemplation of the celestial hierarchies without the use of a material guide within its reach, if it considers the visible beauties as images of the invisible beauty, the sensible fragrances as figures of the intelligible diffusion, the material lights as an image of an immaterial emanation of light, the sacred discourses as an image of the contemplative fullness of intelligence, and the grades of earthly orders as traces of the organized order that befits divine things, and the review of the most divine Eucharist as an image of participation in Jesus and so for all the other things that have been transmitted to the celestial substances in supramundane way, and to us symbolically. Therefore, for this proportional deification for us, the loving principle of humanity, initiating at the mystery, manifests to us the celestial hierarchies and establishes our hierarchy so that it is associated with their ministry through similarity, according to our capacity, with their deiform ministry. Thus, in the sacred books of the Scriptures, he has described with sensible images the super-celestial intelligences, to elevate us through sensible things to intelligible things and from sacred symbols towards the simple summits of the celestial hierarchies.⁸

⁶ Beate Regina Suchla provides an interesting analysis of the order in which the texts of the *corpus dionysiacum* are presented. Cf. B.R. Suchla, "The Dionysian Corpus", in M. Edwards - D. Pallis - G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2022, pp. 13-32. See also Mainoldi's reconstruction on the composition of the corpus dionysiacum in E.S. Mainoldi, *Dietro «Dionigi l'Areopagita». La genesi e gli scopi del Corpus Dionysiacum*, Città Nuova, Roma 2018 (Institutiones).

⁷ For a discussion of angels and the celestial hierarchy, see D. Potter - D. Brown, *Angelology: Recovering Higher-Order Beings as Emblems of Transcendence, Immanence, and Imagination*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene 2016; Mainoldi, *Dietro «Dionigi l'Areopagita»*, (above, n. 6); T. Riggs, "Content of the Dionysian Corpus", in Edwards-Pallis-Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook*, (above, n. 6), pp. 33-52.

⁸ Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, I pp. 8.14-9.15 Heil-Ritter: Διὸ καὶ τὴν ὁσιωτάτην ἡμῶν ἱεραρχίαν ἢ τελετάρχιν ἱεροθεσία τῆς τῶν οὐρανίων ἱεραρχιῶν ὑπερκοσμίου μιμήσεως ἀξιώσασα καὶ τὰς εἰρημένους αὐλοὺς ἱεραρχίας ὑλαίοις σχήμασι καὶ μορφωτικαῖς συνθέσεσι διαποικίλασα παραδέδωκεν, ὅπως ἀναλόγως ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν ἱερωτάτων πλάσεων

What can be immediately noticed is that Dionysius, once again, introduces the discussion of the angelic orders by first addressing the sacraments and rituals and their utility from our human perspective. This perspective aims to ‘simplify’ the celestial hierarchies, making them interpretable and understandable through symbols and material images. This passage allows humans to access, in proportion, higher knowledge and consequently imitate the angelic orders in their union (which is more complete than ours, clearly) with God. Therefore, it is God Himself who has handed down to us this ritual mode of interpreting the supramundane intelligences, granting us the implementation of what Dionysius calls “proportional deification” (ἀναλογία θεώσεως). Dionysius adopts both the concepts of proportion and likeness, as we humans do not intuitively or directly comprehend the higher truths but rather through resemblance, thanks to the sacraments and symbols passed down to us from above. Dionysius then concludes the first chapter of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, stating that God transmitted the Sacred Scriptures precisely to elevate human beings towards the higher truths. Given this first introduction, it could already be said that the *Celestial Hierarchy* is a pedagogical treatise, as the main goal of the text is to elucidate that the angelic realm teaches humanity how to get closer to God, as it is clearly stated from the very first lines. Moreover, if the angelic realm can be perceived (from the human perspective) as a representation of proximity to God, we can assume that the angels themselves can serve as intelligible symbols for the return to God from the lowest levels of reality. However, for this process to occur, it is essential that the angels maintain a certain distance from the One, albeit shorter than our own. This distinction, though somewhat redundant, is crucial to affirm the ontological necessity of hierarchy and, by extension, the utility of symbols, both intelligible and tangible.

The Holy Scripture has called all celestial substances by nine manifest names. Our divine initiator divides them into three triple arrangements and says that the first one is always close to God and, according to tradition, is closely united with Him before any other and without intermediaries. *Indeed, the most holy Thrones and the orders with many eyes and many wings, whose Hebrew names are Cherubim and Seraphim, are placed around God without intermediaries, in a proximity that surpasses all others, and this is handed down through the revelation of the sacred writings.* Our glorious teacher explains that this triadic arrangement forms a single coordinated hierarchy and truly the first one, of which no other is more conformable to God and closer, without intermediaries, to the first illuminations of the Thearchy. The second one, he says, is composed of Powers, Dominions, and Virtues, and the third one consists of the last celestial hierarchies, namely the arrangement of Angels, Archangels, and Principalities.⁹

ἐπὶ τὰς ἀπλᾶς καὶ ἀτυπώτους ἀναχθῶμεν ἀναγωγὰς καὶ ἀφομοιώσεις, ἐπεὶ μὴδὲ δυνατόν ἐστι τῷ καθ’ ἡμᾶς νοῦ πρὸς τὴν αὐλὸν ἐκείνην ἀναταθῆναι τῶν οὐρανίων ἱεραρχιῶν μίμησιν τε καὶ θεωρίαν, εἰ μὴ τῇ κατ’ αὐτὸν ὑλαίᾳ χειραγωγίᾳ χρῆσταιτο τὰ μὲν φαινόμενα κάλλη τῆς ἀφανοῦς εὐπρεπείας ἀπεικονίσματα λογιζόμενος καὶ τὰς αἰσθητάς εὐωδίας ἐκτυπώματα τῆς νοητῆς διαδόσεως καὶ τῆς αὐλοῦ φωτοδοσίας εἰκόνα τὰ ὑλικά φῶτα καὶ τῆς κατὰ νοῦν θεωρητικῆς ἀποπληρώσεως τὰς διεξοδικὰς ἱεράς μαθητείας καὶ τῆς ἐναρμονίου πρὸς τὰ θεῖα καὶ τεταγμένης ἕξεως τὰς τῶν ἐνθάδε διακοσμήσεων τάξεις καὶ τῆς Ἰησοῦ μετουσίας τὴν τῆς θειοτάτης εὐχαριστίας μετάληψιν, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα ταῖς οὐρανίαις μὲν οὐσίαις ὑπερκοσμίως, ἡμῖν δὲ συμβολικῶς παραδεδόται. Ταύτης οὖν ἕνεκα τῆς ἡμῶν ἀναλόγου θεώσεως ἢ φιλόανθρωπος τελεταρχία καὶ τὰς οὐρανίας ἱεραρχίας ἡμῖν ἀναφαίνουσα καὶ συλλειτουργὸν αὐτῶν τελοῦσα τὴν καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἱεραρχίαν τῇ πρὸς δύναμιν ἡμῶν ἀφομοιώσει τῆς θεοειδοῦς αὐτῶν ἱερώσεως αἰσθηταῖς εἰκόσι τοὺς ὑπερουρανίους ἀνεγράψατο νόας ἐν ταῖς ἱερογραφικαῖς τῶν λογίων συνθέσεσιν, ὅπως ἂν ἡμᾶς ἀναγάγοι διὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐπὶ τὰ νοητὰ καὶ τῶν ἱεροπλάστων συμβόλων ἐπὶ τὰς ἀπλᾶς τῶν οὐρανίων ἱεραρχιῶν ἀκρότητας. My translation.

⁹ Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, VI.2 p. 26.11-27.3 Heil-Ritter: Πάσας ἡ θεολογία τὰς οὐρανίας οὐσίας ἐννέα κέκληθεν ἐκφαντορικαῖς ἐπωνυμίαις· ταύτας ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν ἱεροτελεστῆς εἰς τρεῖς ἀφορίζει τριαδικὰς διακοσμήσεις. Καὶ πρώτην μὲν εἶναι φησι τὴν περὶ θεὸν οὖσαν αἰὲ καὶ προσεχῶς αὐτῷ καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀμέσως ἡνωσθαι παραδεδομένην. Τούς τε

It is not by chance, then, that the treatise moves on to explain the function of symbols and their variety.¹⁰ In fact, there are many different symbols that can lead to the contemplation of God. Such variety is justified on the basis that all sensible objects reflect the divine beauty in a way or another. All symbols can therefore be considered as an image of the angels and the higher levels of reality. Symbols that are obtained from the most excellent things reveal the magnificence of the angels. On the other hand, symbols that are obtained from the lowest levels can help understanding what angels are not.¹¹ This interpretation of symbols can always be applied to God Himself, of whom the angels are an image.¹² The *Celestial Hierarchy* is, therefore, the first moment in which the reader can grasp the importance of Dionysius' theory of similar and dissimilar symbols, which will ultimately lead to the idea of apophatic and cataphatic theology.¹³ Furthermore, in the third chapter of the treatise, the angels are described as mirrors (ἑσποπτρα) for humankind, as we can read in the following passage:

The purpose of hierarchy, therefore, is the assimilation and union with God as far as it is attainable, having Him as the guide and leader in every sacred knowledge and activity, and conforming unwaveringly to His most divine beauty. Perceiving Him as much as possible and imprinting His own worshippers as divine images, they [sc. the angels] become highly transparent and spotless mirrors, receptive to the chief light and divine radiance. They are filled with the sacred brilliance that is granted to them, and they abundantly reflect it back in accordance with the regulations of divine governance. It is not permissible for the sacred rituals or those who perform them to deviate at all from the sacred arrangements of their respective rituals, nor is it possible for them to exist otherwise, for they are aligned with their own theoretical splendour and aim reverently towards it. They are imprinted in accordance with the unique disposition of each sacred intellect.¹⁴

Since everything is an image of God, angels are the most important images (and their corresponding sensible symbols)¹⁵ for humankind, as imitating these 'mirrors' can lead to

γὰρ ἀγιωτάτους θρόνους καὶ τὰ πολυόμματα καὶ πολύπτερα τάγματα Χερουβιμ Ἑβραίων φωνῇ καὶ Σεραφίμ ὀνομασμένα κατὰ τὴν πάντων ὑπερκειμένην ἐγγύτητα περὶ θεὸν ἀμέσως ἰδρῦσθαι φησι παραδιδόναι τὴν τῶν ἱερῶν λογίων ἐκφαντορίαν. Τὸν τριαδικὸν οὖν τοῦτον διάκοσμον ὡς ἓνα καὶ ὁμοταγῇ καὶ ὄντως ἰεραρχίαν ὁ κλεινὸς ἡμῶν ἔφη καθηγεμῶν, ἧς οὐκ ἔστιν ἑτέρα θεοειδεστέρα καὶ ταῖς πρωτοουργοῖς τῆς θεαρχίας ἐλλάμψεσιν ἀμέσως προσεχεστέρα, δευτέραν δ' εἶναι φησιν τὴν ὑπὸ τῶν ἐξουσιῶν καὶ κυριοτήτων καὶ δυνάμεων συμπληρουμένην καὶ τρίτην ἐπ' ἐσχάτων τῶν οὐρανίων ἱεραρχιῶν τὴν τῶν ἀγγέλων τε καὶ ἀρχαγγέλων καὶ ἀρχῶν διακόσμησιν. My translation, my italic.

¹⁰ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, II.

¹¹ Cf. P. Scazzoso - E. Bellini - G. Reale (eds.), *Dionigi Areopagita: Tutte le Opere*, Bompiani, Milano 2009 (Il Pensiero Occidentale), p. 79.

¹² Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, III.2.

¹³ For a discussion, see J. Fisher, "The Theology of Dis/similarity: Negation in Pseudo-Dionysius", *The Journal of Religion*, 81.4 (2001), pp. 529-48.

¹⁴ Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, III.2 p. 17.10-18.10 Heil-Ritter: Σκοπὸς οὖν ἱεραρχίας ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοιώσις τε καὶ ἔνωσις αὐτὸν ἔχουσα πάσης ἱεράς ἐπιστήμης τε καὶ ἐνεργείας καθηγεμῶνα καὶ πρὸς τὴν αὐτοῦ θειοτάτην εὐπρέπειαν ἀκλινῶς μὲν ὄρων ὡς δυνατόν δὲ ἀποτυπούμενος καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ θιασώτας ἀγάλματα θεῶν τελῶν ἑσποπρα διειδέστατα καὶ ἀκηλίδωτα, δεκτικὰ τῆς ἀρχιφύτου καὶ θεαρχικῆς ἀκτίνος καὶ τῆς μὲν ἐνδιδομένης αἰγλης ἱερῶς ἀποπληρούμενα, ταύτην δὲ αὖθις ἀφθόνας εἰς τὰ ἐξῆς ἀναλάμποντα κατὰ τοὺς θεαρχικοὺς θεσμούς. Οὐ γὰρ θεμιτὸν ἐστὶ τοῖς τῶν ἱερῶν τελεταῖς ἢ τοῖς ἱερῶς τελουμένοις ἐνεργῆσαι τι καθόλου παρὰ τὰς τῆς οἰκείας τελεταρχίας ἱεράς διατάξεις ἄλλ' οὐδὲ ὑπάρχειν ἑτέρως, εἰ τῆς θεωτικῆς αὐτῆς ἀγλαΐας ἐφίενται καὶ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἱεροπρεπῶς ἀποσκοποῦσι καὶ ἀποτυποῦνται κατὰ τὴν ἐκάστου τῶν ἱερῶν νοῶν ἀναλογίαν. My translation, italics mine.

¹⁵ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, XV.

union with the One. However, during the discussion, Dionysius draws a distinction between individuals capable of comprehending the angelic realm and those who do not meet the criteria of purity (...*inaccessible to the majority*).¹⁶ The idea behind this differentiation is a subject that he endeavours to elucidate in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Here, he expounds upon the diverse levels within the human hierarchy, aiming to provide an explanation for this distinction.

In the traditional structuring of the *corpus dionysiacum*, the *Celestial Hierarchy* stands as the first treatise encountered.¹⁷ From this, it can be inferred that the angelic orders can always be considered from our perspective, as if they were a “tool” for humanity to return to a complete (albeit proportional) union with God. Moreover, the fact that the *Celestial Hierarchy* introduces many other fundamental themes for the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, such as the use of symbols – both similar and dissimilar – and the concept of proportionality, as well as the role of ritual and contemplation of higher orders, suggests that, for Dionysius, these elements permeate the entire structure of reality and operate both in ascending and descending manners. The *Celestial Hierarchy*, therefore, could function as an explanatory treatise for descending functions – proceeding from the top of the angelic orders to the lower levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – while the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* might be understood as an explanatory treatise for the ascending functions of these themes, leading to the ultimate return to the One.

3. The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

If we agree with the assumption that the central core of Dionysius’ entire work is the union of man with God, then we must consider the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* as the pulsating heart of the corpus, as it concentrates on the relationship between humanity and the upper levels of reality. The *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is the second treatise in the corpus, and it expounds upon the varying levels within the human sphere, highlighting differences in purity and degrees of connection with higher realms of reality.¹⁸ Along the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius also mentions the presence of a third rank of reality: the *Legal Hierarchy*, which, to our knowledge, does not receive a dedicated treatise. In this way, the human hierarchy becomes twofold: the legal hierarchy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, whose addressee is always humanity. However, the various hierarchies, especially the ecclesiastical and celestial ones, adopt different methodologies in their pursuit of the divine and ascension to the loftiest echelons of reality. This contrast raises a fundamental question: what mechanisms facilitate effective intercommunication between these realms? The answer lies, again, in the use of symbols, as we have briefly noticed in the previous paragraph, thanks to the analysis of the *Celestial Hierarchy*’s incipit.

Dionysius expounded on the concept of hierarchy to establish a *continuum* encompassing all levels of reality and to achieve harmony among them. Consequently, the notion of hierarchy invites us to perceive the sensible world as a receptacle of symbols and figures that refer to the intelligible realm. Each element employed in reference to God functions as a

¹⁶ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, II.2. See note 2.

¹⁷ See above, note 3.

¹⁸ For a discussion of hierarchy, see G.R. Davis, “The Seraphic Doctrine: Love and Knowledge in the Dionysian Hierarchy”, in Id., *The Weight of Love: Affect, Ecstasy, and Union in the Theology of Bonaventure*, Fordham U.P., New York 2017, pp. 29-44; A.M. Purpura, *God, Hierarchy, and Power: Orthodox Theologies of Authority from Byzantium*, Fordham U.P., New York 2018 (Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought).

symbol, representing something closer to the divine. This is particularly true for humankind, who is limited by the bodily world to perceive deity throughout symbols of any kind.

Therefore, that most perfect institution of rituals, considering our most holy hierarchy worthy of the supramundane *imitation* of celestial hierarchies...¹⁹

This passage encapsulates the fundamental objective of the Dionysian hierarchy: imitation (μίμησις). The human realm occupies one of the lowest levels within this hierarchical framework, with God residing in theological perfection and the angels occupying an intermediate position, characterized by a closer and intuitive relationship with the divine. In contrast, we find ourselves situated at the base of the structure, grappling with a more intricate and complex (thus, mediated) connection to the divine. The ability to establish effective communication with the divine requires the involvement of intermediaries, and it is crucial to acknowledge that not every individual within the human hierarchy has equal access to such channels. Recognizing this necessity for categorizing the human hierarchy based on different levels of purification, is the reason that generated the treatise *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

As we have read in the *Celestial Hierarchy* as well,²⁰ the first chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is used by Dionysius to clarify the purpose (σκοπός) of the treatise, which is that of reconducting men toward unity and communion with God. The power of God operates throughout the ecclesiastical orders, starting from the bishops (hierarchs), who are at the top of the hierarchy. Even if God can somehow “reach” every level of every hierarchy, nevertheless there is a difference between the angelic and human realms, depending upon the mode of cognition. Angels can understand God immediately and in a simple way. On the other hand, humanity struggles with empirical sense-perception and can grasp God only with the help of specific aid.²¹ This is the reason why divine enlightenment is communicated to men throughout the plethora of material symbols in the Holy Scriptures and the sacraments of the Church. In this context, the Pseudo-Dionysius wants to elaborate on some of the ecclesiastical rites and explain the meaning the Apostles gave to them. This is a very exclusive teaching, which is the reason why Dionysius also begs the reader to only transmit the text to those who are worthy, in keeping with the Neoplatonic pedagogical methodology.²² The concept of symbol use also has a progressive aspect, with symbols becoming more “intangible” as the level of knowledge and purification increases.²³

¹⁹ Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, I.3 p. 8.14-15 Heil-Ritter: Διὸ καὶ τὴν ὁσιωτάτην ἡμῶν ἱεραρχίαν ἢ τελετάρχιν ἱεροθεσία τῆς τῶν οὐρανίων ἱεραρχιῶν ὑπερκosmίου μιμήσεως... My translation. Italics mine.

²⁰ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, III.2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, III.2.

²² Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *E.H.*, I.1 pp. 63.3-64.14 Heil-Ritter.

²³ This may be influenced by Iamblichus' conceptualization of theurgy and the role of symbols in the contemplative process, as theurgy is eminently present in the depiction of sacramentalism in the *corpus dionysiacum*. While it would be intriguing to delve into the analogies and differences between the Iamblichean theurgy and the Dionysian interpretation, such an exploration would divert us from the focus of this article. For a discussion, see A. Louth, “Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Dionysius the Areopagite”, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 37.2 (1986), pp. 432-8; G. Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7.4 (1999), pp. 537-99; I. Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity. The Invention of a Ritual Tradition*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen-Bristol 2013 (Beiträge zur Europäischen Religionsgeschichte BERG, 1); C. Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism, Oracles of the Gods*, Routledge, London 2014 (Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity).

But the beings and orders above us, of which I have already made sacred mention, are incorporeal, intelligible, and supramundane is the hierarchy pertaining to them. However, the hierarchy we observe concerning ourselves is analogous to them, being diversified by the variety of sensible symbols through which hierarchically we are led to the divine and the divine virtue in a symmetrical manner.²⁴

The human hierarchy is characterized by a variety of tangible, sensible symbols. On the other hand, angelic realm has an intuitive knowledge of the divine,²⁵ and they can be considered themselves a symbolic tool for humanity to get closer to God. These symbols serve as a means of hierarchical progression, leading humans in a symmetrical manner toward the divine and divine virtue. The idea of symbols having a form of progressivity and proportionality reflects the hierarchy of human ranks and their level of purification. As a matter of fact, the first chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is very precise in stating that the symbols can be “used” and therefore perceived in different ways depending on the level of purification of the single entities of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.²⁶

In the second chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius explains the reason for the existence of the human hierarchy.

For as our glorious teacher declared, the foremost movement toward the divine through the intellect is love of God, and the highest progress in sacred love toward the divine commandments’ liturgy is the most ineffable production of our deification. If deification is the divine birth, he who did not come into possession of the divine existence would not even comprehend or do anything of the divine gifts. Or is it not true that also for us (speaking in a human way), one should first be, and then perform our deeds, since that which does not exist at all has no movement, while that which is somewhere possesses them [the deeds], given that only that which acts or is acted upon belongs by nature to the realm of being? But this, I believe, is clear.²⁷

Once again, it is clear that the union with God involves a dual movement, from the top downward (the love of God) and vice versa (the use of symbols in Sacred Scriptures). Nevertheless, what remains fundamental is that, in order to even grasp the existence of such symbols, one must belong to what is created by God. And, since God’s creation unfolds in hierarchies and is ordered through them, the ecclesiastical hierarchy is ontologically necessary to ensure that deification can materialize proportionally for every being. In other words, deification becomes possible within the framework of hierarchies. The structure of

²⁴ Ps.-Dionys., *E.H.*, I.2 p. 65.8-13 Heil-Ritter: ‘Ἄλλ’ αἱ μὲν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς οὐσίαι καὶ τάξεις, ὧν ἡδὴ μνήμην ἱερὰν ἐποιήσαμεν, ἀσώματοί τε εἰσι καὶ νοητὴ καὶ ὑπερκόσμιός ἐστιν ἡ κατ’ αὐτὰς ἱεραρχία, τὴν καθ’ ἡμᾶς δὲ ὁρῶμεν ἀναλόγως ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς τῇ τῶν αἰσθητῶν συμβόλων ποικιλίᾳ πληθυνομένην, ὅφ’ ὧν ἱεραρχικῶς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐνοειδῆ θέωσιν ἐν συμμετρίᾳ τῇ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἀναγόμεθα [θεόν τε καὶ θεῖαν ἀρετήν]. My translation.

²⁵ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *E.H.*, I.2.

²⁶ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *E.H.*, I.5.

²⁷ Ps.-Dionys., *E.H.*, II.1 p. 69.3-13 Heil-Ritter: ‘Ὡς γὰρ ὁ κλεινὸς ἡμῶν ἔφη καθηγεμών, ἡ κατὰ νοῦν μὲν ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα πρωτίστη κίνησις ἡ ἀγάπης ἐστὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, τῆς δὲ ἱερᾶς ἀγαπήσεως ἡ πρὸς τὴν ἱερουργίαν τῶν θεῶν ἐντολῶν ἀρχικωτάτη πρόοδος ἡ τοῦ εἶναι θεῖως ἡμᾶς ἀρρητοτάτη δημιουργία. Εἰ γὰρ τὸ εἶναι θεῖως ἐστὶν ἡ θεία γέννησις, οὐ μὴ ποτέ τι γνοίη τῶν θεοπαράδοτων οὕτε μὴν ἐνεργήσειεν ὁ μὴδὲ τὸ ὑπάρχειν ἐνθέως ἐσχηκώς. Ἡ οὐχὶ καὶ ἡμῖν (ἀνθρωπίνως φαμέν) ὑπάρξει δεῦτε πρῶτον, εἶτα ἐνεργῆσαι τὰ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ὡς τοῦ μηδαμῶς ὄντος οὐδὲ κίνησιν [ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ ὑπαρξιν] ἔχοντος, τοῦ δὲ πού ὄντος ἐκεῖνα μόνον ἐνεργοῦντος ἢ πάσχοντος ἐν οἷς εἶναι πέφυκεν; Ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν ὡς οἷμα σαφές. My translation.

hierarchies is crucial not only to establish connections between different levels of reality but also to maintain a certain distance, allowing symbols to play a role in the process of unification. Furthermore, the concept of deification and union with God is fundamental to the entire treatise, and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* can essentially be seen as a guidebook on how to become closer to God through the sacraments and rituality.

Hence, the notion of hierarchy plays a dual role, as demonstrated in both the celestial and human hierarchies. Nevertheless, the role of symbols appears intricately tied to the very existence of hierarchy, given that the concept of hierarchy itself relies on the premise that the lower levels emulate the higher ones, forming a harmonious relationship based on proportionality. This process of imitation and reflection, however, would be impractical without a discernible distance between the tiers of reality. As we will elucidate in the upcoming section of this article, symbols and hierarchy are interdependent – symbols would not exist without hierarchy, and conversely.

4. *Why is the Celestial Hierarchy pedagogical?*

As we have already briefly pointed out, Dionysius' conceptualization of the hierarchical structure of reality can be examined from two distinct perspectives: one from the human perspective, and one from the "angelic" perspective. When viewed through the lens of the angelic realm, hierarchy serves to establish a virtuous cycle of imitation and reflection, spanning from the loftiest echelons of reality to the most mundane. On the other hand, from the human perspective, hierarchy operates as a metaphorical "stairway to heaven". Here, each symbol points towards a higher realm, allowing for the development of sacramentalism and ritual practices. It is important to note that both the angelic and ecclesiastical hierarchies share the same overarching purpose, albeit through different vantage points: one focusing on descent and the other on ascent. In essence, the hierarchical structure enables the lower levels to ascend through the different ranks and ultimately return (ἐπιστροφή) to the One.²⁸

Nevertheless, we can delineate an additional dual function that is applicable to both hierarchies. Each hierarchy is tasked with a twofold mission: firstly, to partake in the act of divine creation, and secondly, to convey the purity of the divine, commensurate with their position within the overarching hierarchy of reality. This duality is epitomized by the angelic realm, which serves as the intermediary between God and humanity, perfectly embodying this dual role. Hence, it also symbolizes the didactic intent that Dionysius had in mind while composing the first two treatises of the corpus. In fact, the angelic realm functions as a mirror through which humankind can contemplate a loftier form of intelligence and, consequently, learn to better themselves. From this perspective, the celestial hierarchy's significance primarily lies in its relationship with humanity and its instructional value for those who aspire to comprehend God. As we have said above, speaking of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the ontological necessity of hierarchies lies in the necessity of belonging to God in some way or another. Of course, the ontological necessity of the angelic realm does not lie in its utility for humanity. However, from the human perspective, it is impossible to detect what could be the ontological essence of the angelic realm. Therefore, Dionysius invariably regards angels in connection to human beings

²⁸ For a discussion on the union with God, see F. Ivanovic, "Union with and Likeness to God: Deification According to Dionysius the Areopagite", in M. Edwards - E.E.D.-Vasilescu (eds.), *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, Routledge, London 2017, pp. 118-57 (Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World).

and their hierarchical framework. At this juncture, we can address the ultimate and pivotal question: how and why does the *Celestial Hierarchy* possess pedagogical attributes?

The concept of the celestial hierarchy as a comparative point of view for human contemplation of the divine is a fundamental aspect for Dionysius' theology, as we have tried to show so far. Angels serve as a demonstrative way of contemplation that humans can understand, but since humans cannot attain the same level of intellection as angels, symbols are necessary for communication between the two realms and with God as well. In this sense, one could even say that angelic realm can be interpreted as an intellectual and non-empirical symbol itself for the human hierarchy, as they stand as the privileged mediator between God and humanity. This dynamic involves a mutual use of symbols, with the deity "sending" symbols to humanity for understanding, and humanity "using" symbols to come closer to the divine.

But every procession of luminous manifestation, moved by the Father and coming to us as a gift of goodness, in turn, as a unifying force, makes us simple, pushing us upward, and turns us towards the deifying unity and simplicity of the Father, who unites everything to Himself.²⁹

On the one hand, the human hierarchy itself exemplifies the pedagogical function of hierarchy. It serves to "educate" and guide individuals in attaining the appropriate and proportional level of contemplation based on their respective level of reality, employing suitable symbols for this purpose. Can we say the same thing for the angelic realm?

Before answering the question, there is one issue with Dionysius' angelic realm, that would prevent them to be the most important tool for humans' union with God. As we have said, Dionysius maintains that the concept of imitation is fundamental to the entire hierarchical structure of reality. Angels, anyway, are in a state of extreme proximity with God, and they have an intuitive knowledge of deity.³⁰ However, it is difficult to reconcile the idea of imitation with the idea of immediate proximity with God, as some scholars have already pointed out.³¹ In this case, Dionysius must interpret the proximity of angels as symbols of an intellectual activity that is close to the divine, and yet is not divine.

This is the meaning of their names as we can understand them. Now we must express our opinion regarding their hierarchy. The purpose of every hierarchy is to be inseparably linked to the "deiformity" that imitates God. That the entire hierarchical action is twofold, consisting in holy participation and transmission of unmingled purity, divine light, and perfecting knowledge in a way by them fitting to us, has been already said, I think. But now, I wish to say suitably of the sublime intelligences how their hierarchy is manifested

²⁹ Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, I.1 p. 7.4-7 Heil-Ritter: Ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσα πατροκινήτου φωτοφανείας πρόοδος εἰς ἡμᾶς ἀγαθοδότως φοιτῶσα πάλιν ὡς ἐνοποιὸς δύναμις ἀνατακτικῶς ἡμᾶς ἀναπλοῖ καὶ ἐπιτρέφει πρὸς τὴν τοῦ συναγωγοῦ πατρὸς ἐνότητά καὶ θεοποιὸν ἀπλόττητα. My translation.

³⁰ Cf. Ps.-Dionys., *C.H.*, VI.2.

³¹ For a discussion, see R. Roques, *L'univers dionysien. Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le pseudo-Denys*, Aubier, Paris 1954 (Théologie); B. McGinn, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Early Cistercians", in M.B. Pennington (ed.), *One Yet Two: Monastic Tradition East and West*, Cistercian Pub., Kalamazoo 1976 (Cistercian Studies Series, 29), pp. 201-7; S. Chase, *Angelic Wisdom. The Cherubim and the Grace of Contemplation in Richard of St. Victor*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1995 (Studies in Spirituality and Theology); V. Rees, "The *Celestial Hierarchy*", in Id., *From Gabriel to Lucifer: a Cultural History of Angels*, I.B. Tauris, London 2013, pp. 53-8.

in Scripture. One must consider that the first substances, immediately after the Thearchy that bestows existence upon them, and every created virtue, both invisible and visible, have their own hierarchy that is perfectly uniform. *Therefore, it should be understood that their existence is pure, not because they are freed from blemishes and impure contacts, nor because they do not receive material images, but because, without any mixture, they are above all baseness and, due to their most divine virtues, according to their highest purity, they are positioned above every lower form of the sacred*, so that they adhere unswervingly to their own self-moving order, always maintaining equality according to the immutability of divine love. They do not experience any diminution towards something worse but preserve, without any possibility of falling, the immovable stability of their deiform property.³²

Why is it that angels cannot enjoy immediate proximity to God? It is our contention that the Pseudo-Dionysius posits a deliberate separation between intellectual beings and God, *as any direct connection would result in the absence of symbols through which humanity could apprehend God*. Should an identical relationship between angels and God exist, it would leave no discernible trace, for any semblance would signify a form of mediation. While this may appear somewhat tautological, it indeed underscores a substantial point. Symbols emerge when a “void” exists between two strata of reality. Hierarchies, including the angels themselves from the perspective of humanity, serve as symbols employed by humans to draw nearer to God, culminating in the moment of deification. Devoid of this interstitial “void” and the symbolic trace that spans the chasm between hierarchical levels, the very concept of imitation would become superfluous, as there would be no opportunity for emulation, and all entities would subsist in a state of ontological identity.

Therefore, if one would ask the question again – has the angelic realm a pedagogical function? –, considering what we have just said about the connection between hierarchical structure and symbols and their mutual interdependence, we should answer affirmatively.

5. Conclusions

Pseudo-Dionysius at the very beginning of his *magnum opus* defends the need to proceed symbolically (*symbolikos*) by referring to the incommensurability of the suprasensory being of God with our minds, which are accustomed to the world of the senses. Thus *symbolon* here acquires an anagogic function; it leads to the knowledge of the divine – just as allegorical speech leads to a “higher” meaning. The allegorical procedure of interpretation and the

³² Ps.-Dionys., C.H., VII.2 pp. 28.13-29.5 Heil-Ritter: Αὕτη μὲν ἡ τῶν ὀνομάτων αὐτῶν ὡς καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐκφαντορία· λεκτέον δὲ τίνα τὴν ἱεραρχίαν αὐτῶν οἰόμεθα. Τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀπάσης ἱεραρχίας σκοπὸν τῆς θεομιμήτου θεοσιδείας ἐξηρητημένον ἄρρεπῶς εἶναι καὶ τὸ διαρεῖσθαι πᾶσαν ἱεραρχικὴν πραγματείαν εἰς μετοχὴν ἱερὰν καὶ μετὰδοσιν καθάρσεως ἀμιγῶς καὶ θείου φωτός καὶ τελεστικῆς ἐπιστήμης ἀρκοῦντως ἤδη πρὸς ἡμῶν εἰρῇσθαι νομίζω. Νῦν δὲ εἰπεῖν ἀξίως εὐχομαι τῶν ὑπερτάτων νοῶν πῶς ἡ κατ' αὐτοὺς ἱεραρχία διὰ τῶν λογίων ἐκφαίνεται. Ταῖς πρώταις οὐσίαις, αἱ μετὰ τὴν οὐσιοποιὸν αὐτῶν θεαρχίαν ἱδρυμέναι καὶ οἷον ἐν προθύροις αὐτῆς τεταγμέναι πάσης εἰσὶν ἀοράτου καὶ ὁρατῆς ὑπερβεβηκυῖαι γεγонуίας δυνάμεως, οἰκείαν οἰητέον εἶναι καὶ κατὰ πᾶν ὁμοειδῆ τὴν ἱεραρχίαν. Καθαρὰς μὲν οὖν αὐτὰς ἡγητέον οὐχ ὡς ἀνιέρων κηλίδων καὶ μολυσμῶν ἡλευθερωμένους οὐδ' ὡς προσύλων ἀνεπιδέκτους φαντασιῶν, ἀλλ' ὡς πάσης ὑφέσεως ἀμιγῶς ὑψηλοτέρας καὶ παντός ὑποβεβηκότος ἱεροῦ κατὰ τὴν ὑπερτάτην ἀγνότητα πάσαις ταῖς θεοσιδεσταταῖς δυνάμεσιν ὑπεριδρυμένας καὶ τῆς οἰκείας ἀεικινήτου καὶ ταυτοκινήτου κατὰ τὸ φιλοθέως ἄτρεπτον τάξεως ἄρρεπῶς ἀντεχομένας καὶ τὴν ἐπὶ τὰ χεῖρω κατὰ τι μείωσιν οὐδ' ὅλων εἰδυίας ἀλλ' ἄπτωτον αἰεὶ καὶ ἀμετακίνητον ἔχουσας τὴν τῆς οἰκείας θεοσιδοῦς ιδιότητος ἀμειγστάτην ἔδρυσιν· My translation, my italics.

symbolical procedure of knowledge are both necessary for the same reason: it is possible to know the divine in no other way than by starting from the world of the senses. [...] The only reason that the word “symbol” can be raised from its original usage (as a document, sign, or pass) to the philosophical idea of a mysterious sign, and thus become similar to a hieroglyph interpretable only by an initiate, is that the symbol is not an arbitrarily chosen or created sign, but presupposes a metaphysical connection between visible and invisible.³³

In conclusion, Gadamer’s words may be useful to substantiate the arguments presented in this article, acknowledging that my prose may not aspire to the elegance and precision of Gadamer’s.

In the passage, it is discussed Pseudo-Dionysius’s approach to conveying divine truths, emphasizing the need for a symbolic and allegorical method due to the limitations of the human mind in comprehending God’s supernatural being. The term “symbolon” (σύμβολον) is highlighted for its anagogical function, guiding towards a deeper understanding of the divine, much like allegorical speech conveys higher meanings. Both allegorical interpretation and symbolic cognition are rooted in the necessity of relying on the sensible realm to grasp the divine. Symbols, in this context, signify a metaphysical connection between the visible and the invisible. Gadamer also elucidates a critical dichotomy between the allegorical methodology and the symbolic methodology, a distinction that would gain prominence during the Middle Ages, especially within exegetical approaches. Regrettably, given the constraints of the present context, a comprehensive exploration of this topic is infeasible, despite its profound relevance to Dionysius’ conception of contemplation and knowledge.

Moreover, it is imperative to discern the motivation behind the creation of a treatise on the celestial hierarchy. The *Celestial Hierarchy*, it appears, is a work in which angels are regarded as the source of enlightenment for humanity. It is crucial to recognize that the supramundane nature of angels inherently shrouds them in unknowability. While the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* has a clear pedagogical purpose, one would expect from the *Celestial Hierarchy* to maintain a more theological purpose. On the contrary, Dionysius does not merely engage in a descriptive exposition of angels and the angelic realm; rather, he delves into this subject to facilitate a more nuanced discussion of the human realm. The angelic realm functions as a benchmark for humanity, offering a comparative gauge and a loftier standard toward which to strive. In summary, the process of imitation can be seen as one of the most pivotal elements of Dionysius’ theology. It also gives rise to a pedagogical imperative for the human realm, offering what can be considered an optimistic perspective on reality. This optimism stems from the balanced interplay of learning and imitation, which permeates the entire hierarchical structure of existence. Each layer contributes to illumination while being illuminated, making enlightenment and unification accessible to all and emphasizing the significance of proportionality so central to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

This prompts the question of why Dionysius embarks on an investigation into this celestial realm. After what we have analysed in this article, the answer may lie in a seemingly unassuming word that resounds at the outset of the celestial hierarchy. This word resonates as a profound declaration of intent, akin to a manifesto: μίμησις (“imitation”).

³³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. rev. by J. Weinsheimer – D.G. Marshall, Bloomsbury, London-New York 1975, p. 67.