



British Library, MS Arundel 83-1, The Howard Psalter, fol. 5v, ca. 1310–20; for other versions of the figure, [see here](#).

THE short work, *On the Six Wings of the Cherubim* (*De sex alis cherubim*) enjoyed great popularity in monastic communities during the 12th and 13th centuries. Its authorship is a little confusing. The first part seems to be an edited excerpt from Hugh of St. Victor's (c. 1096–1141) work, *On the Moral Ark of Noah* (*De arca Noe morali*). The second part is by an anonymous author. An earlier attribution of the entire work to Alan of Lille (d. 1203) is incorrect. Marie-Therese d'Alverny (1980) suggested the Cistercian, Clement of Llanthony, as a possible source, but this is highly speculative.

The second part is what interests us. It discusses not cherubim, but the six wings of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:2. Each wing corresponds to a higher-order virtue, and each wing has five feathers, corresponding to specific virtues. The aim is to summarize in a simple form the life of Christian perfection. The work is interesting in its own right, but also in that it set the stage, so to speak, for major philosophical and devotional works by Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173; *The Mystical Ark* or *Benjamin Major*) and St. Bonaventure (1221–1274; *The Soul's Journey into God*), both of whom use the image of a six-winged seraphim as a vehicle of examining contemplative ascent to God.

Many medieval manuscripts of *On the Six Wings* include annotated diagrams of the six-winged angel. Sometimes the figure appears without the accompanying text. In the latter case, artists varied considerably in the virtues named.

A summary of the wings and feathers from *On the Six Wings* is supplied below. Readers are referred to the English translations of Bridget Balint and of Steven Chase. The Latin text is found Migne PL 210:267A–280C.

CONFESSION (*confessio*)

Mournful avowal of one's own weakness, ignorance, and malice

1. Truth (*veritas*); sincerity of confession.
2. Wholeness (*integritas*); a confession should be complete, not shortened or divided
3. Steadfastness (*firmitas*); a confession should be steadfast and firm
4. Humility (*humilitas*); a person making confession should have a humble mind, humble tongue, and humble aspect
5. Simplicity (*simplicitas*); one should reproach ones weakness, ignorance, and wickedness, defending nothing, excusing nothing, minimizing nothing.

REPARATION (*satisfaccio*)

1. Renunciation of sin (*peccati abrenuntiatio*)
2. Outpouring of tears (*lacrymarum effusio*)
3. Mortification of the flesh (*carnis maceratio*)
4. Almsgiving (*eleemosynarum largiti*)
5. Devotion of prayer (*orationis devotio*)

III. PURIFICATION OF THE FLESH (*munditia or purita carnis*)

1. Modesty of gaze (*visus pudicitia*); shuts out wantonness, lest the eye look desiring on another person
2. Chastity of hearing (*auditus castimonia*); do not listen to an insulting voice, words of those who curse and blaspheme, false accusations, lies or provocations
3. Decorousness of scent (*olfactus modestia*); seeks the aroma of goodness by works of mercy.
4. Temperance in eating (*gustus temperantia*)
5. Sanctity of touch (*tactus sanctimonia*)

PURITY OF MIND (*puritas mentis*)

1. Decorous and proper emotion (*affectus sinceri rectitudo*)
2. Delight of the mind in the Lord (*mentis in Domino delectati*); *Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.* (Psalm 37:4); contemplation engenders and shapes this feather.
3. Pure and well-ordered thought (*munda et ordinata cogitatio*)
4. Holiness of will (*voluntatis sanctitudo*)
5. Sound and pure intention (*simplex et pura intentio*)

LOVE OF NEIGHBOR (*dilectio proximi*)

1. Avoid injury to others by word or deed (*nulli nocere verbo vel opere*)
2. Do good in every word and deed (*omnibus prodesse, verbo et opere*)
3. Liberality (*verae liberalitatis fortitudine*); be magnanimous and generous, not niggardly.
4. Lay aside soul for brethren (*animam profratre ponere*); *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* (John 15: 13)
5. Persevere in fraternal love (*in his perseverare*)

LOVE OF GOD (*dilectio Dei*)

1. Long for and strive after nothing other than God (*aliud quam Deum non concupiscit*)
2. Distributes this love actively among brothers, sisters, and the world for the sake of God (*propter Deum sua distribuit*)
3. Reserve nothing for themselves but relinquish all things in God's name (*propter Deum nihil sibi reservat, sed omnia relinquit*)
4. Deny self for God alone (*propter Deum se ipsum abnegat*)
5. Persevere in love of God (*in his perseverat*)

Readings

Anonymous. *De sex alis cherubim*. Attr. Alan of Lille. PL 210:265A–280C. Paris: J. P. Migne, 1855. [Latin text](#).

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