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The Icon of the Annunciation - Paradigm and Prototype of the Ecclesial Christic Hierophany¹

Abstract

Without claiming an exhaustive approach, the present study attempts to present a few aspects related to the iconic theology of the Annunciation. This event has a twofold Christological significance: on the one hand, it implies the joy of fulfilling the veterotestamentary promise by the Incarnation of the Son of God, and, on the other hand, it reveals the first hierophany of the great feasts. The iconological canon of the Annunciation is a



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¹ This article will be published also in Romanian in the proceedings of the International Symposium “Icon and confession in the life of the Church”, at Doxologia Publishing House, Iași.

genuine treasure for the Orthodox spirituality and theology, emphasizing numerous catechetical, dogmatic, and eschatological meanings and messages. In this regard, the core of the present study is to present three symbols found on the version of a Byzantine icon of the Annunciation attributed to the twelfth century, vertically aligned in the middle of the icon: in the upper part, *the vermilion scarf* symbolizes the biological maternity of the Theotokos, in the middle, *the pillar of the throne* stands as symbol of the Church, and, in the lower part, *Mary's sewing basket* with the purple yarn hanging out – element expressed in the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete – stands as symbol of “the loom of the flesh of Immanuel with porphyry”. To conclude, the iconological content of the Feast of the Annunciation differs from all the other iconological themes expressing peace, immovability, immutability, and repose. Nevertheless, the theology of the icon of the Annunciation reveals a real movement, an encountered watchfulness, and unusual dynamics.

Keywords

icon, Annunciation, sanctification, symbol, Theotokos

1 Elements of Iconography: Revealing the Dynamics of the Fulfillment of the Human as Sanctification of Human Nature

The Feast of the Annunciation is the core of the Christian faith and the foundation of icon representation because God “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1: 14) through the dialogue between the two creatures: the angel and the human being. The dialogue consists of a face looking at another face initiating the dialogue. It creates communion, and communion is “the Church

of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3: 15).

The icon of the Annunciation is not a simple exposition of an evangelical pericope; it is also the theological expression of an aspect of Christ's redemptive work. In this icon, the dominant form is the life of Christ Himself, i.e., the specific manner of His presence and the character of His involvement in the world. This form makes an unusual appearance because, in the life of the Incarnate Christ, the highest work of His glory appears as the humblest form of the self-emptying, and the fullness of the divine life appears as suffering and death willingly. That is the reason why the "form" of life that the Virgin Mary has chosen for her own life is an image of her inner being, wholly offered to God².

The unforeseen appearance of the Angel causes the defensive gesture of the Virgin's hand, trying not only to stop the unexpected stepping of the heavenly messenger but also to hold off the roller of the text which the angel addressed to her. It is a strange and even incredible proposal; yet, the Archangel's blessing hand slips slowly and delicately near the Virgin's hand. Space, thin as the fragile "body" of our freedom of choice, continues to keep the two hands apart, delaying their touch. Among them, touched only by the Archangel's hand, we see the painted pillar supporting the Virgin's throne, resembling a splendid column with pedestal and capital.

At the very top of the canopy, we see the vermilion scarf hanging, i.e., the flag of Annunciation. The Archangel's huge wings disconnected by the flight are opposite to this. Up in the left corner, above the angel's wings, there is a black sun out of which there flows a discrete beam of light; the sun passes from one end of the golden icon to another, stopping somewhere in the air, close to Mary's head. There are only a few elements of

² Maximos CONSTAS, *Arta de a vedea. Paradox și percepție în iconografia ortodoxă*, translated by Dragoș Dâscă, (Iași: Doxologia Printing House, 2017), pp. 142-143.

the Eastern icon, showing and demonstrating the presence of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity: the divinity of the Father, symbolized by the undeveloped star in the corner of the icon, and His two working arms, the Person of Logos, foreshadowed by the talking creature of the eschatological angel, and the Person of the Holy Spirit, i.e. the dove embedded in the areola, figured among the light beam which crosses the icon dome³.



*The Icon of the Annunciation,
Byzantine version, 12th century*

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Virgin Mary, followed immediately by the conception of the Son of God, can be seen as the first epiclesis; the second one is that of the Pentecost, when the Church was visibly founded - the Flesh of Christ; the third epiclesis takes place at every Liturgy, when the Holy Spirit changes the Gifts of bread and wine into the Flesh and Blood of

³ Sorin DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana (I), 31+1 de iconologii pentru învățarea icoanei*, (Bucharest: Anastasia Foundation, 2010), pp. 231-234.

Christ⁴. To sum up, what has been stated so far, we can say that we see: to the left, the Trinity proposing, and to the right, the “New Eve”⁵ accepting.

The dialogue between the two creatures ultimately comes down to the words that Our Lady has spoken: “Be it”; this act of accepting the divine will make restored man to the willing obedience to God⁶. This restoration results in the renewal from the root of each element previously vitiated by failure. In this regard, Christ retakes Adam’s place, the Cross takes the place of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and Mary takes Eve’s place⁷. Her identity as a mother is given neither by her womb, nor by her breasts but, as Christ Himself testifies, by the fact that Mary heard, guarded, received, and put into practice the Word of God (Luke 11: 27-28)⁸.

In the *Protoevangelium of James*, an apocryphal gospel written in the second century, the message delivered by angel Gabriel brought fear and tremble in the Virgin’s heart: “Fear not, Mary, for you have found grace before the Lord of all, and you shall conceive, according to His word”. Moreover, she hearing, reasoned with herself, saying: “Shall I conceive by the Lord, the living God? Moreover, shall I bring forth as every woman brings forth”⁹? In a note on the critical edition *Le Protévangile Jacques et ses remaniements Latins* by Emile Amann, it has been argued

4 DANIEL, Metropolitan of Moldova and Bucovina, *Curs de Dogmatică - Studii aprofundate*, “Dumitru Stăniloae” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, for internal use, Iași, 2002-2003.

5 Sorin DUMITRESCU, *op.cit.*, p. 235.

6 Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Chipul evanghelic al lui Iisus Hristos*, (Sibiu: Metropolitan Centre, 1991), p. 16.

7 Alexis KNIAZEV, *Maica Domnului în Biserica Ortodoxă*, translated by Lucreția Maria Vasilescu, (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 1998), p. 56.

8 John BEHR, *Meditații de antropologie creștină în cuvânt și imagine*, translated by Dragoș Dâscă, (Iași: Doxologia Printing House, 2017), p. 98-99.

9 *** *Evangheliile apocrife*, translated by Cristian Bădiliță, (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 1996), p. 51.

that, later on, the Western theology brought forward the idea that Mary would have conceived Jesus through the ear - a realistic way of saying that she conceived Jesus after hearing the angel's words. Thus, the divine Logos perceived as *flatus vocis* would have fertilized the Virgin's ear¹⁰.

The ordinary word bears within itself the reason implanted by the Reason itself, i.e., by the Logos/ the Word of God. Hence, as it happens within the common man where the word/ the logos as bearer of the Reason/ of the Logos/ of the Word conceives the spiritual life, so it happened to Mary: the Reason of Logos itself, not the reason of logos as bearer of the Reason of Logos, has been conceived through hearing. Thus, some religious writers suggest that the divine Logos perceived as *flatus vocis* would have fertilized Mary's ear.

The icon of the Annunciation provides the strong feeling of a still image, and time stuck when the present and the eternity fold themselves at the speed of light. The time of the icon is the intensive overlap of now and forever. In regard of the Annunciation, the waiting suspended between *now* and *ever* indicates the icon theme, while the subject revolves itself around the *watchfulness* and *Virgin's spiritual discernment*¹¹.

The Byzantine icon of the Annunciation, dated back in the twelfth century, is described in the first volume of Sorin Dumitrescu's work *Noi și icoana (We and the Icon)*. Among the numerous elements of in-depth theological content, we have extracted only three fragments that pass almost unnoticed but which gather the *catechetical, dogmatic, and eschatological* meanings stipulated in the iconological canon of the Annunciation. This Byzantine version aligns, on the same vertical line, in the middle of the icon, above all, *the vermilion scarf* as symbol of the biological maternity of the Theotokos, in the middle, *the*

¹⁰ Emile AMANN, *Le Protévangile de Jaques et ses remaniements latins*, (Paris: Editions-Librairie Letouzey Et Ané, 1910), p. 223.

¹¹ Sorin DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana*, pp. 234-236.

pillar of the throne as symbol of the Church seen as “pillar and foundation of Truth”,(1 Tim. 3:15) and, in the lower part, *Mary’s sewing basket* with the purple yarn hanging out as symbol of “the loom of the flesh of Immanuel made with porphyry”¹².

2 The Flag of the Annunciation - Seal for the Motherhood of Church

The vermilion scarf or the blood-colored porphyry in the upper part of the icon belongs to the obligatory props of icons called to prophesy or to express the Incarnation of God, the Visit to Elizabeth, the Entry of the Mother of God into the Temple, the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, etc., and it announces the dogmatic message of the icon. The scarf refers to the Virgin’s placenta (or womb) where the Flesh of Christ was conceived and endowed with the Holy Spirit¹³.

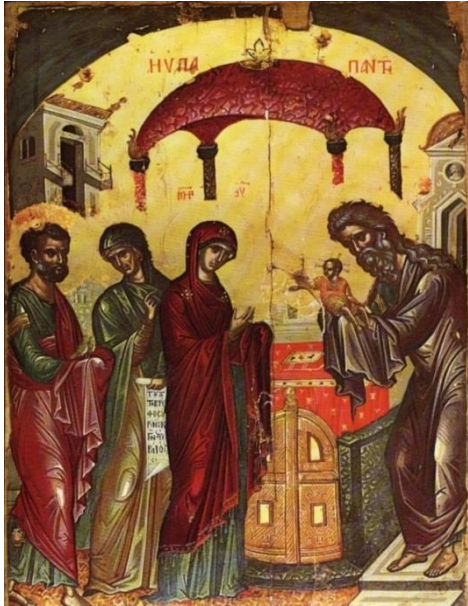
The Axion of the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great refers to the womb of Mary using a comparative of superiority involving the celestial, i.e., the heaven itself: “thy womb did He form more spacious than the heavens”¹⁴. Thus, by analogy, the Virgin Mary also *speaks from heaven*. Due to this fact, the blood-colored porphyry is part of the icon, and Mary is seen as personal heaven superior to the spiritual and topographical conception of the heaven seen as the place where God himself dwells.

In an icon of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple currently located at Stavronikita Monastery, Theophanes the Cretan describes the *Exchange* taking place in front of or above the oblation table.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 243-244.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

¹⁴ *** *Liturgier*, (Bucharest: Institute of the Bible and Orthodox Mission, 2012), p. 256.



The Presentation of Christ in the Temple by Theophanes the Cretan, 1546, Stavronikita Monastery

The table is surrounded by the canopy, and, behind it, one can see a couple of doors with frames making up the sign of the cross. Thus, the composition of this icon prefigures that of the Crucifixion, with Mary sitting at the feet of the cross; however, in this case, we see her by the altar. The respective icon shows a liturgical Golgotha, foreseeing the Self-sacrifice of the God of Israel on His ancient altar. The Temple area also takes a new form, namely that of a Christian edifice. The Mother of God brings her Child as a gift, like a bit of bread (from now on called “Lamb”) is brought for the Eucharistic Liturgy¹⁵.

In the icon above of the Presentation, we can also see that there is a book on the table, showing the transition from the Mosaic Law to the Gospel of Christ. We, therefore, understand that the

¹⁵ Maximos CONSTAS, *Arta de a vedea. Paradox și percepție*, pp. 147-148.

word of the Old Law ended because the Incarnate Word held by Simeon the Righteous above the oblation table reveals Himself. The coverage of Joseph's hands suggests that he is not the father of the flesh, and the Virgin Mary's uncovered hand shows that she is a mother without a father. By pointing her uncovered hand towards the Virgin Mary and Christ, and by staring precisely at Joseph's covered hands, Anna the Prophetess reinforces the same idea. Simeon's covered hands suggest the end of the old law over which the Giver of the New Law rules.

The vermilion scarf or the flag of Annunciation foreshadows the Virgin's biological maternity, that shirt, that veil, that dress, or that house of the Child in which the Son is wrapped, which, in its turn, prefigures the Church in a visible and authentic manner. At Stavronikita monastery, there is also another icon of the Annunciation made by the same painter, Theophanes the Cretan but the middle of its flag is golden.



Detail – *Ustyug* Annunciation, 12th century, at „The State *Tretyakov Gallery*” in Moscow

This color placed on a form symbolizing the hierarchical priesthood omophorion, by joining the red and the blue (green), prefigures the human and the divine united in the single person of the Grand Priest: Christ Himself. This scarf symbolizes both the Virgin's biological maternity and the Church whose holiness becomes visible by the priestly ministry, which is not understood as an attribute of the Virgin Mary (hence, the idea that women do not have access to the sacramental priesthood), but of Christ, always present in His Church. Thus, the flag or the scarf is not placed on Mary's shoulders, but above the canopy where the Virgin is seated, therefore proving that She is a constitutive part of the Church, not out of it.

In this regard, Saint Theophanes of Nicaea claims that Mary is the Neck of the Church (gr. *trachelos*, lat. *collum ecclesiae*), mediator and link between Head and Flesh¹⁶. Thus, the Neck unites the Christ (Head) with His mystical flesh, the Church. In this sense, the Virgin Mary, seen as Neck which unites the Church with the Christ (Head), is placed next to the omophorion of the hierarchical priesthood worn on the shoulders, thus showing that priesthood belongs to the constitution of the Church, and the shoulder is an integrant part of the body, just as the neck.

The vermilion color of the scarf is the result of the iconographic reason of representation of Jesus Christ wearing two differently colored vestments, bearing different symbolical meaning: the blue color stands as a symbol for His divine nature, and the red stands for His human nature. The red color refers to life, passion, and the bloodshed on the Cross for us, previously conceived in Mary's womb. We should notice here that this is something different from the physical suffering of the Savior during his passion; this is something that already anticipates the sufferings of the Mother of God for her son, present all the

¹⁶ TEOFAN AL NICEII, *Maica Domnului în teologia secolului XX și în spiritualitatea isihastă a secolului XIV*, texts and studies by Ioan I. Ică jr., (Sibiu: Deisis Publishing House, 2008), pp. 545-547.

way throughout her life, as Simeon the Righteous has once foretold: “yea and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul; that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke, 2: 35). The moment of the Presentation is depicted as a complex matrix of love and loss. The idea of losing her Child is the core of all the icons of the Presentation: first, Simeon the Righteous takes Him away, then she sees Him dying on the Cross. We notice Mary’s future-oriented sorrow and the fact that she acknowledges the pain of a much higher sacrifice in the act of offering her Child to Simeon the Righteous¹⁷.

Referring to the Incarnate Word, in his *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, St. Hippolytus of Rome develops the abovementioned idea to the extension of a metaphor about the fact that the Incarnate Word is earthly and heavenly as well: “For whereas the Word of God was without flesh, He took upon Himself the holy flesh by the holy Virgin, and prepared a robe which He wove for Himself, like a bridegroom, in the sufferings of the cross (...). The loom is, therefore, the pass on of the Lord upon the Cross, and the warp on it is the power of the Holy Spirit, and the woof is the holy flesh woven by the Spirit, the rods are the Word, and the workers are the patriarchs and prophets who weave the fair, long tunic for Christ”¹⁸.

The flesh of the Word received from the Virgin Mary and woven in the passions of the cross is wrought by the prophets and patriarchs, whose deeds and words testify the way in which the Word is made present and manifests itself. The act of proclaiming Him who died on the Cross and the interpretation given to the event in the womb of the Scripture both indicate that this Word receives flesh from the Virgin Mary. Hippolytus of Rome

¹⁷ Maximos CONSTAS, *Arta de A Vedeia, Paradox și percepție*, p. 148.

¹⁸ Arthur Cleveland COXE, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 5: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Revised and chronologically arranged with brief prefaces and occasional notes by A. Cleveland Coxe, (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), p. 205.

states that Mary is the Church that will never cease to keep in her heart the Word persecuted by the unbelieving world, and the child-man carried by the Church (Mary) is Christ, God, and Man¹⁹.

3 The pillar of the throne – The Church of the Living God

If the vermilion scarf of the icon of the Annunciation announces the Incarnation of God, the supporting column of Virgin Mary's throne foretells the embodiment of the Church and its eschatological vocation as "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3: 15).

In order to explain the presence of the pillar of the throne as a foreshadowing of the Church, we should make the following assumption: if the Virgin Mary is the Mother of Christ, and the Church is His mystical Flesh, His resurrected body, deified, and expanded into humanity, the Virgin Mary is also Mater Ecclesia (Mother of the Church). Making an analogy between the Annunciation and another feast dedicated to Our Lady, namely, The Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple, in his first homily on the Feast of the Annunciation, Saint Photius the Great refers to the Virgin Mary by the name of "temple of God"²⁰. She lived in the temple in Jerusalem from age three to age twelve when she was betrothed to Joseph the Righteous One. While staying at the temple, the Virgin Mary prepared herself in order to become the temple of God. God's presence in Our Lady, there-

¹⁹ John BEHR, *Formarea Teologiei Creștine, Drumul spre Niceea*, volume I, translated by Mihail G. Neamțu, (Bucharest: Sophia Publishing House, 2004), pp. 212-213.

²⁰ Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patriarhul Fotie cel Mare al Constantinopolului; Contribuții la dezvoltarea Teologiei. O analiză a Mariologiei din perspectiva hristologic-antropologică a învățaturii despre păcatul strămoșesc*, (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2012), p. 199.

fore, appears to be superior to Her presence in the temple in Jerusalem.

The Orthodox Eastern hymnography often refers to the Virgin Mary by the name “God’s church”²¹ or, as we call her in the Action of the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great, “the holy church”²². We, therefore, see the link between the Mother of God seen as a church-sanctuary and Jesus Christ seen as Church and people. It is evident that the image of the Mother of God as a temple or church is being gradually built, depending on the evolution of the concept of sacred space in the old vetero-testamentary theology: first, she is animated ark and holy tent²³, then she becomes the temple of the Living God. We take into account the period of the Old Covenant: ark, tent, temple, and Church of God (after the Incarnation of Christ, and after the completion of His entire work of redemption).

Saint Ephrem the Syrian suggests that one of the names of the Church is actually “Mary”: “She is a symbol of the Church when she receives the first proclamation of the Gospel. Moreover, in the name of the Church, Mary sees the risen Jesus. Blessed is God who filled Mary and the Church with joy. We shall name the Church Mary”²⁴. Mary receives the proclamation of the Gospel (the Annunciation), and she conceives the incarnate Christ; she is also the one who received the message of the Risen Lord, assuming - like Eve did once with Adam - that He is “the gar-

²¹ John BEHR, *Meditații de antropologie creștină în cuvânt și imagine*, translated by Dragoș Dâscă, (Iași: Doxologia Printing House, 2017), p. 99.

²² *** *Catavasier*, Bucharest: Institute of the Bible and Orthodox Mission, 2017, p. 110.

²³ SIMEON, Metropolitan of the New Myrrh, *Bucură-te, cea plină de har! Cuvinte la praznicele Maicii Domnului*, translated by Victor Manolache, (Galați: Egumenița Publishing House, 2017), pp. 78-83.

²⁴ Thomas Josephus LAMY, *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones*, Publisher Mechliniae: Hubert Dessain, Summi Pontificis, S. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide et Archiepiscopatus Mechliniensis Typographus, volume I, 1882, p. 534.

dener" (John 20: 15)²⁵. The patristic text mentioned by Professor John Behr (St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York) seems quite confusing at first glance, and especially at the end of it. In this text, the distinguished professor of Patristics John Behr wants to emphasize the fact that at the time of the Annunciation, the Mother of God received God's Word through the angel, and thus conceived the Divine Logos. At the tomb of Christ, she received good tidings again, namely, that of resurrection, out of God's mouth as the first one who saw Jesus risen, unlike Mary Magdalene who did not understand the message of Jesus the Risen One and treated Him as a mere gardener. Mary understood that he is, in fact, "the gardener"²⁶. The Old Eve once assumed that Adam was "the gardener", not realizing that he was a mere gardener, while God was "the gardener". The Old Eve's assumption is fully and certainly renewed by Mary, who is the "New Eve" who correctly identifies "the gardener", while Mary Magdalene is not able to understand that there is not an Old Adam or a mere gardener in front of her, but the New Adam, i.e. "the gardener".

To support the claims advanced by Saint Ephrem the Syrian, according to which the Theotokos was the first one to see the Christ Risen, in his Homily for the Sunday of Myrrh-bearing Women, Saint Gregory Palamas concludes that the Theotokos is the first one who saw the Christ Risen from the dead. According to Palamas, the Mother of God is the other Mary, who witnessed the earthquake, the stone that rolled away from the tomb, the flash like lightning and the words of the angel. She was the only myrrh-bearing woman who understood the mystery and surrendered herself entirely to the being wholly purified and divinely favored. When she went back to the tomb joined by the other women, suddenly Jesus met them saying: "Rejoice!" (Matt.

²⁵ John BEHR, *Meditații de antropologie creștină în cuvânt și imagine*, pp. 99-100.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

28: 9). Moreover, this time Theotokos alone of all the women understood the meaning of the angel's words, as she was the first of the women both to see and to know the Risen One, and she was the first to fall and clasp His feet and become His apostle to the Apostles²⁷.

Saint Nicholas Cabasilas, Archbishop of Thessalonica, suggests that if someone could see Christ's Church, then he or she would see it only as the flesh of God because it is united with Christ and it is part of His flesh²⁸. However, if at the same time, we looked at the Blessed Virgin Mary, we would see her only as the heart of our Christ. She is the center of the life of the creature, a boundary between the Earth and the sky. The Russian theologian Pavel Florenski states that the Virgin Mary is the bearer of purity, a manifestation of Holy Spirit, and the Spring of the Church, the Virgin "wedded to God" who ceased to be *one of the many others* in the Church. She is the exclusive center of the life of the Church, and the Church itself²⁹.

4 Mary's sewing basket and the purple yarn – the foreshadowing of the body of Immanuel

In the lower part of the icon of the Annunciation, one may notice a small sewing basket with a purple thread hanging out of it. It is Mary's work basket. What was the iconographer's purpose when he placed the basket in the lower part of the scene, in the inferior space, isolated from the vigorous context of the composition? Mary's sewing basket is the signal-object which

²⁷ GRIGORE PALAMA, *Maica Domnului în teologia secolului XX și în spiritualitatea isihastă a secolului XIV*, texts and studies by Ioan I. Ică jr., (Sibiu: Deisis Publishing House, 2008), pp. 412-417.

²⁸ NICOLAE CABASILAS, *Explicarea Dumnezeieștii Liturghii*, translated by Ene Braniște, (Bucharest: The Archdiocese of Bucharest, 1989), p. 55.

²⁹ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Stâlpul și Temelia Adevărului, Încercare de teodicee ortodoxă în douăsprezece scrisori*, translated by Emil Iordache, (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 1999), p. 228.

fully supports the catechetical message of the Annunciation. Throughout the Christian asceticism, starting from the Desert Fathers, the handmade work generates the monk's watchfulness in a positive way, strengthens his patience against temptations, and mainly intensifies his judgment. These virtues kept awake and gathered together by the useful handmade work, make up, as monks already know, the working vigilance. It opens the way for the monk to overcome the world, and helps him glimpse "the truth that will set him free"³⁰.

Just as Christ entered the untouched path of the Mother of God and she went into the sanctuary of the Temple, in the same way, monastic life is an entrance to the untrodden path. The Monk is an offering, since Christ Himself offered his life to the Father, becoming Son by birth, and then, by crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, remained faithful to His Father's will, to whom He has brought the human nature as an offering as well. The monk is also a gift, just as Christ and the Mother of God, and when he enters the untrodden path of monastic life, he enters a sacramental life³¹. A household tool of watchfulness, Mary's sewing basket proves to be useful for ascetic work; this toolbox was endowed with a universal perspective: the Virgin Mary's "receptive function"³². It is the origin of the saving deliberation which shattered the deadlock, giving humanity another chance for salvation.

According to the symbolism of the classical world, the lifespan of a man is compared to a thread. This vision can be found in the history of the Jewish people as well, is enhanced by introducing a frame (a wooden frame consisting of two concentric circles, which stretches the fabric to be embroidered, or the warp yarns to weave the carpets). Referring to this issue, the

³⁰ Sorin DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana (I)*, pp. 242-243.

³¹ EMILIANOS SIMONOPETRITUL, *Cuvântări mistagogice la sărbători*, translated by Agapie Corbu, (Arad: Saint Nectarios Publishing House, 2016), pp. 315-316.

³² Sorin Dumitrescu, *Noi și Icoana (I)*, p. 243.

prophet Isaiah once said: “Like a weaver, I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom” (Isaiah, 38: 12). The fact that the life and death of a man are foretold by using the production of textile materials is a phenomenon described in many cultures around the world. For example, we find it in the Hindu scriptures called the Upanishads, which are part of the Vedas and in some modern writings of British and American literature as well³³. Medicine in ancient Greece associates the composition of the human body with the weaving of the threads, and nowadays, genetics has developed the idea of producing the DNA through a fiber called mitotic spindle³⁴. Looking through the image of a DNA macromolecule, one can notice that it consists of two antiparallel polynucleotide chains of helical form twisted with each other. The two chains similar to two threads are connected with each other by hydrogen bonds. All these abovementioned elements of ancient and modern culture regarding the terminology of the weaving of the yarns remind us of the image of the thread (Flesh of Immanuel) in the icon of the Annunciation.

The apocryphal writings *Protoevangelium of James*³⁵ and *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*³⁶ contain texts indicating the fact that

³³ Valerie J. ROEBUCK, *The Upanishads*, (London: Penguin Group, 2003), p. 85.

³⁴ Nicholas CONSTAS, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity. Homilies 1-5, Texts and Translations*, (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2003), pp. 341-342.

³⁵ The text about the spinning of the veil is taken from the *Protoevangelium of James*: The Virgin Mary took the pitcher, and went out to fill it with water. While walking, she suddenly heard a voice saying: “Hail, you who hast received *grace*; the Lord is with you!” And she went away, trembling, to her house, and put down the pitcher; and taking the purple, she sat down on her seat, and drew it out. And an angel of the Lord stood before her, saying: “Fear not, Mary; for you have found *grace* before the Lord of all, and you shall conceive, according to His word”. And she hearing, reasoned with herself, saying: “Shall I conceive by the Lord, the living God? And shall I bring forth as every *woman* brings forth?” The *angel* of the Lord said that she would not bring forth

the Virgin Mary was responsible for weaving the wool for the iconostasis of the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem when an angel blessed her. In this sense, the New Testament states that Christ's flesh, like a sanctified curtain, was identified immediately with the veil: "By a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body" (Hebrews 10: 20). In the end, we can say that what has been molded by the hands of Our Lady (the curtain) and her womb (the Flesh of Christ) have the same outcome: they were both torn apart when Jesus breathed His last breath on the cross. The Virgin Mary's thread and the spindle or the sewing basket are currently found in the oldest representations of the icon of the Annunciation and remain a vital element of Eastern Orthodox iconography.

Linking the moment of the Incarnation with that of the Crucifixion of Christ, and having the Virgin Mary as a link, we can say that, according to Nicholas Cabasilas, and taking into account the same lexical field, the Mother of God is the right altar and blood out of which the garment for Immanuel's flesh was woven, thus making reference to a text by prophet Isaiah: "Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the

as every women would, for the power of the Lord was about to overshadow her: *** *Evangelii Apocrife*, translated by Cristian Bădiliță, (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 1996), p. 51.

³⁶ The weaving scene can be found in the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* as well: while Mary was at the well to fill her pitcher, the angel of the Lord appeared to her, saying: "Blessed art thou, Mary; for in thy womb thou hast prepared an habitation for the Lord. For, lo, the light from heaven shall come and dwell in thee, and by means of thee will shine over the whole world". Again, on the third day, while she was working at the purple with her fingers, there entered a young man of ineffable beauty. And when Mary saw him, she exceedingly feared and trembled. And he said to her: "Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found favour with God: Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a King, who fills not only the earth, but the heaven, and who reigns from generation to generation": *** *Evangelii Apocrife*, p. 159.

greatness of his strength?" (Is. 63: 1)³⁷. The icon of the painter Theophanes the Cretan (16th century) demonstrates that both the angel's scarf and the Virgin Mary's spinning tools were cross-shaped. Thus, the angelic cross is a reflection of the shape of the Virgin's spindle which portrays the catechetical message of the icon synthetically. The Virgin's crucifix is a foreshadowing of the fact that the Logos, Who dwelt within her womb, will be woven together with the mortal flesh, and He will give His life on the Cross. That cross is also a pictogram that mimics the shape of the flesh and unites the creative sacrifice of birth with the redeeming sacrifice of the death on the Cross.



The Icon of the Annunciation, Theophanes the Cretan, 1546, The Imperial Doors, Stavronikita Monastery

³⁷ Nicolae CABASILĂ, *Scieri 1: Cuvântările teologice: la Iezechiel-Hristos-Fecioara Maria*, translated by Ioan I. Ică jr., (Sibiu: Deisis Publishing House, 2010), pp. 223-224.

To conclude, we may say that this Cross seems to rest on the left knee of the Virgin, being a foreshadowing of the Incarnate Logos, who will live there both as a child and as lifeless flesh as well³⁸.

5 Conclusions

The three objects under analysis: the blood-colored porphyry at the top of the flag, symbolizing Mary's biological maternity, the pillar of the throne which prefigures the Church, and the yarn in the basket, symbolizing the flesh of Christ, restore the Troparion of the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete in a penitential and ecclesial manner: "The spiritual purple of Emmanuel was woven inside thy womb as if from scarlet silk, O Most-pure Virgin. Therefore we honor thee as truly Theotokos" (Ode 8, Tone 8). Both the Incarnate God and the Virgin Mary who bore Him in her womb – the conception and the crucifixion – denote two aspects of a single experience. By taking the humanity on Him, God paved the way for the art of craftsmanship that is decorative, aesthetic, and pedagogical on the one hand, and sanctification and bearer of the mystery, on the other hand. The icon was therefore designed to send not only the message of an ecclesial event but also the divine mysteries, through which the viewer of the icon comes into communion with the holy persons reflected in the images. Chronologically speaking, the icon of the Annunciation is the first one that makes possible and real the shift in the character of God from His unseen to His seen presence in the world.

³⁸ Maximos CONSTAS, *Arta de A Vedeia, Paradox și percepție*, pp. 159-161.

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