

The bed in images of the Annunciation (14th-15th centuries): An iconographic interpretation according to Latin Patristics¹

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Recibido: 15 de julio de 2020 / Aceptado: 20 de octubre de 2020

Abstract. The images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries often include in their scene a bed with evident prominence, which allows us to conjecture that this piece of furniture contains some symbolism of particular relevance. Given such unusual detail, this article seeks to interpret the possible doctrinal meanings that this bed could provide. In this sense, twelve Annunciations of this period, which include a bed, are analyzed first with a personal interpretation that stands against some inadequate “interpretations” proposed by other modern authors. We will try to justify our interpretations based on an abundant corpus of texts through which many Latin Fathers and theologians see the thalamus concept as two complementary metaphors: a metaphor of God the Son’s incarnation in Mary’s womb, and also a metaphor of Mary’s virgin divine motherhood.

Keywords: Christian Iconography; Annunciation; Christ’s Incarnation; Mariology; Christology; Latin Patristics.

[es] El lecho en imágenes de la Anunciación (siglos XIV y XV): Interpretación iconográfica según la Patrística Latina

Resumen. Las imágenes de la Anunciación de los siglos XIV y XV a menudo incluyen en su escena una cama con evidente prominencia, lo que nos permite conjeturar que este mueble contiene algún simbolismo de particular relevancia. Dado un detalle tan inusual, este artículo busca interpretar los posibles significados doctrinales que podría contener esta cama. En este sentido, doce Anunciaciones de este período que incluyen una cama se analizan primero con una interpretación personal que se opone a algunas “interpretaciones” inadecuadas propuestas por otros autores modernos. Intentaremos justificar nuestras interpretaciones basadas en un abundante corpus de textos a través del cual muchos Padres y teólogos latinos ven el concepto del tálamo como dos metáforas complementarias: una metáfora de la encarnación del Hijo de Dios en el vientre de María, y también una metáfora de la maternidad divina virgen de María.

Palabras clave: Iconografía cristiana; Anunciación; Encarnación de Cristo; Mariología; Cristología; Patrística Latina.

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Cómo citar: Salvador-González, J. M. (2021). The bed in images of the Annunciation (14th-15th centuries): An iconographic interpretation according to Latin Patristics. *De Medio Aevo* 15(1), 77-93.

1. Introduction

The artistic representation of the event of the Annunciation to Mary experienced a significant evolution over the centuries, as evidenced by some iconographers, such as Manuel Trens (1947),³ Louis Réau (1957),⁴ Giuseppe Toscano (1961),⁵ Gertrud Schiller (1971),⁶ or Timothy Verdon (2004).⁷ During the first nine centuries of the Christian era, the depiction of this Marian episode was expressed according to

a straightforward, stripped scene, usually reduced to the only presence of the two protagonists, the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, in static attitudes, cut out on an abstract neutral background, usually without any accessory.

In the Romanesque period, the scene of the Annunciation began to include a series of increasingly numerous compositional, narrative elements. These concretize in two complementary aspects: firstly, in its protagonists, since the Virgin progressively com-

¹ This article is part of the activities of my CAPIRE Research Group, assigned to the Complutense University of Madrid <https://www.ucm.es/capire>.

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³ Manuel Trens, 1947, *María. Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español*, Madrid, Plus Ultra.

⁴ Louis Réau, 1957, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*. Tome 2, *Iconographie de la Bible*. Part II, *Nouveau Testament*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

⁵ Giuseppe M., Toscano, 1960, *Il pensiero cristiano nell'arte*, Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche.

⁶ Gertrud Schiller, 1971, *Iconography of Christian Art*, London, Lund Humphries, Vol I, 32-37.

⁷ Timothy Verdon, 2004, *Maria nell'arte europea*, Milano, Electa.

plemented her figure with a prayer book, a seat or a recliner, while the angel holds a staff of herald; secondly, concerning the scenography, usually embedded as a narrow architectural framework like a niche, or an increasingly large room or structural element, which suggests the Virgin's home.

In the Late Middle Ages, especially in the 14th and 15th centuries, the images of the Annunciation quickly acquired a progressive complexity.⁸ They begin to include numerous narrative elements, such as a stem of lilies in the angel's hands and or in a vase,⁹ a beam of rays descending towards the Virgin, carrying in its wake the dove of the Holy Spirit, Mary's home shaped like a luxurious abode or a temple, and abundant and precious furniture enriching the scene. Not a few of these details, besides their apparent compositional function, also contain a specific symbolic value related to some essential doctrinal meanings.

One of these narrative elements that many images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries incorporate into the composition is precisely a bed, displayed prominently, usually in the center of the scene and almost always with large dimensions. Now, most art historians not even mention such a bed, and, when some allude to it, they usually do so to consider it a mere decorative detail, without any significant interest. In contrast, others bring some arbitrary and undocumented "interpretations" on it.

Therefore, given such inexplicable silence and unjustified "interpretations" on the bed in the images of the Annunciation, we will address this problem in the current article through two complementary objectives: 1) First, and above all, to undertake an in-depth research in primary sources of Christian doctrine, to verify if, and to what extent and meaning, some Latin Church Fathers and theologians have doctrinally mentioned and interpreted some biblical expression referring metaphorically to a bed or other similar symbolic object; we should note here that in another article, we deal with offering an analogous set of exegetic glosses on the bed by Greek-Eastern Fathers.¹⁰ 2) Based on our conceptual findings when analyzing Christian doctrinal texts, our second methodological objective is to examine some paintings of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries that include a bed, and eventually to highlight the silence and, in particular, some unacceptable "interpretations" which some art historians and iconographers had done on that bed

2. Exploring the primary sources of Christian doctrine on *thalamus Dei* and other similar metaphors

This first analysis of texts is structured in two complementary phases: first of all, the study of the writings of many Church Fathers and medieval theologians on the metaphors in question; second, the scrutiny of some medieval liturgical hymns.

2.1. Latin Fathers and theologians' interpretations on *thalamus*

A thorough investigation in primary sources of the Latin and Greek Patristics soon revealed progressively the answers to the problems raised by that surprising bed (*thalamus*) in images of the Annunciation. Let us specify, first of all, that Latin concept *thalamus* means both "nuptial bed" (or only "bed") and "nuptial room." These two complementary meanings are precisely those that almost all the Christian writers which we consulted have in mind in their exegeses by glossing expressions that include the term *thalamus*.

Now, the enormous amount of comments we have found on *thalamus* among the Latin and Greek-Eastern Fathers and theologians forces us to a double effort of taxonomic selection and ordering. In this sense, in the current article, we will present only a range of exegetic texts of Latin Church Fathers and theologians. At the same time, we set aside for a second article a similar selection of comments of Greek-Eastern Fathers.

In the second half of the 4th century, St. Ambrose of Milan (330-397) refers in one of his hymns to the virginal conception of Jesus, as God the Son incarnate in Mary's womb, and to his supernatural birth preserving his Mother's virginity. So Ambrose praises Christ with these poetic terms:

Leaving his bridal bedroom
The royal palace of purity,
Giant of two twin substances,
For running the road fast.¹¹

Some decades later, St. Maximus of Turin († c. 420), taking up the *thalamus* metaphor, points out that God had planned to associate Mary as Christ's marital bed, in which he became incarnate as a man from her fleshly substance (*Praevidebat enim in*

⁸ On that subject in this period, see, for example, David M. Robb, 1936, "The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *The Art Bulletin* 18, 480-526.

⁹ We have analyzed this subject of the stem of lilies in the following papers: José María Salvador-González, *Flos de radice Iesse*. A hermeneutic approach to the theme of the lily in the Spanish Gothic painting of The Annunciation from patristic and theological sources," *Eikón Imago* 4 (2013): 183-222; José María Salvador-González, "In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur. Nueva interpretación del lirio en La Anunciación gótica española a la luz de fuentes patristicas y teológicas", *Anales de Historia del Arte* 24 (2014a): 37-60; José María Salvador-González, "Flos campi et lilium convallium. Third interpretation of lily in the iconography of The Annunciation in Italian Trecento art from patristic and theological sources", *Eikón Imago* 5 (2014b): 75-96; José María Salvador González, "Sanctitate vernans virga Aaronis. Interpretation of the stem of lilies in the medieval iconography of the Annunciation according to theological sources". Oxford Academic Studies Press. *Art Studies and Architectural Journal* 10 # 9 (2015b): 2-32.

¹⁰ José María Salvador-González, "The bed in images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries: a dogmatic symbol according to Greek-Eastern Patrology," *Imago. Revista de Emblemática y Cultura Visual*, 12 (2020), (in press).

¹¹ Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Hymnus IV*. PL 16, 1.411.

spiritu Mariam de germine suo Christi thalamo sociandam), according to the passage of Psalm 18: “He proceeds from his nuptial bedroom as a husband.”¹² Right away, after remembering that David sang and danced with joy before the ark of the covenant,¹³ the holy bishop of Turin argues that the Virgin Mary is a sacred ark better than ancient Jewish ark of the covenant, because, if it contained the Old Covenant slabs, Mary gestated the heir of that same Testament; and, if that held the old law, Mary contained the Gospel; and, if the ark of the covenant contained the voice of God, Mary contained the right Word (*Verbum*) of God; and, if that one shone inside and outside with the glow of earthly gold, Mary shines inside and outside with the brightness of the heavenly gold of virginity.¹⁴

Perhaps for the same years, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430)¹⁵ imagines in his Sermon 70 –if this attributed sermon is his own¹⁶– a rhetorical dialogue with the Virgin Mary, in which he says that “God prepared in your nuptial bed [womb] the wedding for his Son: and in that same joyful betrothal the world was freed from all that had offended [God].”¹⁷

A couple of decades later St. Peter Chrysologus (c. 380-451), in a homily on Christ’s incarnation, after asking who, being unworthy, could approach the gates of the divine palace, replies by saying that nobody is admitted for approaching the husband’s nuptial bedroom, except the only one who is quite close and intimate to him, having a good conscience and worthy standing. On the contrary, only the Virgin fits within the bridal bedroom itself (of God the Son); God receives only the immaculate virginity.¹⁸

Almost a century and a half later, St. Venantius Fortunatus (c. 530-c. 607/609) takes up the *thalamus* symbol in some hymns, in one of which he asserts:

The chaste members of the maiden are the Creator’s temples,
Furthermore, God himself inhabits that nuptial bedroom.

How much the wife can delight by her virginity,
The same God’s mother delights only as a virgin.¹⁹

Moreover, in another poem in praise of the Virgin, Venantius vows on similar metaphorical expressions about God the Son’s divine conception/incarnation in Mary’s virginal womb, by stating:

Christ is the one who comes from above as a husband
from his bridal bedroom,
And rejoices like a giant running the road,
Oh, the nuptial bed of the womb [Mary],
the new union made of salvation,
In which God, [who] is also flesh [man], married as a
new honor!
In which [nuptial bed] God embraced the flesh, the
flesh united together [to deity].
[So] He remains God, and becomes man, [to exist as]
Christ [with] both natures.²⁰

Several decades later St. Isidore of Seville (c. 556-636) states in a book against the Jews that Christ was born marvelously as a husband who comes out from his bridal bedroom, scilicet, from Mary’s womb, after whose childbirth she did not have intercourse with anybody, nor did she engender another child.²¹

Approximately one generation later, St. Ildefonsus of Toledo (607-667) asserts in a dissertation about Mary’s perpetual virginity that she is the God’s nuptial bed, as God the Son incarnate came out from her womb, as the husband referred to in Psalm 18, preserving her perpetual virginity.²²

More or less four centuries later, St. Peter Damian (1007-1072) undertakes several times the *thalamus* metaphor as a symbol of God the Son’s incarnation and Mary’s virginal divine motherhood. Thus, in a sermon on Mary’s birth, the author maintains that, just as humankind’s redemption could be impossible without the Son of God being born of a Virgin, so this Virgin needed to exist from whom the divine Word would incarnate; thus, it was essential that a house

¹² Maximus Taurinensis, *Sermo* 42, 5. PL 57, 738-739.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “However, what would we call ark but the Holy Mary? For indeed the ark [of the Jewish covenant] carried within the slabs of the [Old] Testament, but Mary was gestating the heir of the same Testament. That [ark of the covenant] contained within the law, this [Mary] contained the Gospel. It had the voice of God, she had the true Word [of God]; and while the ark [of the covenant] shone on the inside and outside with the glow of gold, the Holy Mary also shone inside and outside with the splendor of virginity. That [ark of the covenant] was adorned with earthly gold, this [Mary] with the celestial one.” (Ibid.).

¹⁵ Augustinus (attributed), *Sermo CXX. In Natali Domini IV*, 7. PL 39, 1.984-1.986.

¹⁶ Jacques-Paul Migne places this Sermon among those attributed to Augustine.

¹⁷ Augustinus (attributed), *Sermo CXX. In Natali Domini IV*, 7. PL 39, 1.986.

¹⁸ “Who will approach the same gates of the palace being vile, being unworthy? Certainly no one who is not close enough, who is not intimate enough, who is not of good conscience, who is not of praiseworthy fame is admitted to approach the husband’s nuptial bedroom. But within the nuptial bedroom itself it is only possible to enter a virgin; only an immaculate virginity is received.” (Petrus Chrysologus, *Sermo CXLI. De Incarnatione Domini*. PL 52, 577-588).

¹⁹ Venantius Fortunatus, *Miscellanea. Liber VIII. Caput VI. In nomine Domini nostri Jesu Christi et Domnae Mariae Matris eius de virginitate*. PL 88, 268-269.

²⁰ Venantius Fortunatus, *Miscellanea. Liber VIII. Caput VII. In laudem sanctae Mariae Virginis et matris Domini*. PL 88, 277.

²¹ “For the Lord our God Jesus Christ was born admirably and by his power, as the husband came out from his nuptial bedroom (Ps. XVIII, 6), that is, from the womb of the Virgin, after whose birth we confess that no man maintained intercourse with Mary, that no other son was begotten from her womb.” (Isidorus Hispalensis, *De fide Catholica contra Judaeos. Liber Primus, X*, 10. PL 83, 470).

²² “This virgin in the psalm is the nuptial bedroom of God (thalamus Dei), because this incarnate God came out from her womb as a husband, preserving in her intact the precious attribute of perpetual virginity (Psal. XVIII).” (Hildefonsus Toletanus, *Liber de virginitate perpetua S. Mariae adversus tres infideles*, III. PL 96, 67).

where the King of heaven, descending to earth, condescended to have as lodging, be built.²³ Similarly, it was first necessary to create a nuptial bedroom that could receive the Husband who was coming to espouse his Church, this Husband (Christ) whose epithalamium David sang when says exultantly in Psalm 18: “The Lord is coming from his bridal bedroom as a husband.”²⁴

In another sermon on the Annunciation, the author states that Jesus, as an intense lover, sings the epithalamium with praise, where the Husband enters exhaling a heartfelt love.²⁵ Furthermore, in other writing about the Annunciation, Peter Damian retakes once again with lyrical emphasis the metaphor under scrutiny. After pointing out that God the Son, eternal in his divine majesty, covered himself with the veil of weak human flesh, he ensures that, by joining the Word of God to human nature, the heavenly Husband associated himself in the nuptial bedroom of Mary’s virginal womb to her holy Church, for the love of which he whose infinite immensity heaven cannot contain did not despise the narrowness of mother’s womb.²⁶

A few decades later, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) takes up almost obsessively the doctrinal metaphor of *thalamus* in some canticles in praise of Mary. In one of them, he proclaims:

Mary, the God’s nuptial bed,
Ask those who revere you
May they gloss with the virtues,
Who are obscured by their sins.²⁷

Moreover, in another stanza of the same hymn he proclaims:

Hail, the lawyer’s mother,
Who, joyful with the news,
Came out of the palace of the incorrupt womb
As his nuptial bedroom.²⁸

Furthermore, in a new stanza of this canticle the Archbishop of Canterbury reiterates:

Hail, from whose virginal
Nuptial bed God comes,
Bringing himself to us as grace in grant
In the betrothal.²⁹

A few verses later, the hymnographer continues his praises to Mary with these poetic words:

Hail, a mother whose bridegroom
And creator and son,
Is God, the enlightenment,
The salvation and the protection.³⁰

Some stanzas later, St. Anselm completes his congratulations to the Virgin as the nuptial bedroom of God, expressing:

Hail, this pacific Zion,
Where the hymn outfits God,
Who turned for himself into a nuptial bedroom
The palace of your virginity.³¹

About a generation later, the Benedictine theologian Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075/1080-c. 1129) praises the Virgin Mary by calling her “*templum Domini, sacrarium Spiritus sancti, thalamum sanctitatis, triclinium divini consilii*,” in which God, coming to save us, clothed himself with our flesh.³²

On the other hand, the Benedictine abbot Geoffrey of Vendôme (c. 1070-1132), in a sermon on Jesus Nativity, states that Mary was a holy virgin before delivery, and an even holier virgin in childbirth, and the holiest virgin after birth, as the higher the divine involvement was in her, the more sanctity and religion developed in her.³³ And then he points out that the door of Mary’s womb was never open, but always closed and sealed, through which God Himself became incarnate, like the bridegroom from his bridal bedroom; that is why, one designates Virgin Mary’s

²³ “For as it was impossible for the redemption of the humankind to take place, unless God the Son was born of a Virgin; so it was also necessary that the Virgin, from whom the Word [of God] became flesh, was born. In fact, it was convenient to build the house first, to which the King of heaven, when going down [to the earth], deigned to have as his”. (Petrus Damianus, *Sermo XLV. II. In Nativitate Beatissimae Virginis Mariae*. PL 144, 741-742 (PL 144, 740-748).

²⁴ “It was first necessary to erect the nuptial bedroom, to receive the Husband of the Holy Church who was coming to marry, whom David, exulting in his spirit, sang the epithalamium, saying: ‘The Lord who leaves his nuptial bedroom as a husband (Psal. xviii)’.” (Ibid.).

²⁵ “That vehement lover sees and burns, and sings all his epithalamium with praise, in which the husband is manifestly induced by inspiring a very sincere love”. (Petrus Damianus, *Sermo XI. De Annuntiatione Beatissimae Virginis Mariae*. PL 144, 558).

²⁶ “The one who was omnipotent in the majesty of his eternal essence covered himself with the veil of the weak flesh; and, while the Word of God the Father joined human nature, the heavenly husband associated himself with the holy Church in the nuptial bedroom of the virginal womb [of Mary], in favor of whose love [of the Church] He who does not fit in the infinite width of heaven did not spare the narrowness of the mother’s womb.” (Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et preces. XVI. In eadem annuntiatione beatissimae virginis Mariae*. Ad missam, Praefatio. PL 145, 934).

²⁷ Anselmus Cantauriensis, *Hymni et Psalterium De Sancta Virgine Maria. Hymnus ad nocturnum*. PL 158, 1.035.

²⁸ Anselmus Cantauriensis, *Hymni et Psalterium De Sancta Virgine Maria. Psalterium Dominae nostrae. Pars I*. PL 158, 1.037.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 1.039.

³¹ Ibid., 1.041.

³² Rupertus Tuitiensis, *De Divinis Officiis. Liber Tertius, Caput XI*. PL 170, 67 (9-333).

³³ “For she was a holy Virgin before childbirth, and a virgin more holy in childbirth, and the most holy virgin after childbirth, because the greater the works the divine intervention did in her, the greater holiness and religion grew in her.” (Goffridus Vindocinensis, *Sermo IV. In Nativitate Domini IV*. PL 157, 250).

womb as the nuptial bed, for the Godhead is united in it with our human flesh, and our flesh is united with the Deity.³⁴

A few years later Honorius of Autun (c. 1080-c. 1157) states that the Virgin Mary is the tabernacle of God or the Church, according to what Psalm 18 says “He put his tabernacle in the Sun,” in which God the Son rested when becoming human, and from which he came out as a husband exits from his nuptial bedroom.³⁵

More or less by the same years St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) declares in a lecture that Mary is the royal road by which the Savior comes, coming from her womb like the bridegroom from his bridal bedroom; therefore he requests the Virgin for having access to her Son by her so that he who was given to us by her will receive us.³⁶

Furthermore, in another text in praise of Mary, St. Bernard asserts on the Annunciation:

How much is God’s dignity! How great Virgin’s excellence! Run, mothers, run, daughters, run all who after Eve, and by Eve, and give birth sadly, and give birth. Go to the virginal nuptial bedroom [Mary], come in, if you can, in your sister’s chaste nuptial chamber.³⁷

Approximately half a century later, Peter of Blois (1135-1204), in a sermon on Mary’s birth, points out that she is the nuptial bedroom of God the Son, for he could enter into communion with human nature. From it, Christ was born of her *as the bridegroom from his bridal bedroom*.³⁸

The Benedictine bishop Peter of Celle (c. 1115-1183) in his famous *Liber de Panibus* alludes numerous times to the metaphorical expression *thalamus Dei* –complementing it with that of the bread oven and the temple– as symbols of Mary. Thus, in one of the numerous passages in this book dealing with these three metaphors, Peter of Celle states:

This Virgin [Mary], I say, is not only a bread oven, when she receives the Holy Spirit, but she is also a nuptial bed when she conceives God [the Son], and she is also a temple, living chastely. She is a bread oven, for conversing with dignity; she is a nuptial bed, to conceive in an ineffable way; she is a temple, offering herself to God as a living, holy and pleasant host. She is an oven to prepare bread; a nuptial bed to receive the Bridegroom [Christ]; a temple to introduce the pontiff [Christ].³⁹

Almost a century later St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1221-1274) asserts in a sermon on the Annunciation that the Creator rested in the tabernacle of Mary’s virginal womb, for having put there his nuptial bedroom to become our brother, for having prepared there the royal throne to become our prince, and for having taken the priestly ornaments to become our Pontiff.⁴⁰ The author states that, by this nuptial union, Mary is the God’s Mother; by the royal throne, she is Queen of heaven; and by the priestly vestments, she is an attorney of Humanity; and for all those merits the Virgin Mary was quite suitable, for being of the human race, royal line and priestly lineage; therefore she can say rightly: *He who created me has rested in my tabernacle*.⁴¹ Then Bonaventure goes on saying that

He [God the Son] put his nuptial bedroom in it [Mary’s womb]; and he did so just to espouse the human nature in the virginal womb, anticipating what the prophet David said with prophetic certainty by the divine Spirit: *He put his tabernacle in the sun*. In the sun, he says, that is, in the Holy Virgin, who is rightly entitled as the sun, as she was covered with the sun and fulfilled with the light of eternal brightness, as stated in chapter 12 of Apocalypse: *A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet*.⁴²

³⁴ “For the door of the womb of the mother of the new Savior was never opened, but it was always closed and sealed, through which God Himself became man, like a husband who gets out of his nuptial bedroom (Psal. XVIII, 6). The womb of the good and blessed Virgin Mary is called the nuptial bedroom (*thalamus*), because in it the Godhead is associated with our flesh, and our flesh is associated with the Godhead.” (Goffridus Vindocinensis, *Sermo IV. In Nativitate Domini IV*. PL 157, 250).

³⁵ “The blessed always Virgin Mary is the tabernacle of the Church or of God, according to what is said: She put his tabernacle in the sun (Psal, XVIII, 6). In which the Son of God rested when he became a man, and from which he came out as a husband from his nuptial bedroom (*ibid.*).” (Honorius Augustodunensis, *Sigillum Beatae Mariae ubi exponuntur Cantica Canticorum*. PL 172, 498).

³⁶ “But you already realized, if I am not mistaken, that the Royal Virgin is herself the way, by which the Savior came, coming from her womb, as a husband from his nuptial bedroom. [...] May we have access to the Son [of God] through you, oh blessed inventor of grace, begetting of life, mother of salvation, so that the one who [Jesus] is given to us may receive us for you.” (Bernardus Claraevallensis, *In Adventu Domini. Sermo Secundus*, 5. In *Obras completas de San Bernardo. Edición bilingüe promovida por la Conferencia Regional Española de Abades Cistercienses*, vol. III. *Sermones litúrgicos (I)*, Madrid, La Editorial Católica, 1985, 74-76).

³⁷ Bernardus Claraevallensis, *In laudibus Virginis Matris. Homilia II. En Obras completas de San Bernardo. Edición bilingüe. Promovida por la Conferencia Regional Española de Abades Cistercienses*, Tomo II. Tratados (2º), Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1984, 615.

³⁸ “[Mary] Is a nuptial chamber for the common union of nature, from which Christ came out as a husband from his nuptial bedroom.” (Peter of Blois, *Sermo XXXVIII. In Nativitate Beatae Mariae*. PL 207, 675).

³⁹ Petrus Cellensis, *Liber de Panibus*, cap. XXI. PL 202, 1018.

⁴⁰ “That is why the Creator of the universe rested in the tabernacle of the virgin womb, because he established for himself a nuptial bedroom, to become our brother, he prepared the royal throne, to become our prince; He assumed the priestly dress, to become our pontiff.” (Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *Sermones de B. Virgine Maria. II. De Annunciatione B. Virginis Mariae. Sermo IV. In Obras de San Buenaventura. Tomo IV. Teología mística*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963, 628-631).

⁴¹ “The Virgin Mary is Mother of God by her nuptial bond; he is king of heaven, by his royal throne; She is lawyer to the human race because of her priestly dress. And the Virgin Mary was suitable for all these things, for being of the human race, the gender of the kings and the genre of the priests. Say therefore the most beloved Virgin Mary: *Whoever created me rested in my tabernacle*.” (Ibid.).

⁴² Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *Sermones de B. Virgine Maria. II. De Annunciatione B. Virginis Mariae. Sermo IV. In Obras de San Buenaventura*.

To complete his reasoning, St. Bonaventure adds:

So, he indeed says: *In the sun*, that is, in the blessed Virgin. And then he enhances *as a husband*, for the womb of the Virgin was the nuptial bed in which God joined human nature, and embracing it, merged it with a conjugal union. [...] In this [...] sacrosanct uterus God the Son put the human nature, to marry it: so our Creator of the universe became our brother, and the blessed Virgin became the Mother of all Saints.⁴³

2.2. The *thalamus Dei* and other similar metaphors in medieval liturgical hymns

At this point, it is essential to note that these countless patristic and theological interpretations of the *thalamus Dei* metaphor and other similar metaphorical expressions find a symptomatic reflection and a concordant echo in many medieval liturgical hymns, which, more or less explicitly, allude poetically to those same metaphors. To tell the truth, nothing else could be expected, considering that medieval hymnographers compose their liturgical and devotional songs and poems inspired by the official doctrine of the Fathers, Doctors, and theologians who are recognized as the genuine masters of Christian orthodoxy.

We are lucky that the prestigious German historian Franz Joseph Mone collected and edited in the mid-19th century most of these Latin liturgical hymns in three volumes:⁴⁴ the first dedicated to God;⁴⁵ the second, to the Virgin Mary;⁴⁶ the third, to the saints.⁴⁷ The fragments of the medieval liturgical hymns we will cite below have been extracted from the second volume of F. J. Mone. Here are some samples.

Hymn 373, dedicated in the 14th century to the Virgin, praises her in its fourth stanza with these compliments:

Hail, the nuptial bed of God
Myrrh, incense, and balsam,
Oh Mary.⁴⁸

Another 14th-century liturgical canticle, Hymn 473, written for the hour of Vespers in a liturgical office in honor of Mary, manifests in its fourth stanza a warm tribute to the Virgin with these joyous praises:

Rejoice, you who in the nuptial bed of your womb
Gestate as your own when incarnating
To God the Son,
And you fed him with the balsam of your milk.⁴⁹

And several stanzas later the devotional song insists on similar metaphors, proclaiming:

Rejoice, you who sing to the husband
With a song that has no end,
Your epithalamium be
Own just for you.⁵⁰

In turn, Hymn 400, composed in the 15th century inspired by each of the words of the *Ave Maria* prayer, manifests in its second stanza:

Mary, mother of God,
Bridal bed of love,
Mary, the bosom of rest,
Source of sweetness,
Mary, the port of our hope,
Bridge against terror,
I beg you, remember me
blind sinner.⁵¹

Finally, Hymn 491, also written in the 15th century in honor of Mary, exalts her for her privileged

Tomo IV. Teología mística, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963, 628-631).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ In addition to the three volumes that we will mention below, Franz Joseph Mone published at least this other volume in German translation: F. J. Mone, *Lateinische Hymnen des Mittelalters*, Freiburg im Breslau, Herder'sche Verlagshandlung, 1855.

⁴⁵ Franz Joseph Mone, *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi. E codd. Mss. Edidit et adnotationibus illustravit Franc. Jos. Mone. Tomus Primus. Hymni ad Deum et angelos*, Friburgi Brisgoviae, Sumptibus Herder, 1853.

⁴⁶ Franz Joseph Mone, *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi. E codd. Mss. Edidit et adnotationibus illustravit Franc. Jos. Mone. Tomus Secundus. Hymni ad. B.V. Mariam*, Friburgi Brisgoviae, Sumptibus Herder, 1854.

⁴⁷ Franz Joseph Mone, *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi. E codd. Mss. Edidit et adnotationibus illustravit Franc. Jos. Mone. Tomus Tertius. Hymni ad Sanctos*, Friburgi Brisgoviae, Sumptibus Herder, 1855.

⁴⁸ "Ave, Dei thalamus

Myrrha, thus et balsamus,

O Maria". ("Hymnus 373. De b. Maria v.". In Mone, *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi, Tomus Secundus*, 67)

⁴⁹ "Gaude, quae Dei filium

Tuum per carnem proprium

Ventris portastis thalamo

Lactis potasti balsamo."

("Hymnus 473. De gloriosa b. Maria. Ad vespas". In Mone, *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi, Tomus Secundus*, 188-189).

⁵⁰ "Gaude, quae sponso concinis

Cantu, cuius non est finis,

Tuum epithalamium tibi

soli sit proprium." (Ibid., 189).

⁵¹ "Maria mater dei,

thalamus amoris,

Maria requiei

sinus, fons dulcoris,

Maria nostri spei

portus, pons terroris,

status as virginal mother of God the Son incarnated with these lyrical metaphors:

Palace of the Supreme King,
Emperor's Throne,
Back of the bed of the Bridegroom,
You are the wife of the Creator.⁵²

3. Analyzing ten images of the Annunciation with a bed in the 14th-15th centuries

After collecting many testimonies from Latin Fathers, theologians and hymnographers, who unanimously interpret the *thalamus Dei* metaphor and other similar analogical expressions with the Christological and Mariological meanings already explained, it is time to verify if these dogmatic symbolisms contained in those metaphors are reflected in the artistic images of the Annunciation. We focus the analysis on the plastic representations of the Annunciation, and not on other Marian episodes and iconographic typologies, because all the interpretations of the Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers on the metaphorical expressions studied here refer to the dogmas of God the Son's incarnation and Mary's virginal divine motherhood. And these two dogmas are precisely those that become real in the event of the Annunciation, when the Virgin accepts, with an unrestricted obedience as *ancilla Domini*, the will of the Most High to make her mother of his divine Son incarnate

as man. Let's start with the iconographic analysis of some Annunciations.

At first, it should be noted that the presence of a bed in images of the Annunciation during the 14th and 15th centuries is a characteristic quite common to artists from the most diverse regional backgrounds, be they Italian, Flemish, Spanish, French, German and other European countries. The ten paintings to be analyzed in this paper –as well as many other Annunciations of the 14th and 15th centuries not included in this short sample– incorporate a bed in the scene. However, the finding that this bed almost always stands out for its large size, its splendor, order, and cleanliness, its prominent position (usually in the center of the scene), and its clear function as the prolongation/identification with Mary or as a link between the angel and the Virgin allows to conjecture that it contains some outstanding doctrinal significances in this crucial event of the Annunciation to Mary.

Besides, the undeniable fact that so many different artists from such diverse sociocultural fields, as Italy, Flanders, Spain, France, or Germany, include so repeatedly and so prominently a bed in some Annunciations raises a disturbing problem. It is worth asking whether this reiterative and prominent bed is a pure coincidence, or a mere painter's whim, or a simple, insignificant decorative detail, or if, on the contrary, it is a connoted symbol which contains some crucial doctrinal meaning. The iconographic analyzes that we propose below on these ten Annunciations will try to shed some light on this problem.



Fig. 1. Barna da Siena (or Lippo Memmi), *The Annunciation*, c. 1340. Collegiata di Santa Maria Assunta, San Gimignano. Photo Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barna_Da_Siena_-_The_Annunciation_-_WGA01280.jpg (Last access: 05/02/2020)

Barna da Siena (or, according to other experts, Lippo Memmi), when painting the fresco *The Annunciation*, c. 1340, in the Collegiata di Santa Maria Assunta in San Gimignano (Fig. 1), represented the

house of Mary as a simple, bare room. On its left, a stairway porch leads to the entrance, where the angel entered. On the right, a narrow enclosure lodges a maid spinning the wool. Bringing her ear closer to

memento quaeso mei caeci peccatoris." ("Hymnus 400. Ave Maria". In Mone, *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi, Tomus Secundus*, 107).

⁵² "Summi regis palatium, Thronus imperatoris, Sponsi reclinatorium, Tu sponsa creatoris." ("Hymnus 491. De b. Maria v.". In Mone, *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi, Tomus Secundus*, 211).

the wall, she spies the conversation that the angel and the maiden have in the main room.

Apart from the engaging anecdote of the indiscreet spinner, we are interested in highlighting in this simplified, geometric scenery the bedroom located at the bottom, with Mary's bed visible through the half-open curtains. By this relevant bed –the

only piece of furniture in the scene (except the table next to Mary), occupying all the backward space, in a central position and as a link between Gabriel and Mary–, the painter wanted to highlight the great importance of that bed. Nevertheless, this bed has been ignored by most experts, as, for instance, Joachim Poeschke.⁵³



Fig. 2. Tommaso del Mazza, *The Annunciation*, c. 1390. The Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Photo Paul Getty Museum: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/579/tommaso-del-mazza-the-annunciation-italian-about-1390-1395/> (Last access: 05/02/2020).

Tommaso dal Mazza (act. 1377-1392), when depicting *The Annunciation*, c. 1390, from The Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (Fig. 2), prefers to place this Marian event in the context of a building with some temple characteristics.⁵⁴ These are mainly the niche or small chapel where the Virgin seats, and above all, the precise aspect of a nave, with large windows and its facade crowned by a gable with pinnacles, which fills the painting's left sector.

Kneeling in the outer space of that strange “house/temple,” the angel Gabriel, holding a massive stem of lilies in his left hand, blesses Mary with his right while pointing to the dove of the Holy Spirit,

who flies towards Mary. Interrupting her prayer in the book kept on her knees, she receives in a submissive and crestfallen attitude the angel's message that communicates to her the plan of the Most High, who appears levitating on the upper-left edge of the panel.

It is interesting to note that the room of this house –in the form of a church nave, with large windows and a facade topped with a triangular pinion— is precisely the nuptial chamber of Mary, whose bed with a red cover you can see through the open bay of the door, just between Gabriel and Mary. Not to doubt it, the author of the panel wants to highlight in this scene

⁵³ When commenting this painting, Joachim Poeschke is content just to say: “Derrière elle [Mary], une tenture à moitié ouverte laisse apercevoir sa chambre.” (Joachim Poeschke, *Fresques italiennes du temps de Giotto, 1280-1400*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 2003, 312). Poeschke says nothing about the bed and ignores its outstanding doctrinal meaning.

⁵⁴ We have iconographically interpreted the house of Maria shaped as a temple in images of the Annunciation in the article José María Salvador-González, 2020a, “The temple in images of the Annunciation: a double dogmatic symbol according to the Latin theological tradition (6th-15th centuries)”, *De Medio Aevo*, 14, 53-65.

the bed and the nuptial bedroom (*thalamus*) of Mary, for the relevant doctrinal meanings of which they are

invested, as we have explained in the second part of the article.



Fig. 3. Pere Serra, *The Annunciation*, a panel of the *Holy Spirit Altarpiece*, c. 1394. Basilica of St. Mary, Manresa. Photo Wikimedia Commons: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/af/060_Santa_Maria_de_Manresa%2C_retaule_de_l%27Esperit_Sant%2C_caselles_del_costat_esquerre.jpg (Last access: 05/02/2020).

The Catalan painter Pere Serra (active between 1357 and 1406), when expressing his *Annunciation*, c. 1394, a panel of the *Altarpiece of the Holy Spirit* at the Collegiate Church of St. Mary in Manresa (Fig. 3), gives the Virgin's bed a leading role. All the scenery of this narrow, tiny enclosure—with an artificial linear perspective—is reduced to the nuptial room, filled by a huge red bed. In that capricious scenery the angel, kneeling before the seated Virgin, announces to her that, by God's design, she will be the mother of his divine Son without manly intervention, because “the Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow

you.” That is why the painter captures the dove of the Holy Spirit, touching Mary's ear, for illustrating the curious thesis of *conceptio per aurem*.⁵⁵ Seated on the bed's platform, Mary submissively bows her head to show her compliance with the Almighty's will.

The circumstance that in this painting the bed acquires such an invading prominence, almost filling the small space of the house and in close proximity/continuity with Mary—almost identifying it with her—reveals that the intellectual author of this painting seems to be aware of the significant value of this nuptial bed.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ We have dealt with that thesis in the paper José María Salvador-González, “Per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam. Aproximación iconográfica a la *conceptio per aurem* en la pintura italiana del Trecento desde fuentes patristicas y teológicas,” *Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* 20 (2015a): 193-230.

⁵⁶ As far as we know, no commentator of this painting by Pere Serra has interpreted this bed conceptually.



Fig. 4. Pietro di Miniato, *Annunciazione e storie di Gesù*, 1390-1399, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Photo Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pietro_di_miniato,_annunciazione_e_altre_storie_di_ges%C3%B9,_1390-1420_ca._01.JPG (Last access: 05/02/2020)

Pietro di Miniato poses *The Annunciation*, 1390-1399, painted in fresco on the back-facade of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (Fig. 4), according to a unique narrative structure. Even placing, as expected, the Virgin inside her home—expressed here in the form of a cubic enclosure decorated in Cosmatesque style—he places the angel exceptionally outside the house before its closed door (*porta clausa*). With this fine detail, the intellectual author of this fresco would undoubtedly mean the patristic interpretation of Ezekiel's *porta clausa* as a symbol of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and the supernatural conception/incarnation of God the Son made man in the Virgin's womb.⁵⁷

However, for the purposes we are looking for in this article, it is convenient to highlight the bridal bedroom in the center at the bottom of the scene, whose open door shows the red bed through the half-open white curtains that protect its privacy. Located in a prominent place, at the center of the composition and serving as a link between the heavenly messenger and the recipient of the divine message, this con-

noted *thalamus*—the nuptial room and its bed— translates as a *visual metaphor* the deep dogmatic meanings that, as we have seen above, the Latin Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers were able to see in the *textual metaphor* of *thalamus Dei*. Therefore, it is incredible that the commentators we know about this painting, including Vera-Simone Schulz, do not realize these meanings of the bed.⁵⁸



Fig. 5. Bicci di Lorenzo, *The Annunciation*, c. 1430. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Photo the Walters Art Museum: <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/36492/the-annunciation-4/> (Last access: 05/02/2020).

Bicci di Lorenzo designs *The Annunciation*, c. 1430, of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland (Fig. 5), in a relatively similar way as Tommaso del Mazza did in his newly analyzed *Annunciation*, c. 1390, of the Paul Getty Museum. When structuring his panel, Bicci di Lorenzo also places Gabriel kneeling in the outer space, outside the house (shaped like a thin parallelepiped) where the seated Mary interrupts her prayer for the unexpected arrival of the angel. At the same time, in the middle of both the Virgin's nuptial bedroom stands, through whose open door you can see the red bed. With such details, the intellectual author of this painting marks the doctrinal importance of that *thalamus*, in the same epistemic sense that we have already indicated, and following the same theological interpretation that we have explained in the second part of the article.

⁵⁷ On this specific Mariological metaphor see our paper José María Salvador-González, "Haec Porta Domini. Exegeses of some Greek Church Fathers on Ezekiel's *porta clausa* (5th-10th centuries)", *Cauriensia*, 15 (2020): 615-633.

⁵⁸ When commenting this fresco, which she attributes to Jacopo di Cione, Vera-Simone Schulz (2018, "Infiltrating Artifacts: The Impact of Islamic Art in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Florence and Pisa," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 87 / 4, 218, Fig. 4) does not mention the bed.



Fig. 6. Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Annunciation with donors*, 1450. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Roma. Photo Wikipedia: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciazione_di_palazzo_Barberini#/media/File:Fra_Filippo_Lippi_011.jpg (Last access: 05/02/2020)

Fra Filippo Lippi structures his *Annunciation with donors*, 1450, from the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome (Fig. 6) in the context of a luxurious Renaissance palace, full of precious polychrome marbles and splendid decoration. Framed in the central arch and the vaulted gallery that communicates with a closed garden (*hortus conclusus*) in the background, the majestic upright figure of the Virgin constitutes the physical and conceptual center of the composition. The kneeling angel gives her a stem of lilies—a symbol of her already imminent virginal divine motherhood—as an eloquent metaphor for the heavenly message, announcing to her that God has chosen her as the mother of God the Son incarnate.

As a complement to that symbolic stem of lilies, the red bed of embroidered bedspread that one can see in the upper left of the painting is also affirmed as an analogous symbol of Mary's virginal divine maternity as well as God the Son's conception/incarnation in the Virgin's womb, as we have shown in the second part of this study, based on the multi-secular exegetic tradition of Latin Patristics. In that sense, it is quite strange that most commentators of this Lippi's painting ignore the doctrinal content of this bed, just as Giuseppe Marchini⁵⁹ and Jeffrey Ruda⁶⁰ do.



Fig. 7. Rogier van der Weyden, *The Annunciation*, left panel of *St. Columba Altarpiece*, c. 1455, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Photo Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_St_Columba_Altarpiece_\(left_panel\)_-_WGA25657.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rogier_van_der_Weyden_-_St_Columba_Altarpiece_(left_panel)_-_WGA25657.jpg) (Last access: 05/02/2020)

⁵⁹ In his comment on this Annunciation, Giuseppe Marchini (1979, *Filippo Lippi*, Milano, Electa, 204, n. 22, fig. 39) says nothing about the bed.

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Ruda, 1993, *Fra Filippo Lippi. Life and work with a complete catalogue*, London, Phaidon, 126, 130, 154, and mainly. 153-163, plates 84, 85 and 86 y 89; and. 403-404, cat. 23. In all these entries Ruda not even mention the bed.

Rogier van der Weyden plans a similar situation in *The Annunciation* of the left panel of the *Altarpiece of the Adoration of the Magi* (*St. Columba Altarpiece*), painted around 1455 for the main altar of the church of St. Columba in Cologne, which is exhibited today at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (Fig. 7). Here too, van der Weyden places a large, luxurious red bed, protected by canopy and curtains of the same color, inside a living room (not a bridal bedroom): the large windows and the door with direct access from outside to the house reveal that it is a living room.

In any case, as in the other similar paintings analyzed so far, this nuptial bed stands out with evident prominence for its grand size (which fills a large part of the compositional space), for its vibrant and symbolic red color, for its luxury, order, and neatness, and for placing it in perfect continuity/identification with the Virgin's figure. All these details reveal that the

iconographic programmer of this panel seems to be aware of the deep doctrinal meanings that this bed contains. So it is impressive that most commentators of this painting have silenced all reference to this bed, as Max Julius Friedländer (1924; 1967),⁶¹ Martin Davies (1973),⁶² Odile Delenda (1987),⁶³ Paul Philippot (1994),⁶⁴ Albert Châtelet (1999^a and 1999b),⁶⁵ Elisabeth Dhanens and Jellie Dijkstra (1999),⁶⁶ Dirk De Vos (2002),⁶⁷ and Stephan Kemperdick (2009) do.⁶⁸ Furthermore, when someone alludes to this bed, they do so by giving some inadequate interpretation of it, as Erwin Panofsky (1953),⁶⁹ Dirk De Vos (1999),⁷⁰ and Lorne Campbell and Jan van der Stock (2009)⁷¹ do. Panofsky begins by relating the bed included in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* with this one contained in Rogier van der Weyden's *Annunciations*,⁷² as in that one of the Louvre, on which he states that it clearly expresses the idea of symbolic *thalamus*.⁷³ Then, in specific reference to

⁶¹ In commenting this St. Columba Annunciation, Max Julius Friedländer (1967b [1924], *Early Netherlandish painting. Vol. 2, Rogier van der Weyden and the Master of Flémalle*, Leiden, A.W. Sijthoff, plates 70 and 72) not even mentions the bed.

⁶² Martin Davies, *Rogier van der Weyden. Essai accompagné d'un catalogue critique des oeuvres qui lui ont été attribuées ainsi qu'à Robert Campin*, Bruxelles, Arcade, 1973.

⁶³ Odile Delenda, 1987, *Rogier van der Weyden (Roger de Le Pasture)*, Paris, Cerf, Tricorne.

⁶⁴ In his comments on this St. Columba Annunciation, Paul Philippot (1994, *La peinture dans les anciens Pays-Bas: XVe-XVIe siècles*, Paris, Flammarion, 40, fig 34) does not mention the bed.

⁶⁵ In none of his two books on Rogier van der Weyden, Albert Châtelet –1999a, *Rogier van der Weyden (Rogier de la Pasture)*, Paris, Gallimard, 112-117; and 1999b, *Rogier van der Weyden. Problèmes de la vie et de l'œuvre*, Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 195-200—, when commenting this St. Columba Annunciation, mentions the bed.

⁶⁶ In their comment on this St. Columba Annunciation, Elisabeth Dhanens and Jellie Dijkstra (1999, *Rogier de le Pasture van der Weyden. Introduction à l'œuvre. Relecture des sources*, Tournai, La Renaissance du Libre, 350) say nothing about the bed.

⁶⁷ Dirk De Vos, 2002, *Les primitifs flamands. Les chefs d'œuvre*, Bruges, Fonds Mercator.

⁶⁸ In their comment on this St. Columba Annunciation, Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sandber (2009, *The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden* (exhib. cat.), Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum, and the Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 96 and 100-101, fig. 58) say nothing about the symbolic meaning of this bed.

⁶⁹ Erwin Panofsky (1966 [1953], *Early Netherlandish painting. Its origins and character*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, vol. I, 203-204, and 249-251) brings an extended comment on this St. Columba Altarpiece.

⁷⁰ When commenting widely this St. Columba Altarpiece, Dirk De Vos (1999, *Rogier van der Weyden. L'œuvre complet*, Paris, Hazan, 277-278, and 276-284), states: "*L'Annonciation* est du type *thalamus* et se déroule donc dans la chambre à coucher de Marie, symbole de sa grossesse et de son mariage mystique" (Ibid., 280). In addition to, as we will explain in the following Note 72, in confrontation with Erwin Panofsky, the room represented in this St. Columba Annunciation is not Mary's bedroom, De Vos does not justify with documentary arguments of the Christian doctrine why this alleged bedroom would be "a symbol of her pregnancy and her mystical marriage." For the rest, he does not say either with whom Mary consummates her "mystical marriage".

⁷¹ When commenting this Rogier's Anunciation in the Louvre Museum in their monographic work on the artist, Lorne Campbell and Jan van der Stock (2009, *Rogier van der Weyden 1400-1464. Master of passions* (cat. exp.), Leuven, Davidsfonds) assert: "As in Jan van Eyck's *Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his Wife*, the bed is an essential part of the furnishing of a well-appointed reception room. Within the bed-curtains hangs a golden roundel representing Christ enthroned. His halo incorporates a cross; he raises his right hand in blessing and holds an orb in his left hand. The circumference of the roundel is decorated with twenty large pearls." (Campbell & van der Stock, *Rogier van der Weyden 1400-1464*, 351). It would have been necessary for Campbell and van der Stock to explain their surprising and unjustified statement that "the bed is an essential part of the furnishing of a well-appointed reception room." In fact, it seems unlikely that anyone will install his matrimonial bed right in the reception room of the house. Both commentators also do not explain why Rogier van der Weyden decided –against all logic— to incorporate the matrimonial bed in the living room of the house, precisely to represent the theological content of the crucial event of the Annunciation.

⁷² Speaking on Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, Erwin Panofsky states: "It is not by a chance that the scene takes place in a bedroom instead of a sitting room, for the matrimonial bed was so sacred that a married couple in bed could be visited and blessed by the Trinity, and even the scene of the Annunciation had come to be staged in what was officially referred to as the *thalamus Virginis*." (Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*, Vol. I, 203). In our opinion, Panofsky does not seem to be right when he states that the scene of the Annunciation happens in Mary's bedroom, and not in the sitting room of her house. In fact, in this Annunciation by van der Weyden, as well as in other analogous Flemish Annunciations of the fifteenth century, the scene depicted is a living room, as suggested by the furniture, the windows (and sometimes also the door) open to the outside, and the usual presence of the fireplace. The surprising inclusion of a matrimonial bed in that living room is, on the contrary, strictly due to doctrinal reasons, to symbolize the Christological and Mariological contents that we will explain in the second part of this article. Panofsky also does not justify documentary why he claims that the scene of the Annunciation was "officially referred to as the *thalamus Virginis*", nor does he tell us what exactly that *thalamus Virginis* means from the doctrinal perspective.

⁷³ With a certain stubbornness Panofsky insists again: "In Roger's Louvre panel the Annunciation chamber itself is conspicuously and unequivocally characterized as a *thalamus*, a nuptial room not unlike the interior in the Arnolfini portrait, and the symbolic significance of the bed is clearly manifested by the fact that the chased medallion suspended from its headboard bears the image of the Lord." (Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*, Vol. I, 254). To affirm with such forcefulness as Panofsky does that, in this van der Weyden's painting in the Louvre, "the Annunciation chamber itself is conspicuously and unequivocally characterized as a *thalamus*, a nuptial room" does not seem convincing. In fact, the luxurious furniture, the refined lamp, the large windows generously open to the outside, and above all the large fireplace, are more typical of a living room than of a nuptial room (*thalamus*).

the Annunciation of *St. Columba Altarpiece*, Panofsky assures that in this painting, van der Weyden is

the first painter to want to signify this bed as the symbolic *thalamus Virginis*.⁷⁴



Fig. 8. South Netherlandish Painter, *The Annunciation*, c. 1460. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo The Metropolitan Museum, NY: (Last access: 15/07/2020)

The anonymous South Netherlandish Painter who depicted *The Annunciation*, c. 1460, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, fully expresses the symbolic meanings that we have elucidated here. On the one hand, in effect, he adopts the usual narrative elements in this Marian event: the angel, with his herald stick and the phylacteria with the inscription (almost illegible) *AVE GRATIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM*, kneels reverently before the Virgin; seated on a red cushion on the floor, like *Madonna of Humility*, Mary lowers her head and eyes demurely at the unforeseen irruption of the heavenly messenger, while, in a gesture reminiscent of that of the priest officiating the Mass, she opens in parallel the hands before her chest to manifest her unrestricted acceptance of the will of the Most High; at her feet a conventional stem of lilies stands upright in a beautiful vase; on the furniture in front of the Virgin an open book in which she meditated refers to the Old Testament prophecies that are being fulfilled in the Annunciation; next to the book an apple appears, undoubtedly alluding to the apple of Eve, who by sinning in the Earthly Paradise was the cause of sin and death, an apple that, now before the Virgin, symbolizes the new Eve=Mary, who, by begetting the Redeemer, will make redemption and new life possible.

However, along with those relatively predictable narrative elements, this South Netherlandish Painter

surprises us with the unusual bed of the Virgin depicted on this panel. Against all logic, this green bed appears --the bed only, not the nonexistent bedroom-- inexplicably “embedded” in the middle of the wall, as if it and its external implements (canopy and curtains) were an extension in depth of the wall.

It is evident that, by giving this bed such an impossible situation and such a prominent role --filling half of the pictorial space and in perfect continuity/identification with Mary’s figure--, the intellectual author of this painting wants to highlight the deep Mariological and Christological meanings of the *thalamus Dei* that, based on the coinciding testimonies of Latin Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers, we have explained in the first part of the article.

The Master of Sopedrán organizes *The Annunciation*, c. 1470, of the Prado Museum in Madrid (Fig. 9) reversing the traditional placement of the two protagonists of the event: he places Gabriel on the right, initiating the kneeling gesture, while the Virgin appears kneeling on the left of the composition. The author of the painting stages the Marian episode in the living room of the Virgin, with its elegant furniture, its large windows open to the outside, its pavement of polychrome tiles, and its large fireplace. For our research purposes, the most exciting item in this painting is the luxurious, unpolluted red bed covered by an elegant canopy and green curtains.

⁷⁴ Speaking on the Annunciation of the *St. Columba Altarpiece*, Erwin Panofsky asserts: “And he [Rogier van der Weyden] was also the first to throw full light upon the idea of the *thalamus Virginis*. Where a bed appears in such contemporary or slightly earlier renderings as the Brenken altarpiece or the ‘Annunciations’ by Masolino, Fra Angelico and Bicci di Lorenzo it is removed into an alcove in the rear or nearly hidden in an adjacent room, a modest footnote to the main text.” (Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*: vol. I, 254). It is unnecessary to repeat here the same critical observations we have just made to Panofsky in the preceding footnotes, in the sense of rejecting his “interpretation” of the *St. Columba Annunciation’s* room as the *thalamus Virginis*.



Fig. 9. Master of Sopetrán, *The Annunciation*, c. 1470. Prado Museum, Madrid. Photo Prado Museum: <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/la-anunciacion/a1f4b7a1-b596-4934-95ef-4433554ef1f0> (Last access: 05/02/2020)

The unusual fact that, against all objective logic, the intellectual author of this Prado Museum painting has placed a matrimonial bed (*thalamus*) in the middle of the living room of Virgin's home clearly shows that he wanted to highlight the profound doctrinal symbolism that this bed encloses in its essential relationship with Son of God's incarnation and with Mary's virginal divine motherhood, which are the two essential dogmatic contents in the event of the Annunciation.

Domenico Ghirlandaio poses *The Annunciation*, painted in fresco around 1486-1490 in the Tornabuoni Chapel of the Basilica of Santa Maria Novella in

Florence (Fig. 10), through a risky, although bright, synthesis, due to the hard compositional space, coercively limited by two decorated *candelieri* pilasters. In this narrow, high parallelogram, the artist manages to include in-depth Mary's home, represented as a luxurious Renaissance palace, through one of whose geminated windows a vast landscape of sea and mountains is perceived. Trimming on that precious background, the angel kneels before the shy Virgin, while conveying the good news of her election as Mother of the divine Son incarnate, symbolized by the stem of lilies he carries in his left hand.

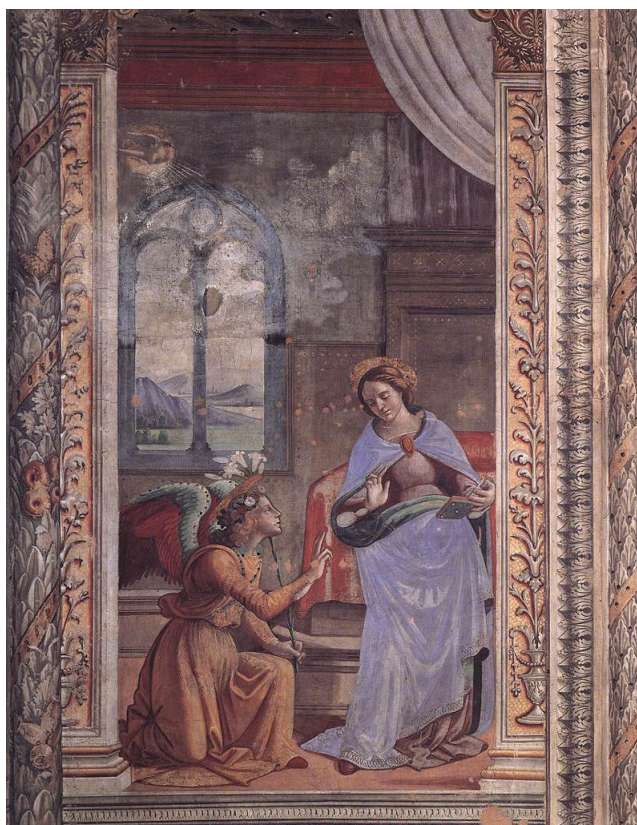


Fig. 10. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Annunciation*. Cappella Tornabuoni, c. 1486-90. Basilica di Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Photo Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Domenico_Ghirlandaio_-_Annunciation_-_WGA8873.jpg (Last access: 05/02/2020)

Concerning the analyzed subject, it is worth highlighting the large red bed that, behind Mary in this *Tornabuoni Annunciation*, seems to manifest itself in continuity/identification with her. With this eloquent detail, the intellectual author of this fresco appears to want to illustrate, as a *visual metaphor*, the doctrinal meanings revealed by the Fathers and theologians when interpreting the *textual metaphor* of *thalamus*, as we have explained above. As if that were not enough, these meanings continue in the white curtain, protective of the secret of the nuptial bed, drawn back in a curve in the upper right corner of the painting.

4. Conclusions

The two complementary types of research undertaken on images and texts seem to be reliable enough bases to justify the following essential conclusions:

1. All the Latin Fathers, theologians and hymnographers studied above concord in interpreting the biblical expression “bed” or “bridal bedroom” (*thalamus*) as a symbol of the Virgin Mary and her virginal womb. They understand this metaphorical expression in a double sense: a) the virginal womb of Mary is the bridal bed in which God the Son, when incarnating, “espouses” his divine nature with human nature; b) the virginal womb of Mary is also the bridal bed where God the Son
2. The bed (*thalamus*) is an object frequently included by many European artists in a prominent position—almost always large, tidy, elegant, and in the center of the scene—in some images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries. Such a recurrent and relevant bed in these Annunciations manifests that it is likely a symbol embodied of some essential doctrinal meanings.
3. The strong and coherent patristic, theological, and liturgical tradition on the metaphorical expressions like *thalamus*, *Sponsus*, *Sponsa*, exemplified in this paper only by some Latin writers, legitimizes interpreting the bed in the images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries as two complementary dogmatic symbols, in parallel Mariological and Christological projections.
4. Based on this double dogmatic interpretation of the *textual metaphor* of *thalamus*, revealed by the millenary patristic, theological and liturgical tradition, the intellectual authors of some artistic images of the Annunciation include a bed in their scene to illustrate, as a *visual metaphor*, these two complementary dogmas: a) the hypostatical union of the two natures, divine, and human, in the unique person of Christ, after the Son of God incarnates as a man; b) Mary’s virginal divine motherhood, as a necessary consequence of the dogma mentioned firstly.

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