

In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur. A new interpretation of the stem of lilies in the Spanish Gothic Annunciation from patristic and theological sources

In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur. Nueva interpretación del ramo de lirios en La Anunciación gótica española a la luz de fuentes patrísticas y teológicas

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Recibido: 24/05/2016

Aprobado: 10/08/2016

Abstract: In clear disagreement with the conventional interpretation of the lily in the iconographic theme of *The Annunciation*—illustrated with great relevance in the ten Spanish Gothic paintings we discuss here—, this article proposes two new theological explanations of this flower in this biblical scene. We rely for this in many consistent exegesis of prestigious Church Fathers and medieval theologians on the wondrous flourishing of the Aaron's dry staff. Thus, based in such a perfect exegetic match of Christian thinkers, which certifies in this issue a consolidated dogmatic tradition over nearly a millennium, we try to show that the stem of lilies in the scene of the Annunciation exhibits two Christological and Mariological profound symbolisms, essentially interrelated, i.e.: this stem of irises means at the same time the supernatural human incarnation of God the Son and the virginal divine motherhood of Mary.

Key words: Medieval Art; iconography; Spanish Gothic painting; Mariology; Christology; Patrology; theology.

Resumen: En abierto desacuerdo con la convencional interpretación del lirio en el tema iconográfico de *La Anunciación*—ilustrado con gran pertinencia en las diez pinturas góticas españolas que aquí analizamos—, el presente artículo propone dos nuevas explicaciones teológicas de dicha flor en esa escena bíblica. Nos basamos para ello en numerosas y concordantes exégesis de prestigiosos Padres de la Iglesia y teólogos medievales sobre el prodigioso florecimiento de la vara seca de Aarón. Así, fundándonos en esa perfecta coincidencia exegética de los pensadores cristianos, la cual certifica en ese punto una consolidada tradición dogmática a lo largo de casi un milenio, tratamos de mostrar que el ramo de lirios en la escena de la Anunciación exhibe dos profundos simbolismos, cristológico y mariológico, interrelacionados de manera esencial, a saber: ese ramo de lirios significa al mismo tiempo la sobrenatural encarnación humana de Dios Hijo y la virginal maternidad divina de María.

Palabras clave: Arte medieval; iconografía; pintura gótica española; mariología; cristología; patrística; teología.

Summary: 1. Proem, by way of reminder. 2. The stem of lilies, a constant in the Spanish Gothic iconography of *The Annunciation*. 3. The flowering of the Aaron's dry staff, a metaphor of the Incarnation of God the Son in the Mary's virginal womb, according to the patristic and theological tradition. 4. Conclusions. Sources and Bibliography.

1. Proem, by way of reminder

In our first hermeneutic approach to the motif of the stem of lilies in the Gothic images of *The Annunciation*, we inferred some relevant conclusions, that it is useful to recall now, before we begin our second iconographic interpretation on this subject.

This first study highlighted that the representations of *The Annunciation* was inspired directly, essentially, and explicitly in the Gospel of St. Luke, without interference of the apocryphal writings, or even *The Golden Legend* of Jacopo da Varazze.

It was also indicated that, after long centuries of development in formulas of relative compositional and conceptual simplicity, since the eleventh century on, and especially during the Late Middle Ages, the iconographic theme under scrutiny increased significantly its morphological and conceptual complexity, using poetic symbolisms and subtle metaphors: such a significant increase –we concluded then— was made possible thanks to the progressive devotion to the Blessed Virgin and to the refinement of argument in Mariology, in inextricable link with the hiper-development of Christology.

According to another conclusion of our initial approach, the clear prominence that, in almost all late medieval pictures of *The Annunciation*, assumed by the stem of lilies in the hands of the archangel Gabriel or placed in a jar or a vase next to the Virgin demands to be understood with greater insight. This stem of lilies, indeed, does not find satisfactory explanation if it is interpreted in the generic and abstract sense of purity or virginity in general –not even applied expressly to the Virgin Mary, as is usually done by the specialists in symbology and iconography, such as Louis Réau, George Ferguson, Juan-Eduardo Cirlot, Gertrud Schiller, Marie-Madeleine Davy, James Hall, Federico Revilla, Hans Biedermann, and Udo Becker.

We also emphasized that the outstanding manifestation of the stem of lilies in almost all the late medieval Annunciations depends on the fact that the iconographic programmers of such images were inspired by a long and consistent patristic and theological tradition: indeed, countless ecclesiastical authors in the Middle Ages “canonize” the interpretation of that botanical element –the flower sprouted of a stem— in accordance with a simultaneously Christological and Mariological symbolism, by identifying Jesus with the flower and Mary with the stem.

Finally, we set out in that article the exegesis with which many Church Fathers and medieval theologians interpret the Isaiah’s prophecy about the flowering stem in the root of Jesse as a clear metaphor of the incarnation of the Son of God (the flower) in the Mary’s virginal womb (the stem), thus being justified in first instance the symbolism of the stem of lilies in the medieval Annunciations.

After this brief summary of the main results obtained in our first iconographic interpretation of the stem of lilies in the late medieval *Annunciations*, starting from the exegesis of the flower sprung from the stem in the Jesse’s root, it is time already of undertaking a second hermeneutic approach, from the perspective of another prefiguration shaped by Old Testament.

2. The stem of lilies, a constant in the Spanish Gothic iconography of *The Annunciation*.

In the Spanish Gothic art, the same as in the medieval European, the images of the *Annunciation* with stem of irises are countless. However, to better focus the iconographic study proposed in the current paper, we have chosen here, for analysing them, ten Gothic Spanish paintings representative of that item.



Fig. 1. Pere Serra, *The Annunciation*, panel of the altarpiece of the church of Sant Llorenç de Morunys.

Pere Serra (docum. 1357-1405), in his *Annunciation* in the altarpiece of the church of Sant Llorenç de Morunys (Fig. 1), maintains quite conventionally the compositional and narrative structure. Head bowed and kneeling before the enormous furniture –with a double function of desk and prie-dieu— on which her prayer book rests, Mary opens up her arms in a gesture of shyness and hesitation. Appearing on the left side, the angel Gabriel kneels before her, pointing to her with his right index to indicate her divine election as the Messiah’s mother. At the same time the Holy Spirit flies toward the Virgin’s ear, to mean that she is being fertilized by the divine Spirit through the ear (*conceptio per aurem*) at the same time of listening to the angel’s announcement. Pere Serra introduces, however, an interesting detail, as it is infrequent: he depicts here the angel carrying in his left hand a bouquet of lilies, in perfect parallelism with other stems of the same flower arranged in the great jug that connects in the foreground the two protagonists of the event. Through this redundant parallelism between the two equivalent stems, he seems

to wish to reinforce the symbolic meanings that, as it will be seen later, such flowers enclose.



Fig. 2. Master of Sigena, *The Annunciation*, panel of the *Sigena Altarpiece*.

Also the Master of Sigena –identified by many scholars with Jaume Serra, or with any of his brothers, Pere or Francesc Serra— structures his *Annunciation* (Fig. 2) of the *Sigena Altarpiece*, c. 1362-1375, or c. 1367-1381, according to a model which, while preserving certain analogies with the newly analyzed of Pere Serra, exhibits also some remarkable differences with regard to this one. The similarities are, above all, in the flight of the Holy Spirit's dove toward the Virgin's ear, her location next to the bed and the carrying of a stem of flowers by the angel, in redundancy with the bouquet of lilies emerging from the vase in the foreground. However, the variants that the Master of Sigena entered in his panel with respect to the preceding scheme of Pere Serra are much more abundant and quite more important. Instead of placing kneeling both protagonists, as did Pere Serra, the Master of Sigena depicts here Mary sitting with demureness, with the book opened on her lap (in the absence of a desktop/prie-dieu), while he situates the archangel standing on the ground and with his feet very separate from each other, to translate the gesture of landing on his flight or breaking with haste in the room to communicate his heavenly message to the maiden. In addition, at the top left of the painting, on the outside of the Mary's house, God the Father, half-length in his glorious mandorla, launches with his right hand the lightning ray, whose trail the divine Spirit traverses in flight to fertilize the Virgin.



Fig. 3. Jaume Cirera and Bernat Despuig, *The Anunciacion*, panel of the *Altarpiece of St. Michael and St. Peter*, church of St. Michael of the Seu d'Urgell, 1432-1433.

Jaume Cirera and Bernat Despuig combine in their *Annunciation* of the *Altarpiece of St. Michael and St. Peter*, in the church of St. Michel of the Seu d'Urgell, 1432-33 (Fig. 3), some elements that appeared scattered in the two paintings just analyzed. Thus, in the crest of the panel, emerging in bust in his dense fringe of cherubim, God the Father exhales through his mouth the breath of life that gives human existence to the Son of God in the womb of the maiden, toward whose ear the divine Spirit flies in camber. Meanwhile, three lush stems of lilies, emerging from a huge vase in the foreground—a clear symbolic link between the two protagonists of the announcement—symbolize the incarnation of the Redeemer in the Virgin's womb, who, kneeling before her prayer book, receives with astonishment the angel's message, genuflected with reverence before the newly-turned Mother of God.

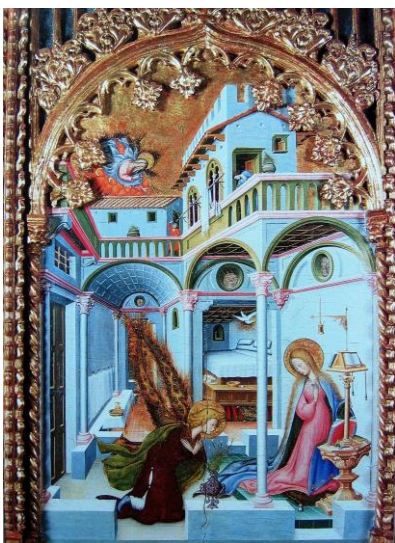


Fig. 4. Dello Delli, *The Annunciation*, panel of the *Main Altarpiece of the Salamanca Old Cathedral*, c. 1430-1450.

Dello Delli (with the help of his brothers Nicholas and Samson), in *The Annunciation* (Fig. 4) of the *Main Altarpiece of the Salamanca Old Cathedral*, c. 1430-1450, adopts a compositional structure of great complexity and remarkable artifice, with quite a few details of narrative interest. At the top left of the panel, breaking from the sky in his nimbus of cherubim, God the Father launches by his mouth the ray/breath of life, whose glow seems to increase under the body of the Holy Spirit's dove, in flight toward the Virgin's ear. Kneeling in devout prayer before a strange prie-dieu/lectern, she receives the respectful homage of the heavenly messenger, who tilts with reverence before her as a sign of submission to his sovereign. As if that were not enough, the painter introduces a number of decorative and anecdotal ingredients. The house of the humble Nazarene girl looks like a luxurious renaissance palace, with problematic perspectives, full of everyday utensils, as the basin on the table in the vaulted chamber, the basket of women's work next to the bed in the bedroom, or the pots and the clothes that hang on the upper balcony. As it was to be expected, in that domestic-palatial context a beautiful vase with lilies in the foreground on the parapet plays his proverbial primary role. With a similar anecdotal purpose, Delli situates on the second floor of the capricious building a couple of snoopers contemplating the complex scene: a boy, dressed in red, looks with surprise the emergence of God the Father, while a young man dressed in blue looks at the archangel, with showy wings of peacock feathers. Thus the interpretation of the subject by Delli is, at last, spiced with a high dose of decorative, anecdotal everydayness.



Fig. 5. Jaume Huguet, *The Annunciation*, panel of the *Altarpiece of the Mother of God*, from Vallmoll, c. 1450. Museu Diocesà of Tarragona.

Jaume Huguet (c. 1415-1419), in *The Annunciation of the Altarpiece of the Mother of God*, painted toward 1450 for the church of Vallmoll, and today in the Museu Diocesà of Tarragona (Fig. 5), introduces a series of particularly attractive resources. Coated with luxurious coat of purple with brocade, the ruddy

archangel holds a long fleur-de-lys patterned sceptre in his left hand, from which he deploys, in turn, a band with the salutation inscribed in it: the painter's decision of interconnecting the two protagonists through such phylactery is interesting in this sense, perhaps to better illustrate the dialog between both, symbolized precisely by such epigraphic support. In addition, kneeling on her pew, covered with rich cloak and with her hands crossed on her chest, the Virgin returns with shyness her gaze to the visitor, distancing her away from the prayer book open on the lectern. Meanwhile, on the outskirts of the house –with appearance of gothic chapel— of the maiden, God the Father, surrounded by red cherubim, pumps through the circular window the breath of life, bearer of the divine Spirit's dove, which flies swiftly toward the head of Mary to fertilize her *per aurem*. As an eloquent appeal, Huguet places in the center of the composition, above the phylactery and under the ledge of the gothic window, a voluminous bunch with three lilies, which, in addition to interrelate the two dialoguing figures –or, to be more exact, the contents of their respective speeches—, sets a clear symbolic bond with the landscape in pristine condition that can be seen by the window.



Fig. 6. Jaume Ferrer II, *The Annunciation*, panel of the *Retaule de la Verge dels Paers*, Lleida, c. 1450-1455.

Jaume Ferrer II (docum. 1430-1457), when representing *The Annunciation* in the *Retaule de la Verge dels Paers* in the chapel of La Paeria, Lleida, c. 1450-1455 (Fig. 6), separates the two protagonists in two independent panels, located at the top of the left wing (the archangel Gabriel) and at the top of the right wing (the Virgin). However, despite its obvious narrative relation, both panels do not keep between them any compositional relationship, neither by the shape of its respective scenographies nor by its orientation. In the first of these two panels (whose image is not illustrated in the current paper), against a synthetic architectural background seen in a front position, the painter puts a great

archangel of gorgeous wings, who, standing, deploys in front of him a huge and meandering band, with the angelic congratulations inscribed in it. In the right panel, instead, Jaume Ferrer II depicts the Virgin kneeling, who, with her hands crossed on her chest and removing her eyes from the prayer book, tilts parsimoniously before the Holy Spirit when approaching in flight to her head.

It is interesting the fact that in this painting the artist, besides removing the divine ray and the presence of God the Father, introduces into the architectural scenography, with aberrant perspective, a varied set of details of everyday life: such are the instruments of writing and reading in the desktop, the household chattels on the shelf, or the curtains which ensure the privacy of the bed, as well as a series of anecdotal postures, as the cat chasing a mouse in the outer space or the bird drinking in a basin. In any case, the artist also places here in a central place in the foreground a leafy bouquet of lilies, which arise from the narrow bottleneck of a precious jug.



Fig. 7. Jaume Jacomart (or Lluís Dalmau), *The Annunciation*, c. 1411-61. Fine Arts Museum, Valencia.

Jaume Jacomart (or, according to other experts, Lluís Dalmau), in *The Annunciation*, c. 1411-1461, of the Valencia Museum of Fine Arts (Fig. 7), raises a compositional solution radically different to that of the other artists which we are analysing here. In fact, by opting for an abstract background of gold leaf, against which the pavement impacts with a sudden rupture, the artist disregards all scenographic element, because he only allows to include as essential accessory the prie-dieu/lectern before which Mary prays. However, the most noteworthy development introduced by the painter in this work –divided into two panels, each occupied by one or other of the protagonists— is the fact that the stem of lilies, in a disproportionate size, is not in a vase or jar, as is almost always usual, but is held by the angel as if it were a harbinger crook. This gesture of bringing and delivering the stem of lilies to the Virgin metaphorizes clearly the divine will transmitted by the angel, according to which she is chosen so that the human embodiment of God the Son (the flower) outbreaks in her virginal womb (the stem).

Moreover, while the artist represents Mary conventionally kneeling with her

hands crossed on her chest, gives her, however, another psychological expression: instead of imagining her downcast and fearful, he figures her entrusted and determined, raising her eyes toward the Holy Spirit's dove, which flies toward her in the absence of the divine ray. Linking both characters, without the support of the usual phylactery, an epigraphic inscription proclaims the Gabriel's laudatory salutation: *Ave gr[atia] plena d[omi]n[u]s tecum.*



Fig. 8. Master of Canapost, *The Annunciation*, panel of the *Altarpiece of Puigcerdà*, MNAC, Barcelona.

The Master of Canapost develops in *The Annunciation* of the *Puigcerdà Altarpiece* a certain compositional complexity. In addition to designing the residence of Mary as a splendid palace, open in the background toward a lush garden with a fountain in the center—in clear symbolic reference to Mary as *hortus conclusus* and *fons signatus*—, the painter, contrary to the classic model of composition adopted by most of the artists in their Annunciations, reverses here the position of the two characters: the angel now appears on the right, while the Virgin is located on the left side.

After entering the house through the open door, the kneeling Gabriel communicates his message to Mary pointing upwards with his right index, to tell her that the message comes from the Most High, while with his left hand deploys his flexible band with the ennobling greeting *Ave gratia plena d[omi]n[u]s* inscribed in it. The Virgin, who, sitting with hesitation and submissive downcast gesture, maintains open with her left hand the prayer book on her legs, raises her right hand in an attitude of accepting—as in the oath's ritual—the inscrutable divine will that the heavenly messenger transmits to her. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove flies over her head, gliding through the oblique fertilizing beam that the Almighty sends to the maiden for impregnating her.

Next to the humble *ancilla Domini*, over a piece of furniture, a lush bouquet of

snowy white lilies arises from a jug, that, in perfect symmetry with the white dove, set with it a chromatic and conceptual link around the Virgin's head, in perfect correspondence with the profound dogmatic content that are enclosed in the image of the Annunciation with stem of lilies, as will be explained later.



Fig. 9. Master of Sopedrán, *The Annunciation*, end s. XV. Prado Museum, Madrid.

As the Master of Canapost did in the painting newly analyzed, also the Master of Sopedrán reverses the positions of the two partners in his *Annunciation* of the Prado Museum (Fig. 9). Carrying a fleur-de-lys patterned sceptre/crook, the archangel appears on the right, starting the gesture of genuflecting before the Virgin, while she remains kneeling in the left part of the panel, before the prayer book, whose pages keeps open with her right hand.

In this neat bourgeois room of the maiden –where there is no lack of symbolic elements such as the bed (impregnation/conception) and the glazed windows penetrated through by light ray (i.e., the Mary's virginal motherhood: “as the light ray passes through the glass without breaking or staining it”)— the Holy Spirit's dove flies in the background over the bed, while in the foreground an erect stem of lilies emerging from a vase deploys in its top three white flowers.

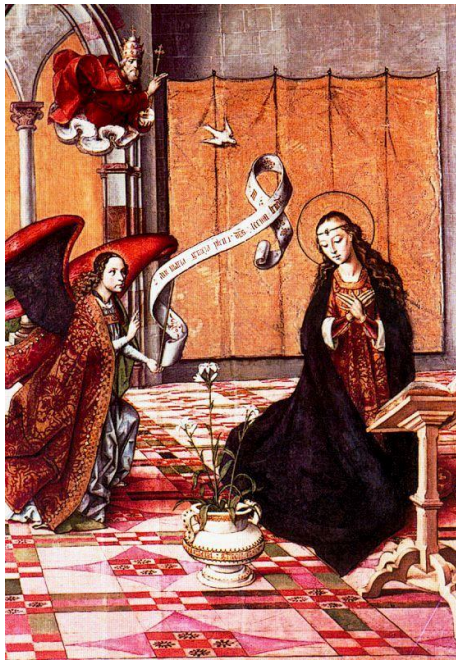


Fig. 10. Pedro Berruguete, *The Annunciation*, church of Paredes de Nava (Palencia).

Pedro Berruguete (c. 1450-1503) structures his *Annunciation* of the church of Paredes de Nava, Palencia (Fig. 10), clearly and succinctly, without renouncing to certain symbolic elements. Coated with splendid cope, the gorgeous archangel holds with unusual juggling on his open left hand a long sceptre/crook, next to which deploys the meandering phylactery with the usual praise inscribed on it *Ave Maria gratia plena d[omi]n[u]s tecum bened[icta tu in] m[ulieribus]*, while pointing with his right hand toward the Holy Spirit, a dove flying toward the Virgin's head. Kneeling before the lectern with her half open eyes, she tilts with modesty her head and crosses her hands on her chest, to express her obedience of a slave to the fathomless divine designs.

This dialogic relationship between divinity that choose and the maiden who obeys is also illustrated by the presence (half-body on a fringe of clouds) of the Almighty God, who, coated with a large red cloak and girded with the papal triple crown, blesses Mary with his right hand, while holding with his left one the cruciferous sphere of the Universe. Once more, the theological content that is clarified in this triangular dialog –the divinity, his angelic messenger and the maiden receiving the heavenly message— is visualized by the powerful metaphor of the stem of lilies that lie in the huge white flower vase placed in the center of the foreground.

3. The flowering of the Aaron's dry staff, a metaphor of the Incarnation of God the Son in the Mary's virginal womb, according to the patristic and theological tradition

The fact that the stem of lilies reaches so protagonic presence in almost all late medieval images of *The Annunciation*, as those just analyzed here, is explained fully by some strict dogmatic reasons. To tell the truth, the symbolic content of the stem of lilies in such images is revealed in a clear and decisive

way through a series of repetitive and unanimous exegesis of Church Fathers, Doctors and medieval theologians on two Old Testament excerpts: the prophecy of Isaiah about the flowering stem in the Jesse's root, and the flourishing of the Aaron's dry staff.

As it was said before, we have interpreted already in a previous paper the stem of lilies in the images of the Annunciation in the light of the theological and patristic commentaries on the Isaiah's prophecy foretelling the flowering of the stem sprouted from the Jesse's root. The current article will address a range of new interpretations, according to which not a few Church Fathers or Doctors and medieval theologians agree to see Christ and Mary prophetically figured in another excerpt from the Old Testament: the reference to the Aaron's dry staff, which suddenly, by divine miracle, sprouted, flourished and bore fruit in the tent of the testimony.

This prodigious episode is described thus in *Numbers*, the fourth book of the *Pentateuch*:

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them staffs, one for each fathers' house, from all their chiefs according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. Write each man's name on his staff, 3 and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each fathers' house. 4 Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony, where I meet with you. 5 And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumblings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you." 6 Moses spoke to the people of Israel. And all their chiefs gave him staffs, one for each chief, according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. And the staff of Aaron was among their staffs. 7 And Moses deposited the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the testimony. 8 On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. 9 Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the people of Israel. And they looked, and each man took his staff. 10 And the Lord said to Moses, "Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumblings against me, lest they die." 11 Thus did Moses; as the Lord commanded him, so he did.¹

¹ Nm 17. 1-11. English Bible. The English Standard Version (ESV). Quoted from <http://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/numbers/18.html>. The Latin original version of this quotation says: "1 Et locutus est Dominus ad Moysen, dicens: 2 Loquere ad filios Israel, et accipe ab eis virgas singulas per cognationes suas, a cunctis principibus tribuum, virgas duodecim, et unuscuiusque nomen superscribes virgae suae. 3 Nomen autem Aaron erit in tribu Levi, et una virga cunctas seorsum familias continebit: 4 ponesque eas in tabernaculo foederis coram testimonio, ubi loquar ad te. 5 Quem ex his elegero, germinabit virga eius: et cohibebo a me querimonias filiorum Israel, quibus contra vos murmurant. 6 Locutusque est Moyses ad filios Israel: et dederunt ei omnes principes virgas per singulas tribus: fueruntque virgae duodecim absque virga Aaron. 7 Quas cum posuisset Moyses coram Domino in tabernaculo testimonii: 8 sequenti die regressus invenit germinasse virgam Aaron in domo Levi: et

However, for many Church Fathers and medieval theologians both the flowering of the stem or stick in the Jesse's root and the Aaron's dry staff show a double, simultaneously Mariological and Christological symbolism. In their view, in effect, the stem flourishing in the Jesse's root and the Aaron's flowered staff constitute two subtle metaphors of Mary in her virginal divine motherhood (Mariological symbolism), while the flower sprouted in that stem in the Jesse's root or in the Aaron's staff prefigures in poetic analogy Christ in his incarnation in the Mary's womb (Christological symbolism). These two symbols are inextricably linked, as it is highlighted by the concordant exegesis of the prestigious ecclesiastical authors who deal with this subject.

In the light of such premises, before the need to translate into artistic images the decisive event of the Annunciation –which warantees the mankind's salvation through the Incarnation of God the Son in the Mary's womb—, the programmers of the conceptual content of such images are inspired by this solid patristic and theological tradition that interprets the flowering stem in the Jesse's root and the Aaron's staff as a double prefiguration of the engendering of God the Son incarnate in the Mary's virginal womb. Exposed already in our previous article the exegesis referred to the first figuration (the flower in the Jesse's root), we shall point out now a lot of patristic and theological interpretations on the second Christological and Mariological foreshadowing: the flowering of the Aaron's dry staff.

For example, St. Fortunatus of Aquilea († c. 304) endorses in explicit terms that the Aaron's staff flowered in the tabernacle anticipates premonitorily the Virgin Mary and Jesus as the flower and the fruit sprouted from it, in perfect parallelism with the above-mentioned Isaiah's prediction about the flowering stem in the Jesse's root, and in full accordance with the other sentence of Solomon describing the Lord as the flower of the field and the lily of the valleys.

Almost three generations later, St. Ephrem of Syria (306-373) expresses similar ideas, for whom the flowered and fructified Aaron's dry staff foreshadows the womb of Mary, who, remaining virgin, begat and gave birth to Jesus.

Almost by the same years St. Ambrose (330-397), archbishop of Milan, notes that the prophet announced the miraculous incarnation of the Son of God when uttering “You have arisen, my son, from the offshoot”, because he germinated from the Virgin Mary's womb as a fruit of the earth, and rose from the motherly bowels as a flower of good smell for the world's redemption, according to the Isaiah's prophecy about the flowering stem in the Jesse's root. The Milanese prelate completes this idea by stating that, if the root of Jesse is the Jewish lineage, the stem is Mary, and the flower of Mary is Christ, in such a way that the stem has a royal status, from the family and the homeland of David,

turgentibus gemmis eruperant flores, qui, foliis dilatatis, in amygdalas deformati sunt. 9 Protulit ergo Moyses virgas de conspectu Domini ad cunctos filios Israel: videruntque, et receperunt singuli virgas suas. 10 Dixitque Dominus ad Moysen: Refer virgam Aaron in tabernaculum testimonii, ut servetur ibi in signum rebellium filiorum Israel, et quiescant querulae eorum a me, ne moriantur. 11 Fecitque Moyses sicut praeciperat Dominus.” (Nm 17, 1-11. En *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, etc.. etc., 122-123).

whose flower is Christ, who cleaned the worldly dirtiness and breathed the smell of eternal life.

Not very different is a century later the opinion of Chromatius of Aquileia († c. 407), when referring to the Virgin Mary –begetter of Jesus without intercourse— as prefigured in the Aaron’s staff, which, after germinating, flowering and bearing fruit without the nutrient humus of the earth, was deposited in the tabernacle as a sign of eternal memory. The same Saint insists on the idea that in the Aaron’s staff, which without the fertilizer of the land germinated and produced a pleasing fruit, Mary is manifested, who without manly intercourse begat a son, turned in the true fruit of human salvation.

At the end of the fourth century the homilist Sedatus Nemausensis († c. 500) confirms that Aaron, through the miracle of his dry staff sprouting leaves and producing walnuts, preannounced Christ as a flower born of a virginal womb.

Some decades later, the Syrian monk and theologian Severus of Antioch (c. 475-538) says in a letter to Theodosius of Alexandria:

There is evidence that the Aaron’s staff produced leaves and almonds, with what Emmanuel was prefigured to us, who is the staff of the kingdom and was born as of the root of God the Father, without beginning or time, and reigns with him and with the Holy Spirit on heaven and the earth. And at the end of the days he became incarnate and became man, without changing his divine nature and was born in human flesh of the root of Jesse and David, from which the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, descends.

This Syrian writer argues that the stem means the germination and the conception of Jesus without intercourse in the Virgin Mary’s womb, because the attribute of the stem, as natural ornament of the root, is precisely the birth without intercourse or carnal union. That is why, in his poetic *Hymn 119*, Severus of Antioch highlights two biblical prefigurations of the Virgin and her divine Son: first and foremost, he compares Mary –by her privilege to be the Virgin Mother of God the Son— with the Ark of the Covenant, built with pure gold and incorruptible timber, and containing the vessel of manna; and then reiterates that Christ is prefigured metaphorically in the Aaron’s staff, which remaining dry, germinated and threw fruits, because the Son of God, by becoming incarnate, assumed and rejuvenated our nature, which had languished in old age because of sin.

Perhaps by the same years, an anonymous author, designated as the Pseudo Augustine (fifth-sixth century), notes that etymologically in latin “stem” or “staff” (*virga*) sounds almost like “virgin” (*virgo*), with a single different letter, by which the stem (*virga*) derives virgin. The unknown author extends his exegesis to sustain that, if the prophet designates the Virgin as a stem, is due to the fact that Mary conceived and bare without losing her virginity. On the basis of these premises, the Pseudo Augustine concludes that the royal flower (*O florem regem!*) sprouted in that stem is the flesh of the Lord, who was born without the need for “the human semen’s vice” (*nata sine vitio humani seminis*), to

the point that, as well as this stem was not a stem (*virga*), but a virgin (*virgo*), so this flower is not a flower of a stem, but the human nature or flesh (*caro*), because whoever bare (Mary) to the flower made brought forth flesh (Christ incarnate) from the human race (Mary).

An anonymous hymnographer active toward the sixth century points out that the Scriptures prefigured the Christ's engendering in the Virgin's womb as the Aaron's staff deposited in the Ark of the Covenant, a staff that was covered with leaves, despite not having been planted. Abounding in such idea, the anonymous writer concludes :

The staff [of Aaron] was crowned with leaves without any irrigation, to become a Virgin's figure which produced miracle fruit and gave it to us. The figure of this Virgin is marked and is known by the staff of the Levites.

In the year 567 Theodosius I, Patriarch of Alexandria between 535 and 567, says that Christ, a long time before birth as the Son of God incarnate, had already been announced by the prophets, since Moses calls him Tent of Testimony in which the Aaron's staff bloomed, Isaias predicts his virginal delivery, Jeremiah calls him staff of hazelnut, Ezekiel presents him as the door of the Most High, and Daniel as the holy mountain of God.

Severe, Patriarch of Antioch (c. 462-518), begins by recalling the fact that the Aaron's staff issued leaves and produced almonds, which presignified Emmanuel, who is the staff of the kingdom, conceived and born of the root of God the Father, without beginning or time, reigning with him and with the Holy Spirit on heaven and earth. The hierarch of Antioch completes his exegesis stressing that, anyway, the staff of Aaron also means the germination (begetting) and the conception of Christ without seed (semen) in the bowels of the holy and always virgin Mary.

The Byzantine hymnographer St. Romanus the Melodist (c. 490-c. 556) poetically states that the Aaron's staff, flowered without being irrigated, expresses the same as prophesied by Isaias about the flowering of a staff or stem in the root of Jesse: in his view, both rods of Aaron and Jesse designate Mary, who, without having been cultivated, germinates a fruit, given birth by her while remaining a virgin after childbirth.

Shortly after the Melodist continues by showing that the Scriptures, after prefiguring Christ as the vessel of the manna and the flower sprouted from the root, also designate his mother, Mary, as the flower, staff and ark (of the Covenant), by being a mother whose womb is open and gestates by the grace of the Holy Spirit, even if after that remains closed, to the extent of being able to say of her: The Virgin bare, and after childbirth remains virgin.

Toward the end of the sixth century or the beginning of the seventh St. Isidore, bishop of Seville (c. 556-636), endorses the traditional exegesis according to which the Aaron's dry staff, which flowers without needing humidity, is a symbol of the Virgin Mary, who without intercourse conceived the Incarnate

Word of God, Christ, prophesied also by Isaiah under the figure of the flowering stem in the Jesse's root.

Theotecnos, bishop of Livias in Palestine (seventh century), warns against the temptation to judge impossible the miracle occurred in the holiest body of the Mother of God, when remaining virginal and undefiled before, during and after childbirth: according to this Palestinian theologian, in fact, it was convenient to us the spiritual Ark of the Covenant (Mary), which kept the vessel of the manna and the Aaron's flourishing staff, which germinated a fruit without defect (Christ).

In the first half of the eighth century the prestigious mariologist St. John Damascene (675-749) praises Mary calling her "staff, branch of a divine plantation, the only that bare between all the virgins", who, without having received manly seed (*nullo semine suscepto*), produced as a flower the Son of God, the Lord of the universe.

By these same dates St. John of Euboea (eighth century) expresses similar ideas, to say that, as well as the staff of Aaron, after flowering, was repositioned in the Ark of the Covenant covered with gold, so another staff (Mary) flowers without requiring human seed.

In the transition of the tenth to eleventh century St. Fulbert, bishop of Chartres (c. 960-1028), argues that in a similar way to the staff of Aaron bearing fruit without root or any other natural or artificial resource, the Virgin Mary without conjugal intervention generated a son, who is designated with both the flower and the fruit: with the flower, due to his beauty; with the fruit, by his usefulness.

A couple of generations later the Benedictine reformer and cardinal St. Peter Damian (c. 1007-1072), in a sermon on the occasion of the Assumption, after indicating that Mary is the staff of Aaron, with which the impetus of the demons are repressed and by which all the prodigies occur, insists that the Virgin Mary contains the hope and comfort of the miserables with the staff and the crossier of the cross.

Almost a century later the Cistercian reformer St. Bernard (1090-1153), abbot of the Clairvaux monastery, reaffirms with tenacious insistence the identification of the Virgin with the staff of Aaron. Therefore, exploiting the significant value of this metaphor of the greened, thriving and fructified staff, the Clairavalensis, in the second of his four homilies in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary, argues that Christ is presignified not only by the flower, the fruit and even the greened leaves of the Aaron's staff, but also "by the same staff" of Moses, with whose blow he separated the waters of the Red Sea, for which his people pass and with which made bring forth water from the rock to give him to drink. On that argumental basis, the St. Bernard declares:

There is thus no problem that Christ is been prefigured in different things for different causes; and that in the staff is understood his power, in the flower his fragrance, in the fruit the sweetness of his taste, in the leaves also his careful protection, with which he never ceases to shelter under the shadow of his wings the little ones who

take refuge under him, fleeing the carnal desires and the impious who persecute them.

And in another sermon on the occasion of the Advent, the abbot of Clairvaux sets forth that the Virgin Mother of God is the staff or stem, and Christ its flower, “a snow-white and ruddy flower, chosen among thousands, a flower that the angels wish to see, and whose smell raises the dead”, before proclaiming with lyrical emotion:

O Virgin, sublime staff, to what height you raise your sacred treetop!
To him who is seated on the throne, until the Lord of Majesty. Nor is it to admire this, because the roots of your humility also reach the depth. O really heavenly plant, the most beautiful, the holiest of all! O really tree of life, which was only worthy to bear the fruit of salvation!

Half a century later the French diplomat and poet Pierre de Blois (c. 1135-c. 1204), evoking the delights of the Virgin Mary, for being the preferred choice of God, preannounced by the prophets, desired by the patriarchs, hailed by the archangel Gabriel and fertilized by the Holy Spirit, testifies that what prefigured in the staff of Aaron, in the fleece of Gideon, in the door of Ezekiel, and in the burning bush of Moses is precisely Mary: according to this author, such prefigurations are justified by the fact that the Mother of Christ is “fecund without intercourse, pregnant without uncomfortable burden, giving birth without pain in childbirth”, because she is the door of life, the first of the virgins and the friend of the eternal God.

Finally, the Franciscan theologian and mystic St. Bonaventure (1218-1274), to explain three biblical figures that symbolize the birth of Jesus in Mary –the first two of which are the splendour irradiating from the light, and the germ sprung from the vine—, argues that the third symbol is the flower that springs from the branch. The lyrical thinker stresses that, as well as “the flower, when sprouting of the branch, not undermines it, but rather improves it; it does not crack it, but embellishes it”, so also “God is born [...] of the Virgin fertilizing her and embellishes her, without violating or corrupting her virginal integrity”. Assuming the Isaiah’s prophecy about the flowering of the staff in the Jesse’s root, St. Bonaventure insists in the idea that “per staff is understood to be the Virgin Mother of God, per flower, her divine Son; per sprouting of the staff, the birth of the Savior [...], and the Holy Spirit rests over the flower.”

4. Conclusions

Following this broad analysis of artistic images and doctrinal texts, we believe possible to synthesize some essential outcomes of our research:

As illustrated by the ten Spanish Gothic paintings here analyzed, the stem of lilies constitutes a frequent motif, almost essential, in the late medieval European images of *The Annunciation*, in which, as if that were not enough, it

assumes a clear protagonism, highlighting almost always with a remarkable size in the foreground of the scene.

Under the reasonable assumption that so frequent and protagonic presence of the stem of lilies in the iconography of the Annunciation hides any very relevant doctrinal symbolism, the interpretations of these lilies given in the monographs and dictionaries specialized in symbols and iconographic motifs look unsatisfactory. It seems, in fact, hardly appropriate in this Marian topic to restrict—as do the authors of these books—the interpretation of lily to the purity, virginity or innocence, even in exclusive reference to the Virgin Mary.

The stem of lilies in the late medieval *Annunciations* is, in contrast, clearly justified on the basis of a broad and solid patristic and theological tradition, according to which many Church Fathers and medieval theologians agree to interpret the flowering of the Aaron's dry staff according to a double symbolism, simultaneously Christological and Mariological. In the view of all those ecclesiastical authors, in effect, that biblical prodigy metaphorizes at the same time the virginal divine motherhood of Mary (who was identified as the dry staff of Aaron) and the conception of Christ, the incarnate Son of God (who was identified as the flower and the fruit sprouted of the dry staff).

On that exegetical basis, the fact that the stem of lilies exhibits so obvious prominence in almost all late medieval images under scrutiny is justified because, when translating into artistic forms the salvific event of the Annunciation, the iconographic programmers of such images were inspired by this consolidated patristic and theological tradition that interprets the flowering of the dry staff of Aaron in function of these Christological and Mariological dogmas already explained.

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