

**Iconography of *The Birth of the Virgin Mary* on the basis of
a homily of St. John Damascene**
**Iconografía del *Nacimiento de la Virgen María* sobre la base
de una homilía de San Juan Damasceno**

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Abstract: As a consequence of the fact that the New Testament mentions few episodes and very few details of the real life of the Virgin Mary, among the Eastern Christian communities several apocryphal legends, that tried to supply this hermetic silence around the birth, infancy, youth, adulthood and death of the Mother of Jesus, arose during the first centuries of Christianity. These apocryphal accounts were then taken up and interpreted catechetically as a useful devotional matter by many Church Fathers, theologians and ecclesiastical writers. The reflections of these prestigious thinkers formed a solid corpus of doctrine, from which very important Marian devotions and liturgical feasts would soon follow. A primordial milestone in this “imaginary” life of Mary is her supernatural birth, after her miraculous conception in the bosom of her old and sterile mother Anne. As a natural fruit of these heterogenous literary and theological sources, from the tenth-eleventh centuries the medieval Byzantine and European artists approached with remarkable enthusiasm the iconographic theme of the *Birth of the Virgin Mary* as a significant episode of her life. On this basis, in this article we propose a triple complementary objective. First of all, after outlining the essential content of the apocryphal sources, we will broadly analyze the various theological theses that we believe are deductible from the emotional reflections that St. John Damascene expresses in a homily on the subject. Secondly, we will analyze some Byzantine and European paintings on the Birth of Mary, in order to determine to what extent the apocryphal accounts and the doctrinal statements of the Damascene are reflected in the characters, situations, attitudes, accessories and scenographic elements represented in these depictions. Finally, we will state some conclusions that we believe to be plausible in relating the Damascenian texts and the pictorial works of reference.

Key words: Medieval art, Marian iconography, Birth of the Virgin Mary, St. John of Damascus.

Resumen: Como consecuencia de que el Nuevo Testamento menciona pocos episodios y muy escasos detalles de la vida real de la Virgen María, entre las comunidades cristianas orientales surgieron durante los primeros siglos del Cristianismo varias leyendas apócrifas, que trataron de suplir ese hermético silencio en torno al nacimiento, infancia, juventud, adultez y muerte de la Madre de Jesús. Esos relatos apócrifos fueron luego asumidos e interpretados catequéticamente como aprovechable materia devocional por numerosos Padres de la Iglesia, teólogos y escritores eclesiásticos. Las reflexiones de esos prestigiosos pensadores conformaron un sólido *corpus* doctrinal del que se derivarían poco después varias devociones y fiestas litúrgicas marianas de extraordinaria importancia. Hito primordial en esa “imaginaria” vida de María es su sobrenatural nacimiento, tras su milagrosa concepción en el seno de su anciana y estéril madre Ana. Como fruto natural de esas heterogéneas fuentes literarias y teológicas, desde los siglos X-XI los artistas medievales bizantinos y europeos abordaron con notable entusiasmo el tema iconográfico del *Nacimiento de la Virgen María* como un episodio significativo de su vida. Sobre esta base, en el presente artículo nos proponemos un triple objetivo complementario. Ante todo, tras esbozar el contenido esencial de las fuentes apócrifas,

analizaremos ampliamente las diversas tesis teológicas que creemos deducibles de las emotivas reflexiones que San Juan Damasceno expresa en una homilía sobre el tema. En segundo lugar, analizaremos algunas obras pictóricas bizantinas y europeas sobre el *Nacimiento de María*, para determinar hasta qué punto los relatos apócrifos y las reflexiones doctrinales del Damasceno se reflejan en los personajes, situaciones, actitudes, accesorios y elementos escenográficos representados en esas pinturas. Por último, enunciaremos algunas conclusiones que creemos plausibles al relacionar los textos damascenianos y las obras pictóricas de referencia.

Palabras clave: Arte medieval, iconografía mariana, Nacimiento de la Virgen María, San Juan Damasceno.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Interpretation of the Birth of the Virgin from the theological perspective of St. John Damascene. 2.1. The Birth of Mary, epiphany of the supernatural. 2.2. The Birth of Mary, promise and certification of her perpetual virginity. 2.3. The Birth of Mary, prelude to her divine motherhood. 2.4. The Birth of Mary, prophetic proclamation of the double nature of Christ. 2.5. The Birth of Mary, sign of the regeneration of humanity. 2.6. The Birth of Mary, ratification of a New Covenant. 2.7. The Birth of Mary, the prophetic announcement of the Redemption. 3. Possible reflections of the St. John Damascene's doctrine in the iconography of the Birth of the Virgin Mary. 3.1. Approach to some Byzantine paintings of the Birth of the Virgin Mary. 3.2. Approach to some European paintings of the Birth of Mary. 5. Conclusions. Sources and Bibliography.

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1. Introduction

Together with the Nativity of Jesus, the Birth of the Virgin Mary is one of the most endearing themes in popular devotion and Christian iconography during the Middle Ages. It is well known that, after the Council of Ephesus (431), the cult of Mary intensified significantly, especially in Syria, whence St. John Damascene (c. 675-c. 749) comes.¹ In this article we will analyze a dense homily written by this influential Church Father on this Marian episode, and we will relate it to some Byzantine and European paintings that represent the Birth of the Virgin, to see if and to what extent one can glimpse some direct relation between this Damascene's doctrinal text and those artistic images.

Lacking biblical and historical bases, the account of the Birth of Mary was constructed from an early date by three apocryphal texts: the *Protoevangelium of James*² (second century), the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*³ (ca. fourth century) and

¹ Priest and monk incardinated in the monastery of St. Sabas in Jerusalem, a brilliant orator, a fiery eulogist and outstanding theologian, respected as one of the last Fathers of the Greek Church, St. John Damascene (ca.675-ca. 749) was the first and more fervent defender of the cult of the images during the iconoclastic repression, promoted in Byzantium by the emperors Leon III and Constantine V.

² *Protoevangelio de Santiago*. Texto bilingüe griego/castellano. Publicado en Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Los Evangelios Apócrifos* (Colección de textos griegos y latinos, versión crítica, estudios introductorios y comentarios por Aurelio de Santos Otero), Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 13ª impresión, 2006, p. 130-170. In the following notes of the present paper we will quote this apocryphal with the abbreviations PES.

the *Book of the Nativity of Mary*⁴ (dated to the ninth century, a mere synthesis of the preceding apocryphal). That Apocrypha on the early years of the Mother of God contributed a lot to introduce and propagate the liturgical feast and the iconography of the Birth of the Virgin. In the Byzantine environment the emergence and diffusion of the aforementioned Marian solemnity will be explained to a great extent thanks to several sermons preached by St. Andrew of Crete (660-740) in the first years of the eighth century, as well as to other exegetical comments of Eastern Church Fathers, among them those of St. John Damascene. All these teachings of venerable representatives of the official Christian doctrine will imprint a seal of “legitimacy” on that Marian feast promoted by the Apocrypha. In the West, on the other hand, the liturgical feast of the Birth of Mary, deriving from non-canonical sources, will take a long time to implant itself, for it will begin to be welcomed in part only since the end of the seventh century.

Synthesizing what is described in the three apocryphal texts mentioned above—the *Protoevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew*, and the *Book of the Nativity of Mary*—the configurative details of this Marian event are summarized as follows: having no descendants after twenty years of marriage, the elders Joachim and Anne, the future parents of Mary, promised God to consecrate to him the son whom he would grant them by exceptional grace,⁵ a miracle they used to ask in their periodic visits to the temple during the traditional Jewish festivities;⁶ when addressing once again to the sanctuary of Jerusalem in the Festival of the Dedication, Joachim was expelled from the temple by the priest, who rejected his offerings, arguing that he who had deserved the divine curse for not having descendants had no right to approach the abode of Yahweh;⁷ shamed by such humiliating repudiation, Joachim, instead of returning home, took refuge in the country with his shepherds, so as not to be subjected to the scorn of his countrymen;⁸ after some months in the solitude of the mountains, an angel announced to him that his barren wife would give birth to a daughter, predestined to be Mother of God the Son, who would take by name Jesus;⁹ the angel revealed to Anne this same message, before ordering her to go to meet Joachim at the entrance of the city;¹⁰ when both husbands met each other

³ *Evangelio del Pseudo Mateo*. Texto bilingüe latín/castellano publicado en Santos Otero, op.cit., p. 173-236. In the following notes of the present paper we will quote this apocryphal with the abbreviations EPM.

⁴ *Libro de la Natividad de María*. Texto bilingüe latín/castellano publicado en Santos Otero, op.cit., p. 238-252. In the following notes of the present paper we will quote this apocryphal with the abbreviations LNM.

⁵ PES, I,1; EPM, I,2; LNM, I,3.

⁶ LNM, I,3.

⁷ PES, I,2; EPM, II,1; LNM, II,1.

⁸ PES, I,3-4; EPM, II,1; LNM, II,2.

⁹ EPM, III,1-4; LNM, III,1-4.

¹⁰ PES, IV,1; EPM, III,5; LNM, IV,1-2.

in front of the Golden Gate, they embraced with joy¹¹ and, after worshipping God, returned home;¹² nine months after that meeting, Anne gave birth to a girl, whom, according to the angel's warning,¹³ they named Mary.¹⁴

2. Interpretation of the Birth of the Virgin from the theological perspective of St. John Damascene

The doctrinal exegesis that this miraculous birth gave rise between the Church Fathers and the Christian theologians are countless. Our brief essay intends to focus attention exclusively on the statements made on the Birth of Mary by St. John of Damascus in a homily pronounced on the occasion of the resultant Marian feast.¹⁵ In this homily the Damascene produced an anthology of dogmatic and catechetical disquisitions, of suggestive poetic flavor and strong symbolic bias, which could be summarized in seven theological sentences, essentially and indissolubly interrelated: the Birth of Mary means the epiphany of the supernatural, the promise and certification of her perpetual virginity, the prelude to her divine motherhood, the prophetic proclamation of the dual nature of Christ, the sign of the regeneration of mankind, the ratification of a New Covenant, and the prophetic announcement of the Redemption.

2.1. *The Birth of Mary, epiphany of the supernatural*

Ignoring the improbable details imagined by the Apocrypha and popular legends, St. John Damascene highlights two genuine signs of the miraculous intervention of God in the birth of Mary. A first divine prodigy is that Anne's congenital sterility – with which God inhibited her in nature, preventing her from being fertile before conceiving the Virgin— would have been fruitful precisely in her old age, when God granted her miraculously to beget the future Mother of the Redeemer. Moved by such a wonder, the panegyrist of Damascus rejoices: “Let the earth trust. And the children of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for the desert germinated: the barren one brought forth his fruit.”¹⁶

¹¹ According to some interpreters, this embrace metaphorizes the intercourse between the two spouses after such a long distance from each other, an intercourse that would bear fruit in the immediate conception of Mary. Other authors, however, understand this embrace as a normal gesture of affection, considering that Mary was conceived virginally, without intercourse.

¹² PES, IV,3-4; EPM, III,5; LNM, V,1-2.

¹³ PES, V,2; EPM, IV; LNM, V,2.

¹⁴ According to the *Protoevangelium of James*, Anne gave her daughter the name of Mary only after completing the legal lapse to purify herself from childbirth: “The time being marked by the law having passed, Anne purified herself, nursed the baby and named her Mariam.” (PES, V,2).

¹⁵ St. John Damascene, *Homilia in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*. PG 96, 661-679.

¹⁶ “Audaciam sumat terra, ac filii Sion. Gaudete in Domino Deo vestro, quia germinavit desertum: sterilis protulit fructum suum.” (St. John Damascene, *Homilia in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*. PG, 96, 674).

A second prodigy, even more miraculous and supernatural, is the fact that the infertile and elderly Anne gave birth to an immaculate, first-born and only-begotten girl, destined to be, in turn, the mother of another First-born and Only-begotten of God. The Syrian homilist points out it this way:

Nature has yielded to grace, and remains trembling without wanting to continue to the end. Since the Virgin Mother of God was to be born of Anne, nature did not dare to prevent grace, but remained fruitless until grace produced the fruit. It suited that the one from whom the first-born of every creature, in whom all things subsist, would be born, to be born first-born.¹⁷

The controversial problem of the way in which Mary was conceived emerges immediately, a problem that many and such sharp debates will raise over the centuries among Christian thinkers, not excluding some saints of fervent Marian devotion, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas. In this sense, the three apocryphal writings already mentioned seem to defend the belief that the Virgin was begotten by divine intervention, without any male contribution, that is, according to a supernatural conception. Although none of the three Apocrypha clearly states whether or not Joachim intervened in the genesis of Mary, they nevertheless stress that, in tune with the angel's announcement, Anne was already sure she had conceived even before reuniting with her husband in front of the Golden Gate. The *Protoevangelium of James*, for example, points out without any doubt:

When Joachim came with his flocks, Anne was at the door. When she saw him coming, she began to run and fell upon her neck, saying, “Now I see that God has blessed me abundantly, for, being a widow, I am no longer, and being sterile, I will conceive in my womb.”¹⁸

Even more explicit is the *Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew*, when he states that, at the very moment of her reunion with her (long-time) absent husband, she communicates: “I have conceived in my entrails.”¹⁹

Apart from the optimistic presumption of the Apocrypha, John Damascene shows greater caution when assuming unrestrictedly the supernatural conception

¹⁷ “Natura enim gratiae cedit, statque tremula, pergere non sustinens. Quoniam itaque futurum erat, ut Dei Genitrix Virgo ex Anna nasceretur, natura gratiae germen antevertere non ausa est: sed mansit fructus expers, dum gratia fructum ederet. Nasci siquidem primogenitam oportebat, ex qua nasciturus esset omnis creaturae primogenitus, in quo omnia constant.” (Ibid., 663).

¹⁸ PES, IV,4.

¹⁹ “But [Anne] was already tired and still bored with waiting for [the return of her husband], when she suddenly raised her eyes and saw Joachim coming with his flocks. And immediately she ran to meet him, and fell upon his neck, and gave thanks to God, saying, I was recently a widow, and I am not; not long ago I was barren, and behold, I have conceived in my bowels.' This caused all the neighbors and acquaintances to be filled with joy, to the point that all the land of Israel was glad for such a pleasant new.” (EPM, III,5).

of Mary, and even in some passages he seems to discard it. His stance on that question is, to tell the truth, rather ambiguous. Thus, in a passage from the analyzed homily, he exclaims: “Oh Joachim's most beautiful entrails, from which an absolutely immaculate semen came! Oh admirable Anne's bosom, thanks to which a most holy fetus secretly developed and formed!”²⁰ Such a phrase seems to affirm at the same time the natural paternal contest (the “entrails of Joachim”) and the supernatural generation of his daughter (“an absolutely immaculate semen”). Similarly, the Damascene apparently accepts in another paragraph the Virgin's perfectly natural breeding (according to nature, like that of any other human being), by physical intervention of the two parents, even though it was preceded by a lifelong chastity for both. This is confirmed unequivocally by the doctor of Damascus, when stating that, thanks to their lifelong chastity, Joachim and Anne deserved from the Almighty a gift that surpasses nature, that is to say, that of having begot Mary, who would become the Mother of God without needing a husband for it. The author expresses such ideas through these lyrical terms:

Oh Joachim and Anne, most chaste couple of rational doves!
Preserving the chastity prescribed by natural law, you have deserved
the gifts that surpass nature: you have given birth to a Mother of God
unaware of carnal intercourse. After a pious and holy existence in a
human nature, you fathered a daughter superior to the angels, who is
now Queen of the Angels.²¹

In spite of what has been said, Damascene considers that the eventual lack of a basis to guarantee with certainty the Virgin's immaculate conception does not deprive her of the exceptional privilege of being free of original sin. The Syrian theologian argues in effect with poetic emphasis that Mary eluded the clutches of the Evil and was preserved intact in the nuptial chamber of the Holy Spirit in order to become at the same time the wife and carnal Mother of God.²²

Finally, after defending the exemption of original sin, the thinker of Damascus endorses the thesis of other exegetes and theologians, in holding that Mary was born supernaturally and miraculously of a sterile woman, without causing any pain to her mother during childbirth. He says thus, exultant: “Let us celebrate the feast for the Mother of God's birth. Rejoice, Anne, *barren, you who do not*

²⁰ “O lumbos Joachim beatissimos, ex quibus mundissimum semen jactum est! o praeclaram Annae vulvam, in qua tacitis accrementis ex ea auctus atque formatus fuit fetus sanctissimus!” (St. John Damascene, *Homilia in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*. PG, 96, 663).

²¹ “O castissimum rationalium turturum par Joachim et Anna! Vos castitatem, quam natura lex praescribit, conservantes, ea quae naturam superant, divinitus estis consecuti: mundo quippe Dei matrem viri nesciam peperistis. Vos pie et sancte in humana natura vitam agentes, filiam angelis superiorem, nunquam angelorum Dominam, edidistis.” (Ibid., 670).

²² “O Joachim et Annae sacratissima filia, quae principalibus et potestatibus, ignisque maligni ielis latuisti: quae in Spiritus thalamo versata es, et sine macula custodita, ut sponsa Dei, naturaque Dei mater esses.” (Ibid., 671)

beget; explode in shouts of joy and gladness, you who do not suffer the pain of childbirth."²³

2.2. *The Birth of Mary, promise and certification of her perpetual virginity*

The statement that Mary, conceived in a supernatural way, conceived and gave birth to her son Jesus supernaturally, remaining a virgin before, during and after childbirth (perpetual virginity), is the thesis more emphatically and repeatedly sustained by the Damascene, in full concordance with the firm and almost unanimous opinion of the other Church Fathers who preceded him. The Syrian panegyrist witnesses it thus:

Having led a chaste and holy life, you [Joachim and Anne] have given birth to a virgin, a virgin at childbirth and also a virgin after childbirth, the only one who would always preserve her virginity in the mind as in the soul, as well as in the body.²⁴

Our author emphasizes the desirability of that exceptional virginity born of chastity (the Virgin Mary born of Anne and Joachim) to create bodily the unique and only begotten light (Jesus Christ), thanks to the benevolence of Him (God the Father) who begot him incorporeal, to the point of turning it not into the light which engenders, but into the light which is always engendered (God the Son), for whom being engendered is his only personal property.²⁵

After sustaining that Mary was conceived virginly and without original sin, the Damascene declares that, by the grace and power of the Almighty, she will always remain a virgin, before, during and after conceiving virginally, without intercourse, her son Jesus, for as he already has an eternal and divine Father, and does not require a temporal and human father. In this sense, he proclaims: "Oh, daughter always virgin, who could conceive without human intervention! For the One whom you have wrought in your womb has an eternal Father. Oh, earthly daughter, you carried the divine Creator in your maternal lap!"²⁶

The Syrian author also depicts this Mary's perpetual virginity through the poetic metaphor according to which the Virgin is the ever closed door seen by the prophet Ezekiel (an idea similar to that of the *hortus conclusus*), which, while

²³ "Constituamus diem solemnem pro Dei Genitricis nativitate. Laetare, Anna *sterilis, quae non paris: erumpe et clama, quae non parturis.*" (Ibid., 667).

²⁴ "Casta enim et sancta conversatione vestra partum virgo foret, atque in partu virgo, nec non virgo post partum; illam, inquam, quae sola semper, tum mente, tum animo, tum etiam corpore virginitatem cultura esset." (Ibid., 667).

²⁵ "Par siquidem erat, ut germinans illic ex castitate virginitas, solum illum unigenitum lumen corporali ratione produceret, ejus benigna voluntate, qui incorporali modo ipsum genuisset; lumen utique non quod gignit, sed quod semper gignitur, ac cui gigni personalis sola proprietates est." (Ibid., 667).

²⁶ "O filia semper virgo, cui nulla ad concipiendum necessaria viri opera est! Quem enim utero gestasti, hic sempiternum Patrem habet. O filia terrigena, quae Dei genitricibus ulnis Creatorem gerebas!" (col. 671).

remaining and always remaining hermetic, will allow the entrance (the virginal conception) and the exit (the virginal birth) of Christ, who, in turn, is constituted in the “Eastern gate”, through which men have access to God. “Today,” says the Syrian theologian, “the Eastern door has been built, through which Christ will enter and leave; and this door will be closed, therein Christ stands as the door of the sheep, whose name is East: by whom we had access to the Father, the beginning of light.”²⁷ For this reason, Mary –whom he defines as “the always virginal Door of God!”²⁸ and as “a pure and spotless heart, which see and desire the spotless God, desiring Him— stands in the eyes of all humans in prototype and paradigm of virginity, worthy of all praise. In this regard, the apologist exclaims:

Rightly all generations proclaim you blessed, as the eminent decorum of mankind. You are the glory of the priests, the hope of the Christians, the lofty plant of virginity. For by thee the honor of virginity spread in a very broad way: *Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.*²⁹

2.3. The Birth of Mary, prelude to her divine motherhood

The mariologist of Damascus then establishes a perfect analogical parallelism –with partial similarity and partial difference— between the actual birth of Mary and the future birth of Jesus. The double similarity manifests itself in the fact that the Virgin and Christ are both first-born and only-begotten sons, she of a barren mother (Anne), he of a virgin mother (Mary), who begets the Firstborn among many brethren (Jesus Christ), to whom she gives flesh and blood similar to those of other men.³⁰

On the other hand, the partial difference between the birth of Mary and that of Jesus is perceived in the fact that, while she is the only begotten of two fathers (Joachim and Anne), the privilege of absolute uniqueness is reserved only to Jesus Christ, Only-Begotten of a single Father (God), and only-begotten of a

²⁷ “Hodie porta illa ad orientem posita, exstructa est, per quam Christus ingrediatur et egredietur: et erit clausa porta, in qua Christus ostium ovium cujus nomen Oriens: per quem accessum ad Patrem luminis principium habuimus.” (Ibid., 666).

²⁸ “Dei porta, perpetua virginitate nitens.” (Ibid., 675).

²⁹ “Merito te beatam praedicant omnes generationes, ut eximium humani generis decus. Tu sacerdotum gloria, Christianorum spes, virginitatis uberrima planta. Per te enim virginitatis honestas sese latissime effudit: *Benedicta tu inter mulieres, et benedictus fructus ventris tui.*” (Ibid., 679).

³⁰ *Sanctus fortis*, Dei Filius ac Deus, unigenitus, qui et primogenitam hodie ex sterili produxit, ut unigenitus ipse ex Patre, et primogenitus omnis creaturae, unigenitus nasceretur ex te Virgine matre, primogenitus in multis fratribus similis nobis, ratione carnis et sanguinis, quae ex te assumpsit, particeps factus.” (Ibid., 678).

single mother (Mary), who did not need manly intercourse to beget him.³¹ In another passage the author states in lyrical circumlocutions the same thesis of the divine motherhood of Mary, in pointing:

The womb [of Mary] is the abode of Him whom no place can contain. Her breasts, which fed her milk to God, certainly nourished the baby Jesus as well. Gate of God, you shine with perpetual virginity. The hands and knees that hold God are a throne more sublime than the Cherubim.³²

With that strong conviction about the truth of such dogma, the Damascene does not hesitate to proclaim in honor of Mary, in front of the followers of Nestorius: “Blessed are you among all women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Those who claim that you are the Mother of God are blessed; and those who deny it are damned.”³³

2.4. The Birth of Mary, prophetic proclamation of the double nature of Christ

Against the heretical theses of the Monophysites and the Nestorians, John Damascene argues that Jesus Christ –whom he defines as the eternal, immaterial, and incorporeal light (God the Son), arising from eternity of the eternal light (God the Father)— possesses two natures, divine and human, in a single undivided person, because, upon receiving the human body from Mary, he becomes a man without ceasing to be God. As the Syrian thinker states:

There are [in Christ] two natures, though the Headless are mad; he is one person, even though the Nestorians are angry, for this eternal light, coming from eternal light, has existed since before all ages; the light devoid of matter and incorporeal [God the Son] takes on the body from this same woman [Mary], and just as a husband advances ahead of the nuptial chamber, he, being God, later became an earthly being.³⁴

³¹ “Atqui te non ex solo Genitore, aut ex sola produxit Matre, ut soli Unigenito unigeniti proprietatis modis omnibus absoluta servaretur. Solus enim ipse unigenitus est ex solo Patre, et solus ex sola Matre.” (Ibid.).

³² “Venter ejus domicilium, quem nullus locus capit. Lactis ubera, quae Deum aluerunt, nempe puellum Jesum. Dei porta, perpetua virginitate nitens. Manus Deum gestantes ac genua, thronus Cherubim sublimior”. (Ibid., 675).

³³ “*Benedicta tu inter mulieres, et benedictus fructus ventris tui.* Qui te Dei Genitricem confitentur, hi benedicti sunt: qui inficiantur, maledicti.” (Ibid., 679).

³⁴ “*Duae naturae, furant licet Acephali; una persona, quamlibet rumpantur Nestoriani, Aeternum enim illud lumen quod ex aeterno lumine antiquiorem saeculis existentiam habet; lumen, inquam, illud materia vacans et incorporeum, ex ipsa corporatur, et tanquam sponsus de thalamo procedit, qui cum Deus sit, subinde factus terrigena.*” (Ibid., 663-664).

Therefore, in another passage the enthusiastic mariologist does not hesitate to eulogize the miraculous, indissoluble union of divinity and humanity that the newborn Mary will conceive later by the power of God in her virginal womb:

Oh how this girl has become abode of many wonders and alliances!
Daughter of sterility, virginity giving birth! [A Son will be begotten in
her who will be] a mixture of divinity and humanity, of suffering and
impassibility, of life and death, so that in all men the worst would be
overcome by the best.³⁵

2.5. The Birth of Mary, sign of the regeneration of humanity

Following other exegetes, the Damascene maintains that the Virgin's birth also marks the final rescue of fallen humanity. In her view, with Mary a new Eve is born, who will beget this new Adam, who is God Himself made flesh, conceived in a virginal womb to redeem men from the original guilt. Thus, he declares in reference to Mary:

For by your birth, the one who fell into sin [Eve] is lifted up. Oh sacrosanct daughter, the glory of women! For although the first Eve was guilty of prevarication, and if death came into her, because she had placed herself at the service of the serpent against our first father, Mary, on the contrary, in accepting the divine will, deceived the deceiving serpent, and introduced immortality into the world.³⁶

The doctor of Damascus does not get tired of emphasizing the antithesis between the ancient Eve, whom, in punishment for her original guilt, God condemns to give birth with pain and to be subject to her husband, and Mary, the new Eve, full of grace and favor of the Lord.³⁷ Therefore, he does not hesitate to sing with joy the glory of the mother of Jesus, "Dignified daughter of God, beauty of human nature, retrieval of Eve, our first mother!"³⁸

His doctrinal position is not so different when in another excerpt he invites the believers to rejoice and to celebrate the most sacred birth of Mary. Thanks to this childbirth of Anne, God the Father will beget his Son, the Word, who is

³⁵ "O quot puella haec miraculorum, et qualium foederum officina facta est! sterilitatis germen, virginitas pariens. Deitatis humanitatisque mistio, passionis et impassibilitatis, vitae et mortis, ut in omnibus quod deterius erat, a potiori vinceretur". (Ibid., 667).

³⁶ "Tuo namque partu, quae ceciderat, erecta est. O sacrosancta filia, feminarum gloria! Quamvis enim prima Eva praevaricationis rea exstiterit, ac per eam mors, dum illa serpenti adversus primum parentem inserviret, ingressa sit: attamen Maria divinae obsequens voluntati, deceptorem anguem ipsa deceptit, ac mundo immortalitatem invexit." (Ibid.).

³⁷ Contrasting Eve and Mary, the Damascene expresses: "Illa namque divinae sententiae decreto audivit: *In moeroribus paries: haec, Ave, gratia plena. Illa, Ad virum erit conversio tua. Haec, Dominus tecum.*" (Ibid., 662).

³⁸ "O digna Deo filia, humanae venustas naturae, primigenae parentis Evae emendatio!" (Ibid., 671).

predestined to improve human nature in essence; since man, by his condition of mixture of spirit and matter, is the unifying nexus between visible and invisible creation, the Son of God, when united to human nature, is united by this to all creation.³⁹

2.6. The Birth of Mary, ratification of a New Covenant

For some Church Fathers, theologians and ecclesiastical writers, especially in the Eastern realm, the birth of Mary marks the beginning of the New Covenant, which God sealed with mankind, after the interim conferred on the Old Testament had been exhausted. The previous Mosaic law, to the exclusive benefit of the “chosen people”, is replaced by the new Christian commandment of universal love, for the benefit of all human beings. That is why, St. John Damascene states that the old-testamentary temple, built by the carnal Solomon with stones and gold, is now replaced by another new spiritual temple (Mary), built and inhabited by the new spiritual Solomon (God), to lodge his divine Son after the fecundating radiance of the Holy Spirit. In this vein the Damascene points out:

Oh Virgin full of divine grace, holy temple of God, inhabited by spiritual Solomon, prince of peace [Jesus Christ], after having built it for himself; a temple not decorated with gold and inanimate stones, but refulgent by the Holy Spirit, better than by gold; having as you have, instead of precious stones, the beautiful pearl which is Christ, the very ruby of divinity.⁴⁰

After sustaining that with the substitution of the Old Covenant by the New – “By means of you the change of Law was fulfilled, and revealed the spirit hidden under the letter”⁴¹ —, the Syrian panegyrist alludes again to the New Covenant that God pledges with all men after the advent of the indissoluble couple Mary / Jesus, emphasizing the leading role played by the Virgin as a new liberated Woman. In his opinion, contrary to other women, subjected to the male, the Virgin Mary has as sole lord God the Father, who establishes a new alliance with men, sending his Son, the Word, through the Holy Spirit. It is precisely this last divine Person who, as a spiritual and divine seed, fertilizes Mary without the

³⁹ “omnis creatura una festive oblectetur, ac sacratissimum sacrae Annae laudet puerperium. Illa quippe mundo bonorum peperit thesaurum, quem vis nulla auferre possit. Per eum siquidem Creator naturam universam media humanitate in melius commutavit. Cum enim homo media inter mentem et materiam sede constitutus, rerum omnium conditarum, tuto visibilium, tum invisibilium, nodus vinculumque sit, profecto rerum artifex Deus Verbum humanae naturae copulatum, ejus beneficio creaturae universae unitum fuit.” (Ibid., 662-663).

⁴⁰ “O Virgo divinis gratiis affluens, templum Dei sanctum, quod spiritualis Salomon, ille princeps pacis abs se constructum inhabitavit: templum, inquam, non auro et inanimis lapidibus decoratum, sed auri loco Spiritu fulgens; pro lapidibus pretiosis, pulcherrimam margaritam habens Christum, Deitatis illum carbunculum.” (Ibid., 678).

⁴¹ “Per te legis facta translatio est, patefactusque spiritus, qui sub lege delitescebat”. (Ibid., 670).

need of carnal intercourse, so that she makes possible the incarnation of the Word of God.⁴²

2.7. The Birth of Mary, the prophetic announcement of the Redemption

Many Church Fathers, Christian theologians and apologists of East and West also emphasize the idea of the birth of the Virgin as the preamble of the Redemption: the birth of Mary, predestined by God to be the Mother of Jesus, marks the beginning of the redemptive process which the latter will carry out with his earthly life and his death on the cross.

It is just that the meaning of the Damascenian metaphor which imagines Mary as a new Eve, begetter of a new Man, who, while being God incarnate, will redeem humanity destroyed by the Original Sin: a new Eve capable of raising the old Eve of her fall, a new Eve who, after crushing the head of the tempting serpent, introduces into the world, through her son Jesus Christ, the definitive immortality, which defeats the death introduced by the Original Sin.⁴³

Thus, after inviting the believers to celebrate the innovative fecundity regenerated in Mary (her prodigious conception by sterile parents) that allows us to rescue the treasures of redemption, the Damascene urges all men to celebrate with joy the Mary's birth, bearer of happiness for whole mankind.⁴⁴ For this reason, he alleges that, if the Gentiles manifested with all kinds of honors the feast of their false idols and the birthday of their cruel monarchs, the Christians should especially honor the feast of the birth of the Mother of God, through whom humanity was redeemed, transforming Eve's sorrow into joy.⁴⁵ That is why, the apologist of Damascus trumpets with delight before the birth of Mary:

Today salvation began for the world. Praise the Lord, whole Earth,
sing, exult, play instruments. Raise your voice, raise it up. Do not be
afraid. For in the holy Probatic pool or house of the sheep the Mother

⁴² "Omnis namque mulieris caput est vir: hujus autem, cum virum non habeat, Deus et Pater caput fuit, qui Spiritus sancti opera conjugii veluti foedus paciscens, tanquam divinum quoddam semen, Filium suum ac Verbum, omnipotentem illam virtutem emisit. Benigna quippe voluntate Patris, non ex naturali congressu, sed ex Spiritu sancto et ex Maria Virgine supra naturae leges, nulla mutatione Verbum caro factum est, et habitavi! in nobis. Dei siquidem cum hominibus conjunctio per spiritum efficitur." (Ibid., 666).

⁴³ Ibid., 671.

⁴⁴ "Adeste omnes gentes, omne nominum genus, lingua omnis, et aetas omnis, omnisque dignitas; orbis universi laetitiae natalem diem laetis gaudiis celebremus." (Ibid.).

⁴⁵ "Si enim gentiles daemonum per commentitias fabulas clanculum animis illudentium, ac veritatem obscurantium, regum item natalitios dies omni honoris genere prosequerantur, ac pro sua quisque facultate oblatis muneribus litabant, cum alioqui humanam illi vitam infestarent: quanto nos potiori jure Dei Genitricis natalem operae pretium est honorare, per quam universum mortalium genus redintegratum est; per quam primigeniae matris Evae luctus in gaudium est commutatus?" (Ibid.).

of God has been born to us, from whom the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world wanted to be born.⁴⁶

Now, in order to see if the thoughts of St. John Damascene in this homily are reflected in some measure in the medieval images that represent the Birth of the Virgin, we will now analyze a set of Byzantine paintings on this iconographic motive, and then we will study another analogous group of European late medieval and Renaissance depictions. This will allow us to appreciate the possible similarities and differences between these Byzantine images and their corresponding specimens in medieval Europe.

3. Possible reflections of the St. John Damascene's doctrine in the iconography of the Birth of the Virgin Mary

3.1. Approach to some Byzantine paintings of the Birth of the Virgin Mary

As the three Apocrypha that serve as reference do not provide precise data on the birth of Mary, except for the brief mention of a midwife and a cradle in the *Protoevangelium of James*,⁴⁷ during the Middle Ages the artists and designers of the iconographic programs interested in this Marian episode added on their own several fabulous anecdotes and greatly emotional details. Combined the different narrative details proposed in this iconographic theme by Byzantine and European artists, the diverse medieval representations of the Birth of Mary usually have in common a number of basic elements, relating to characters, attitudes, actions, situations, scenography and accessories.

Concerning the first four elements, the Byzantine artists generally agree on the following guidelines: in the main sector of the painting, Anne remains, fully dressed with wide formal clothes, seated or lying *on* a bed (not *inside* it), to signify the childbirth just produced or still in process; the neonate is almost always naked or half naked, in the arms of a midwife who is preparing to bathe her, although sometimes she is dressed or wrapped in girdles (sometimes she is represented twice, while she is bathed, and sleeping in her crib or being put in her mother's arms);⁴⁸ in the foreground, one or several midwives crouching or

⁴⁶ "Hodie mundi salus inchoata est. Jubilate Deo, omnis terra, cantate, exsultate et psallite. Exaltate vocem vestram, exaltate, nolite timere. Nobis enim in sancta Probatica, seu pecuaria domo nata est Dei mater, ex qua Agnus Dei qui tollit peccatum mundi, nasci voluit." (Ibid., 670).

⁴⁷ "And her time was fulfilled, and the ninth month she gave birth. And she asked the midwife, 'What have I given birth to?' And the midwife replied, 'A child.' Then Anne exclaimed, 'My soul hath been exalted today.' And she rested the girl in the crib." (PES, V,2).

⁴⁸ This rather rare situation of maternal-filial closeness may perhaps be related to that admirable exclamation of the Damascene in honor of Anne: "Daughter of Adam and Mother of God! Blessed are the flanks and the bosom whence thou hast sprouted! Happy are the arms that carried you, the lips that have tasted your chaste kisses, the lips of your fathers alone, so that in all things you may always be a virgin." "O filia Adami et Dei mater! Beati lumbi et venter, ex quibus prodiisti. Beatae ulnae, quae te gestaverunt: labia item, quibus castis osculis frui

squatting wash the child in a tub or sink, while other standing midwives can sometimes help Anne holding her during or after childbirth;⁴⁹ several servants approach the woman in labor to offer her food and drink; very seldom Joachim appears, who, in that case, does so very discreetly in a corner of the painting.



Fig. 1. *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, miniature of the *Menologium of Basil II*, ca. 985. Biblioteca Vaticana, Roma

The Byzantine scenography of the Birth of the Virgin is usually achieved by a room of a stately house, almost always decorated by quite elegant architectural features. The accessories exhibit some luxury in the splendid furnishings, rich draperies, sumptuous bed with embroidered bedding or linen, trays with victuals and drinks carried by maids, a basin or tub where they wash the newborn, a beautiful crib, empty or already occupied by the baby.⁵⁰

concessa est, parentum nempe duntaxat tuorum, ut in omnibus semper virginitatem coleres.”(St. John Damascene, op.cit, 670).

⁴⁹ In commenting on the Nativity of Mary in Nerezi, Tania Velmans emphasizes very rightly the "realistic intention" that manifests the gesture of the servant who holds Anne, wanting to support the weakened newly mother. Velmans also emphasizes the realism that is expressed in the appearance of a robust peasant woman who exhibits the midwife, who holds the neonate with one hand, while washing her with the other. (Tania Velmans, *La peinture murale byzantine à la fin du Moyen-Âge*. Tome I, Paris, Klincksieck, Coll. Bibliothèque des Cahiers Archéologiques, XI, 1977, 113).

⁵⁰ In analyzing the mosaic of Kariye Djami, Paul A. Underwood defines as "scene of genre" the detail of the young servant in the act of preparing the cradle in which the newborn will be placed, Right next to her mother's bed. (Paul A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*. Vol. I: Historical

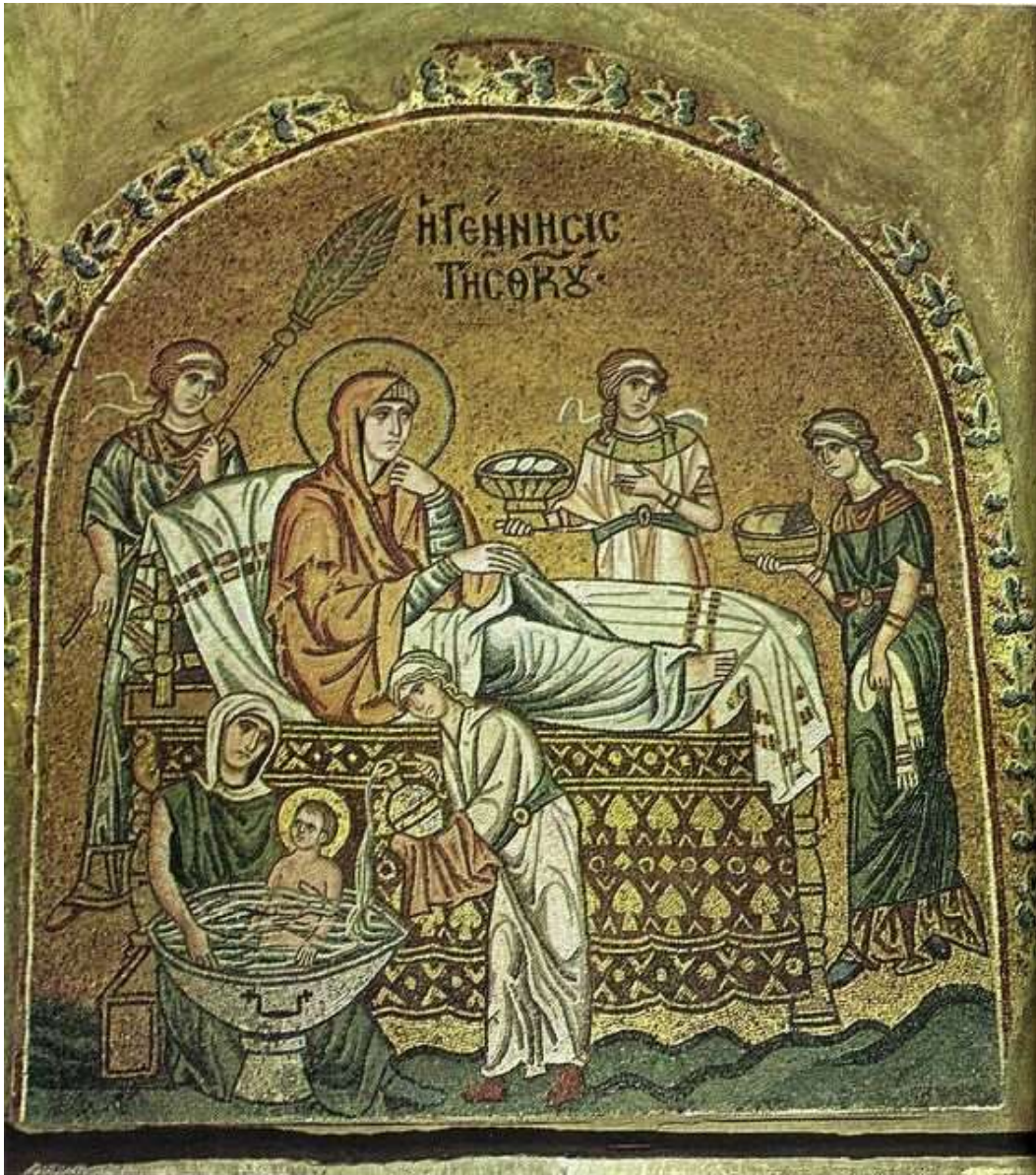


Fig. 2: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, mosaic, 2nd half of eleventh century.
Monastery of Dafni, Grece

All these Byzantine depictions under analysis illustrate in a more or less explicit way the labor of childbirth suffered by Anne, who still rests semi-recumbent or lying on the bed, while midwives and servants attend her. The Studenica's fresco takes up to the end such an effect, as it shapes the woman with the belly still prominent by the pregnancy, open thighs and sore face, while, semi-incorporated in her bed, is helped by two midwives who support her for both arms, in a joint attitude easily interpretable as to facilitate the work of pushing for delivery.



Fig. 3: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, fresco, 1164. Church of St. Panteleimón, Nerezi, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia.

A similar situation is observed in Nerezi's fresco, where a young midwife holds the body and palpates the belly of the semi-recumbent Anne, who appears to be in apparent labor. This clear interest of the creators of the murals of Studenica and Nerezi for emphasizing the labor of the delivery manifests, perhaps, their desire to translate in images the praiseworthy compliments directed by the Damascene to Anne, for having given birth and suckled to whom would later beget and feed the Creator and feeder of the world. This is what the Syrian apologist points out:

Oh womb in which a living heaven was conceived, greater than the immensity of heavens! [...] Oh breasts that suckled the one who nursed Him for whom the world feeds! Oh miracle of miracles, marvel of all marvels! Certainly it was right that the way was full of miracles for the ineffable incarnation of God, through which He bowed to us.⁵¹

The event of the ablution or bath of the newborn, which one or two midwives and one maid perform in a basin or bathtub is almost always figured in these pictures (except at Ohrid), without remarkable variants in its details. Seldom the neonate is immersed in the bathtub (Dafni, Nerezi), as she most often appears in the arms of a midwife before the bath, while this one or another midwife put the

⁵¹ “o uterum, in quo animatum coelum, coelorum latitudine latius conceptum fuit! o aream, quae vivifici frumenti acervum protulit, juxta ac Christus ipse pronuntiavit: *Nisi granum frumenti eadem in terram mortuum fuerit, ipsum solum manet*. O ubera, ejus lactantia nutricem, a quo mundos alitur! o miraculorum miracula, et rerum admirabilium res maxime mirabiles! Aequum quippe erat, ut ad ineffabilem Dei incarnationem, qua se ille ad nos inclinavit, iter per miracula muniretur.” (St. John Damascene, op.cit, 663).

hand into the bathtub to confirm the sufficient lukewarmness of water, poured by a maid with a ewer (Menologium of Basil II, Kariye Djami, Studenica, Sopoçani).



Fig. 4: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, fresco, 1295. Church of Panagia Peribleptos (now St. Climent), Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia



Fig. 5: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, fresco, 1313-1314. Monastery of Studenica, King's Church, Studenica, Serbia



Fig. 6: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, mosaic, 1320-1321. Monastery of St. Savior of Chora (Kariye Djami), Istanbul

As a curious exception, the Ohrid fresco omits, as we have already pointed out, the conventional episode of the ablution of the neonate, an omission that could perhaps be interpreted as a symbolic allusion to Mary's immaculate birth and her exemption from Original Sin. Who knows if the designer of the iconographic program of Ohrid has heard inside him the echo of these words of Damascene:

Now a Virgin is born, an enemy of the ancestral debauchery of her ancestors, who is united to the same God as a wife, and gives birth to the mercy of God [Christ]. [...] From her, in fact, the most beloved Son of God is born, in whom the Father made his satisfactions.⁵²

On the other hand, contrary to the custom of omitting Joachim in the Byzantine images of the Nativity of the Virgin, the Studenica's fresco and the Kariye Djami's mosaic give him a quite discrete prominence, placing him in the foreground as a solicitous protector of his baby, asleep in her crib, while a maid fans her (Studenica), or making him appear almost stealthily through a side door (Kariye Djami). It is evident that the programmers of the iconography of both murals sought to enhance the parental co-leading role, perhaps having in mind those sentences of Damascene: "Rejoice, Joachim: from your daughter a child is

⁵² "Virgo nunc antiquae majorum suorum scortationis adversaria nascitur, ipsique Deo sponsa jungitur, ac Dei misericordiam parit [...] Ex ea quippe nascitur Filius Dei dilectissimus, in quo Pater bene sibi complacuit." (Ibid., 674).

born to us, a son has been given to us, and will be called *Angel of the great council* of salvation of the whole world, strong God.”⁵³ Or perhaps they remembered those other praises that –as we pointed out before– the Syrian eulogist dedicates to Joachim and Anne, considering that their sanctity as a chaste couple was worthy of the most holy child born to them.⁵⁴

As we have already pointed out in various contexts, all the Byzantine paintings under scrutiny stage a multifarious action of midwives and maids, the first washing the newborn (and, sometimes, helping the bearing mother), the latter giving food and drinks to the women in labor, and even fanning her with a fan (Dafni, Ohrid, Studenica, Kariye Djami). By highlighting the narrative content staged by these female groups and their pragmatic interventions, the artists and their principals reaffirm, in first instance, the natural and everyday dimension underlying the supernatural event of the Birth of the Mother of God, in order to present it as a normal delivery, like that of any giving birth among the ordinary mortals. Thus the authors of these images would seem to be at the antipodes of the Damascene thought.

It is not ruled out, however, that some symbolic significance is hidden behind this manifest factual banality. For example, if the artists were receptive to the devout digressions of St. John Damascene on this matter, these foods, drinks, and attentions with which Anne was bestowed on her bed might well be interpreted analogically as the tribute of gratitude that whole humanity should offer to that couple, for having given birth to the future Mother of the Redeemer. The position of the orator of Damascus is very clear when he writes: “Oh Joachim and Anne, happy couple! All creation is indebted to you; for you it offered to the Creator the gift, the most excellent of all gifts, a chaste mother, the only one worthy of the Creator.”⁵⁵ In the same order of ideas, in the light of our theologian's thought, it is possible –in those scenes of the Birth of Mary– to interpret the fragile image of the helpless neonate, protected and suckled by her mother, and blessed only by her two parents, as a discreet epiphany of the true glory and power of the Virgin, conqueror of the devil, queen of the angels, who give her escort, and is also acclaimed by men of all ages as God's favorite. This is what our apologist asserts:

Oh very sacred daughter, you appear in the lap of your mother, and you are the terror of the apostasy's powers! Oh very sacred daughter, nourished with breast milk, and surrounded by the armies of angels! Oh daughter, beloved of God, honor of your fathers, generations of generations call you blessed, as was rightly said about you!⁵⁶

⁵³ “Exsulta, Joachim, quoniam ex filia tua puer natus est nobis, et filius datus est nobis, et vocabitur nomen ejus *magni consilii*, salutis universi mundi, *Angelus, Deus fortis*.” (Ibid., 667).

⁵⁴ See our Note 21.

⁵⁵ “O par beatum Joachim et Anna! vobis omnis creatura obstricta est. Per vos enim donum omnium donorum praestantissimum Creatori obtulit, nempe castam matrem, quae sola Creatore digna erat.” (St. John Damascene, op.cit, 663).

⁵⁶ “O sacratissima filia, quae in maternis ulnis cerneris, apostaticisque virtutibus formidabilis es! O sacratissima filia, quae matris uberibus lactaris, atque ab angelis undique cingeris! O chara

We could perhaps track other traces –however imperceptible they may be— of the Damascenian elucidations in some objects and accessories that populate the scene of these Byzantine paintings, ingredients whose possible symbolism is worth exploring. Thus, among the foods offered by maids to the mother in labor, some paintings include eggs – Menologium of Basil II, Dafni mosaic, fresco of Hagia Sofia in Kiev—, eggs that some experts interpret as a clear metaphor of fecundity and life.⁵⁷ Perhaps, therefore, the authors of these images, in introducing such significant nutrients, have remembered those statements of the Damascene, pondering the fruitful fecundity, promoter of the True Life (Jesus), which the birth of Mary comes to produce from the sterility of her parents:

Today the doors of sterility [of Joachim and Anne] are opened, and a virginal and divine door [Mary] is advanced, from which and through which God, who is superior to all beings, will enter the Earth in corporal form [...] Today a stem arose from the root of Jesse, from which a flower that subsists as a divine being will rise to the world.⁵⁸



Fig. 7: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, fresco, mid eleventh century, church of Hagia Sofia, Kiev, Ucraina

Deo filia, parentum decus, quam, ut abs te vere dictum est, generationes omnes beatam dicunt!” (Ibid., 671).

⁵⁷ For example, Gaetano Passarelli (*Iconos. Festividades bizantinas*, Madrid, LIBSA, 1999, p. 45) interprets it that way.

⁵⁸ “Hodie sterilitatis porta aperiuntur, divinaque porta virginalis procedit, ex qua et per quam qui est super omnia Deus, in urbem terrae corporali modo est ingressurus [...]. Hodie virga de radice Jesse orta est, ex qua mundo flos divine subsistens ascendet.” (St. John Damascene, op.cit, 663).

It is noteworthy that the symbols underlying these eggs offered to the calving mother do not only metaphorize the human life to which the neonate Mary accedes at that instant, but the eternal Life that her future son Jesus will guarantee over the centuries to mankind, after redeeming it of sin through his death on cross. It is not in vain that St. John Damascene exclaims, as he celebrates this Marian feast: “A very fertile vine germinated from the Anne’s womb, and produced a very sweet bunch of grapes, a source of nectar that flow unto eternal life to men. Joachim and Anne sowed themselves for righteousness, and they harvested a fruit of life.”⁵⁹



Fig. 8: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, fresco, c. 1265. Monastery of Sopoćani, Serbia. Detail of the bath’ scene

Fig. 9: *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, fresco, end of thirteenth century. Church of Gradac, Dalmatia, Croacia. Detail of the bath’ scene

The basin or washbowl in which they wash the newborn as well as the very act of ablution are full of symbolism. Many commentators, in fact, see in these elements a symbol of baptism, as the purifying sacrament of original sin. For this reason, most of these basins or bathtubs in the Byzantine paintings analyzed here have the form of baptismal font (Menologium of Basil II, Dafni, Kiev, Nerezi, Sopoćani, Karije Djami). Likewise –and this interpretation does not cancel the previous one, but completes and perfects it– other experts interpret the basin with its purifying water as an analogy of Christ, who defined himself as the living water capable of finally satisfying the thirst of the thirsty, or even as a symbol of the Virgin Mary, assumed as *Fons Vitae*, as the pure and virginal spring from which springs the Water of Life (Jesus Christ). This is what Damascene himself says when proclaiming: “Rejoice, happy Anne, for having given birth to a woman. For this woman will be the Mother of God, the gate of light, the source of life.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “Vitis uberrima ex Anna pullulavit, uvaque suavissima effloruit, potum nectaris terrigenis fundens in vitam aeternam. Joachim et Anna ad justitiam sibi ipsi seminarunt, ac vitae fructum messuerunt.” (Ibid., 674).

⁶⁰ “Laetare, beata Anna, quod feminam pepereris. Haec enim femina Dei mater futura est, porta lucis, fons vitae”. (Ibid., 674).

Perhaps these same ideas were those intuited by Damascene when he compares the Virgin Mary with the “Sheep's Porch”, ie the Gate adjacent to the Probatic Pool in Jerusalem, where the sheep were washed before being sacrificed in the temple of Solomon: According to the Syrian apologist, that probatic source, contrary to what happened once when the angel waved its waters once a year and healed a single paralytic, now becomes, after the birth of Mary, a source of universal healing for all sheep that form the spiritual flock of Christ. This is expressed poetically by Damascene:

I greet you, probatic pool, very sacred sanctuary of the Mother of God, [...] formerly probatic of the sheep of Joachim, now become the Church of the spiritual flock of Christ, which represents heaven; you who once received only once a year the angel of God, who stirred the waters and healed a single man, now you have here a multitude of celestial powers that celebrate with us the Mother of God; she who is the abyss of miracles, the source of the healing of the universe.⁶¹

3.2. Approach to some European paintings of the Birth of Mary

By comparison with their Byzantine counterparts –in which, however, they are inspired and from which extract the most relevant narrative elements— the European representations of this iconographic subject (except that of Pietro Cavallini in his mosaic of Santa Maria in Trastevere, a work very influenced by the models of Byzantium) are usually much more realistic. In fact, these European images are conceived from a fundamentally objective and “wordly” approach, according to which the birth of the Virgin was a wholly natural and everyday process, with little aspects of miracle or supernatural.

Only Giotto, in his fresco at the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, departs partially in one aspect from this realistic conception, presenting twice the neonate Mary: once while she is attended by the midwives in the bath scene, and a second time when being delivered by another midwife to the Anne's arms.⁶² However, Giotto models the whole scene with his typical realism: for example, the gestures of the midwife opening the eyes of the baby after bathing, or that of the maid draining the wet towel after use, or the detail of the young woman who, on the porch of

⁶¹ “Salvesis, probatica, Dei Matris sacratissimum delubrum. [...] Salvesis, probatica Joachim, pecorum quondam caula, nunc autem rationalis Christi ovilis Ecclesia coelum repraesentans; quae olim quidem quotannis semel Angelum Dei excipiebas turbantem aquam, unumque valetudini restituentem, nunc autem coelestium virtutum copiosissimam agmen habes Dei Genitricem laudantium nobiscum; illam miraculorum abyssum, mundi universi curationis fontem”. (Ibid., 678).

⁶² With that double representation of the newborn, Giotto resembles the Byzantine author of the fresco in the King's Church in the Serbian monastery of Studenica, with the difference that in this fresco of Studenica the newborn appeared in the bath scene and sleeping already in her cradle.

the house, gives a servant some provisions to comfort the woman in labor,⁶³ or the fact that Anne is not *on* the bed,⁶⁴ but *inside* the bed, half covered by blankets and sheets.



Fig. 10 Giotto, *The Birth of the Virgin*, 1302-1305, fresco, Capella Scrovegni, Padua.

It is not without significance that, following the Giotto's example, this situation of Anne inside the bed is also repeated by Giovanni da Milano, Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, the German Master of the Life of the Virgin, the Workshop of Pedro García de Benabarre, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Benozzo Gozzoli.

Moreover, all the European artists analyzed here fully adopt the narrative elements of a naturalistic and daily dimension introduced at the time by Byzantine artists, namely: the ablution of the newborn by at least two midwives, one of them pouring the water in the basin or washbowl located on the floor, the other holding the small baby in or out of the basin; the assistance and the relief that some maids give Anne, bringing her food (eggs, chicken, soup), drinks, cloths and other comforting items; in Giovanni da Milano, Andrea di Bartolo and Benozzo Gozzoli, the attention is drawn to the eloquent detail of washing her hands, which is nothing more than a poetic suggestion to fully clean the mother after delivery.

⁶³ This situation is also taken up by Giovanni da Milano in his fresco of the Rinuccini Chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence.

⁶⁴ The conventional Byzantine way of representing the delivering Anne in this Marian episode is to place her lying or sitting on the bed, completely dressed in daily clothes.



Fig. 11 Pietro Cavallini, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, ca. 1320, mosaic, Santa Maria in Trastevere, Roma



Fig. 12 Pietro Lorenzetti, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, 1342. Museo del Duomo, Siena



Fig. 13. Giovanni da Milano, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, 1365,
fresco, Cappella Rinuccini, Santa Croce, Florence

Another striking narrative element assumed from Byzantine artists by European painters is the careful work by some midwives and maids around the bed of the woman in labor, in a multiple feminine share which sometimes –as in the cases of Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, the German Master of the Life of the Virgin, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Benozzo Gozzoli— is enlarged with the presence of other women, who sometimes whisper to each other (the Master of the Life of the Virgin, Benozzo Gozzoli) or give way to the anachronistic inclusion of some girls belonging to the donor's house (Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Tornabuoni Chapel in Florence).



Fig. 14. Andrea di Bartolo, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*,
ca.1400. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Fig. 15. Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, Sabauda Gallery, Turin.



Fig. 16. Master of the Virgin's Life, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, ca. 1460, Munich

Such realism –now of purely Flemish hallmark— arrives in the German Master of the Virgin's Life to noteworthy extremes, as, for example: to figure the naked neonate next to her mother lying in the bed while a midwife takes the baby in her own arms, in a subtle metaphor of grasping her just at the moment of the childbirth; to form a “team” of three midwives or servants who will do the ablution of the newborn, one of them pouring water into the basin, the other testing the temperature with the hand, the third waiting with a large towel to dry the babe after bath; the realistic detail of a fourth maid offering a new folded towel to the latter trio, that she has just extracted from the still open coffer, is not lacking either.



Fig. 17. Workshop of Pedro García de Benabarre, *The Birth of Mary*,
ca. 1475. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona

The anonymous painter of the Pedro García de Benabarre's Workshop expresses also this daily realism through two symptomatic details: first of all, the abundant and varied set of food and drinks that the servants offer to the Anne bedridden; in addition the detail of the brazier in foreground in which the midwife warms the already wrapped in girdles neonate and in which a servant dries the towel freshly used in the ablution.



Fig. 18. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, 1491, fresco, Cappella
Tornabuoni, Santa Maria Novella, Firenze.



Fig. 19. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Birth of the Virgin Mary*, from the cycle *Tabernacolo della Visitazione*, 1491-92, transferred fresco, Museo Benozzo Gozzoli, Castelfiorentino

Moreover, by reiterating the presence of Joachim in the Byzantine images of this subject in Studenica and Karije Djami, Pietro Lorenzetti (in his triptych of the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Siena) and, after him, Andrea di Bartolo place Joachim sitting next to another man in the antechamber of the bedroom, awaiting impatiently news of the delivery in progress, news that, on the Lorenzetti's triptych, a little girl whispers in his ear.

5. Conclusions

At the end of this double comparative analysis between John Damascene's doctrinal thought and Byzantine and European artistic images of the Virgin Mary's Birth, it seems reasonable to deduce the following inferences.

Very few of the numerous and very symbolic and profound theological disquisitions of Damascene are explicitly reflected in the realistic and everyday Byzantine and European representations of this Marian episode. Only by forcing, as we have done, the analyzes, we could see some subtle and diffuse analogy between certain doctrinal concepts of the Syrian theologian and several details of the artistic images studied, such as the possible symbolic meaning of water in the ablution of the newborn, or the eggs offered to Anne as a comfort, or the marked role of the woman in labor as protective and nurturing mother of the neonate Mother of the Son of God.

And if that was not enough, the Byzantine and European depictions of the Birth of the Virgin Mary collect only the detail of the midwives (and the crib, in the Byzantine works of Ohrid, Studenica and Karije Djami). On the contrary, the remaining elements referred to characters, situations, attitudes, accessories and scenographic ingredients represented in those Eastern and Western paintings are extracted from the factual experience and of the daily life. It is as much as to say that the intellectual authors of these Byzantine and European pictorial works – these latter with greater emphasis than the former— prefer to interpret the birth of Mary as a fully human and natural phenomenon, regardless of any miraculous or supernatural dimension. For this reason, both in Byzantine and Western European art, they insist on the following aspects of objective reality and life experience: the presence of midwives to facilitate delivery; the need to wash the newborn and in some cases (Giovanni da Milano, Andrea di Bartolo and Benozzo Gozzoli) also her freshly calved mother; the urgency to comfort the woman in labor with food, drinks, cloths and even fans (Pietro Lorenzetti) with which to give air in her suffocating labor. In this context, it is essential to highlight a very important detail for the medieval and Renaissance period: the childbirth event is an exclusively female ambit, strictly reserved for women (calving woman, midwives, maidservants, women of the house). That is why the few artists that include the husband Joachim (Studenica, Karije Djami, Pietro Lorenzetti and Andrea di Bartolo) do it depicting him in a passive and expectant attitude in a marginal place separated from the scene of the delivery.

In any case, the too human Byzantine and European iconography of the Birth of the Virgin Mary does not cease to constitute before the eyes of the Eastern and Western Christians a powerful stimulus to invigorate their devotion to the exalted Mother of God. After all, at the coming into the world of that fragile baby, predestined to be the mighty Mother of the Redeemer Messiah, they all perceived the very beginning of the History of Human Salvation.

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