

The House/Palace in Annunciations of the 15th Century. An Iconographic Interpretation in the Light of the Latin Patristics and Theological Tradition

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Abstract. This article seeks to highlight the doctrinal meanings enclosed in the representation of the house of Mary in the form of a palace or an aristocratic residence in seven images of the Annunciation of the 15th century. To justify our iconographic interpretations in this sense, we based on the analysis of many exegetical comments with which many Latin Fathers and theologians interpreted several metaphorical expressions with dogmatic projection, such as *domus Sapientiae*, *domus Dei*, *aula regia*, *palatium Regis*, *domicilium Trinitatis*, and other analogous terms. As a methodological strategy, we use here a double comparative analysis: in the first instance, analyzing a series of patristic and theological texts that exegetically interpret the metaphors above; secondly, relating these exegetical texts with the eight Annunciations explained here.

Keywords: *Domus Sapientiae*; Christ's incarnation; virginal divine motherhood; Virgin Mary; Latin Patrology.

[es] La casa/palacio en Anunciaciones del siglo XV. Una interpretación iconográfica a la luz de la tradición patristica y teológica latina

Resumen. Este artículo busca poner de relieve los significados doctrinales encerrados en la representación de la casa de María en forma de palacio o residencia aristocrática en siete imágenes de la Anunciación del siglo XV. Para justificar nuestras interpretaciones iconográficas en tal sentido nos basamos en el análisis de muchos comentarios exegeticos con los que numerosos Padres y teólogos latinos interpretaron con proyección dogmática varias expresiones metafóricas, como *domus Sapientiae*, *domus Dei*, *aula regia*, *palatium Regis*, *domicilium Trinitatis*, y otros términos análogos. Como estrategia metodológica nos basamos aquí en un doble análisis comparativo: en primera instancia, analizando una serie de textos patristicos y teológicos que interpretan exegeticamente las metáforas antes mencionadas; en segunda instancia, relacionando esos textos exegeticos con las ocho Anunciaciones explicadas aquí.

Palabras clave: *Domus Sapientiae*; encarnación de Cristo; virginal maternidad divina; Virgen María; Patrología Latina.

Summary. 1. Introduction 2. Interpretations of Latin Fathers and theologians on the “house of Wisdom” (*domus Sapientiae*), the “royal palace” (*aula regia*), or similar metaphorical expressions. 3. Iconographic interpretation of the house/palace of Mary in seven Annunciations of the 15th century. 4. Conclusions. 5. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction²

During our systematic and accurate research into primary sources of Christian doctrine, an important finding was confirmed with increasing force and insistence: for more than a millennium, from at least the middle of the 4th century to the end of the 15th century, countless Greek-Eastern and Latin Fathers and theologians agreed

to interpret certain metaphorical expressions –taken literally or paraphrased– from the Old Testament with dogmatic scope. We refer in this case to expressions such as “house of Wisdom” (*domus Sapientiae*), “dwelling place of the Most High”, “house of God” (*domus Dei*), “palace of the King” (*palatium Regis*), “royal palace” (*aula regia*), “throne of divinity”, “domicile of the Trinity” (*domicilium Trinitatis*), and other analogous

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terms alluding to some kind of sumptuous dwelling or protocol space for the exclusive use of God or the king. One of the primary sources of inspiration in this regard is the biblical sentence “*Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum; excidit septem columnas*”, included in the book of *Proverbs*³.

Now, according to the results of our research, the most surprising finding in this regard is that, regardless of their respective historical periods and their different geographical-cultural contexts, all those masters of Eastern and Western Christian doctrine substantially agree in interpreting these expressions as symbols or metaphors of God the Son’s incarnation in Mary’s virginal womb. This substantial agreement is, however, articulated in three possible exegetical variants, which, although different, interrelate and complement each other necessarily. According to the first variant, strictly Mariological, the expressions of reference symbolize Mary and, specifically, her virginal womb. According to the second version, strictly Christological, they symbolize the body or human nature in which God the Son incarnated. According to the third double variant, Mariological and Christological, at the same time, such metaphorical expressions symbolize both Mary and the human body of Christ.

It is also worth noting a fourth interpretative variant of the Fathers on those metaphors under analysis: the ecclesiological one. This fourth interpretation is based on the fact that many Christian doctrine teachers consider Mary as a symbol, model, or paradigm of the Church. Thus, according to these influential authors, everything we affirm about Mary refers equally to the Church: it follows that the Mariological interpretation of the symbolic expressions above becomes necessarily an ecclesiological interpretation. However, the strict limits imposed on us in an academic article of this nature force us to put aside that ecclesiological interpretation⁴.

In the context of the heated controversies lived in Christianity against the different heresies that arose in the 3rd and 4th centuries (especially Arianism), the efforts of the great leaders of Christian orthodoxy become more and more intense and reiterated to defend two great essentially complementary dogmas: first of all, the duality of Christ’s natures, divine, and human, hypostatically united in a single and indissoluble person; secondly, and as a necessary correlate, the virginal divine motherhood of Mary, defined then as *Theotókos* (Mother of God), and not only as *Christotókos* (mother of Christ as a man). Precisely in this hostile atmosphere of the frontal struggle between Christian orthodoxy and the various heresies, many Church Fathers interpret the Biblical metaphors mentioned above as rhetorical arguments to demonstrate the truth of the two dogmas just mentioned. Not surprisingly, the first to use these exegetical resources to confirm the Christological and

Mariological orthodoxy against the heretics were the Greek-Eastern Fathers. Logically also, after the anti-heretical controversies have subsided, many other Fathers, Doctors, and theologians of the Greek-Eastern and Latin Churches will continue in the following centuries reiterating exegetical comments on the metaphorical expressions under study. Thus, they forged and consolidated a compact doctrinal tradition in the East and West, based on interpreting the aforementioned Old Testament expressions as Christological and Mariological symbols.

The preceding paragraphs summarize the results obtained in our research in primary Greek-Eastern and Latin Christian sources. Now, since the *corpus* of patristic and theological quotations discovered in that specific topic is so abundant and complex, we have decided to divide the study into two different articles, although closely interconnected. In this first article, we restrict ourselves to analyzing the exegetical comments of Latin theologians on these metaphors. In a second article, we will study the glosses of the Greek-Eastern Christian thinkers on the matter.

2. Interpretations of Latin Fathers and theologians on the “house of Wisdom” (*domus Sapientiae*), the “royal palace” (*aula regia*), or similar metaphorical expressions

In the second half of the 4th century, St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (c. 339 / 340-397), adopted the two exegetical variants, Mariological and Christological, on the “house of God” (*domus Dei*) as the simultaneous symbol of Mary (her virginal womb) and Christ (his human body). From the outset, in a series of texts of different kinds, he seems to adhere only to the restricted interpretation, reserved only to Mary. Thus in a treatise on virginity, he states that, when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, he entered through the closed door of the virginity of Mary and sat in it⁵, as the King who sits (that is, resides) in the royal palace (*aula regia*) of the virginal womb of Mary, as this is the royal palace not subject to any male, but only to God⁶.

In his 63rd Epistle, Ambrose insists on this same Mariological projection, when he asks rhetorically how we could ponder how great was the grace of Mary’s virginity, who deserved to be chosen by Christ to be the bodily temple of God, in which fullness dwelt of the godhead, keeping herself at the same time virgin by begetting the Savior of the world, and by giving birth to the Life of all people.⁷ As if that were not enough, the Milan bishop

⁵ St. Ambrose refers here to Ezekiel’s prophecy about the eastern *porta clausa* of the temple.

⁶ “Ipse ergo Rex Israel transivit hanc portam, ipse dux sedit in ea; quando Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis (Joan. 1, 14), quasi Rex sedens in aula regali uteri virginalis, vel in olla ferventi [...]. Utrumque enim diversis in codicibus invenitur. Aula regalis est virgo, quae non est viro subdita, sed Deo soli.” (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De institutione virginis*, XII, 79. PL 16, 324).

⁷ “Quid autem loquar quanta sit virginitatis gratia, quae meruit a Christo elegi, ut esset etiam corporale Dei templum, in qua corporaliter, ut legimus (Coloss. 2, 9) habitavit plenitudo divinitatis? Virgo genuit mundi salutem, virgo peperit vitam universorum”. (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Epistula LXIII*, 33. PL 16, 1249-1250).

³ Prov. 9, 1. Translated in English: “Wisdom has built her house; she has carved out her seven pillars”.

⁴ The iconographic interpretation of the image of the Virgin Mary as the Church, and vice versa, has been brilliantly studied by Marie-Louise Thérél, *Le triomphe de la Vierge-Église. Sources historiques, littéraires et iconographiques* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1984).

reinforces his Mariological interpretation in a couple of hymns in honor of the Virgin. Thus, in one of them, he refers to the conception/birth of Christ from the womb of Mary in these poetic terms:

From your bridal room
Royal Palace of Modesty⁸,
The Giant of two twin substances⁹,
[is conceived and born] to run the road quickly¹⁰.

And in another hymn of a similar Marian nature, Ambrose refers to Christ's conception/birth from Mary's virginal womb thus:

Scion of lofty light,
He was born from the royal palace of the Virgin,
Husband, Redeemer, Founder,
Giant of his Church¹¹.

However, in a second instance, St. Ambrose unequivocally adopts the double Mariological and Christological interpretation of the *domus Dei* or the *aula regia*. In his 30th Epistle, in effect, he maintains that, when Jesus Christ wanted to find a temple in which to live for redeeming humankind, he did not look for stones or wood worked with human hands, but instead chose the womb of the Virgin Mary to make it the royal palace (*aula regia*) and in the temple where the King of heaven lived so that the human body became the temple of God, which would be resurrected three days after death.¹² Thus it is clear that for St. Ambrose, these building metaphors mean both the virginal womb of Mary and the human body of Christ.

Two or three decades after St. Ambrose expressed such concepts, St. Jerome of Stridon (c. 347-420) joined the Mariological variant, assuring in a comment to Isaiah that the Lord of the virtues and King of glory will descend into a virginal womb and, as Ezekiel predicted, will enter and exit through the eastern door, which is always closed, according to what Gabriel announced to Mary "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; So the

holy one to be born will be called the Son of God"¹³, and according to what is written in Proverbs: "Wisdom has built her house"¹⁴.

Around the same dates that St. Jerome did, Bishop St. Maximus of Turin († c. 420) joined those who supported the Mariological interpretation of the Biblical metaphors under scrutiny, proclaiming Mary as a worthy abode for Christ, not according to the laws of physical nature, but by the original grace of the Holy Spirit: the Virgin—the holy Prelate of Turin asserts—mysteriously carried as in the tabernacle of her womb the priest, Christ God, priest and host, God of the resurrection and priest of the oblation¹⁵. A few lines later, St. Maximus goes on to say that instead of the womb, he prefers to call the womb of Mary a temple since this is the temple in which all the holy things existing in heaven (Christ) dwells, more valuable even than heaven, almost as if the divine mystery were installed in the most secret tabernacle¹⁶.

Not many years later, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) opted instead for the Christological interpretation, considering that this *domus Dei* or *domus Sapientiae* signifies the body or human nature of God the Son incarnate. Augustine, in effect, interprets the sentence above of Proverbs "Wisdom has built her house" in the sense that we recognize that the divine Wisdom, that is, the Word of God, coeternal with the Father, built for himself in the virginal womb of Mary the temple of his body or human nature, a body to which he would later unite the Church, as the members are united to the head¹⁷.

Perhaps for the same decades Arnobius Junior († post 455), bishop in the Roman province of Gaul, in a comment to the Psalms, after affirming that every pure person will enter the Lord's tabernacle and there will be purified, assures that the immaculate Jesus, the only one who entered the virginal royal palace (*aula*) of Mary (her womb), freed her from the carnal stains and gave her much higher sanctification than he received from her¹⁸.

⁸ A metaphor of Mary's virginal womb.

⁹ He alludes metaphorically to Christ, supreme Son of God (Giant), possessor of two natures, divine and human, inseparably united (twins) in his only Person.

¹⁰ "Procedens de thalamo suo
Pudoris aula regia,
Geminae Gigas substantiae,
Alacris ut currat viam." (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Hymnus IV*. PL 16, 1411).

¹¹ "Genus superni luminis,
processit aula virginis,
Sponsus, redemptor, conditor,
Suae gigas Ecclesiae.
Honor matris et gaudium,
Immensa spes credentium,
Per atra mortis pocula,
Resolvit nostra crimina." (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Hymnus XII*. PL 16, 1412).

¹² "Neque enim terrenorum parietum constructiones, et silvestrium ligna culminum desiderabat, quae cum fuissent, manus dirueret hostilis; sed illud templum quaerebat, quod in hominum conderetur mentibus [...], in quo habitaret Dominus Jesus, et unde ad redemptionem universorum procederet, ut in utero Virginis sacra reperieretur aula, in qua Rex habitaret coelestium, et corpus humanum Dei templum fieret; quod etiam, cum solutum esset, in triduo resuscitaretur." (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Epistola XXX*, 3. PL 16, 1107).

¹³ Lc. 1, 35. In *Biblia de Jerusalén. Nueva edición revisada y aumentada*. Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998: 1496.

¹⁴ "Dominus enim virtutum ipse est rex gloriae (Ps. 23, 10) : ipse descendet in uterum virginalem, et ingredietur et egredietur Orientalem portam, quae semper est clausa (Ezech. 44); de qua Gabriel dicit ad Virginem: *Spiritus sanctus veniet super te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi : propterea quod nasceatur in te sanctum, vocabitur Filius Dei* (Lc. 1, 35). Et in Proverbiis: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum* (Prov. 9, 1)". (Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Isaiam Prophetam. Liber III. Caput VII*, 14. PL 24, 107).

¹⁵ "Idoneum plane Maria Christo habitaculum, non pro habitu corporis, sed pro gratia originali." (Maximus Taurinensis, *Homilia V. De eadem [ante natale Domini]*. PL 57, 235).

¹⁶ "Mariae ergo uterum non uterum dixerim fuisse, sed templum; templum plane est, in quo habitat sanctum quicquid in coelo est: nisi quod super coelos aestimandum est, ubi quasi in secretiore tabernaculo mysterium a divinitate disponitur, quemadmodum a pluribus ascendatur ad coelum". (Taurinensis, *Homilia V...*, 236).

¹⁷ "Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum (Prov. 9, 1)"... Hic certe agnoscimus Dei Sapientiam, hoc est, Verbum Patro coaeternum, in utero virginali domum sibi aedificasse corpus humanum, et hunc tamquam capiti membra Ecclesiam subiunxisse". (Augustinus Hipponensis, *De Civitate Dei*, 17, 20. PL 41, 583, in *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*, ed. Sergio Álvarez Campos, vol. 3, Burgos: Aldecoa, 1974, 325).

¹⁸ "Domine, quis habitabit in tabernaculo tuo, aut quis requiescet in monte sancto tuo? Qui ingreditur sine macula et operatur iustitiam (Ps. 14, 1-2)" [...] Omnis immaculatus ingreditur tabernaculum Domini, et ibi immaculatus efficitur. Jesus autem immaculatus solus virgineam aulam ingressus, ipsam tabernaculum a maculis carnalibus liberavit, et dedit sanctificationem potius quam accepit". (Arnobius Junior, *Commentarii in Psalmos. Psalmus XIV*. PL 53, 340-341).

Towards the end of the 5th century or in the first decades of 6th St. Eleutherius (c. 456-531), the first bishop of Tournai, says in a sermon on the incarnation of Christ that, entering the Holy Spirit in the royal palace of modesty (the womb) of the Virgin Mary, made her give birth to Christ, God the Son made man, who would redeem the sins of all people by shedding his innocent blood for the redemption of humanity, also making the invisible God appear visible before people through his visible only-begotten Son made man¹⁹.

About three generations later, the exquisite Italian lyric poet St. Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers (c. 530-c. 607/609), praises the Virgin Mary in one of his poems with these metaphorical concepts:

The royal palace (*aula*) of God, the ornament of paradise, the glory of the kingdom;
The shelter of life, the bridge that penetrates heaven.
Glowing ark and mighty scabbard of a doubly sharp sword,
For the ascendant of God, the high beacon of light²⁰.

More than half a century later, St. Ildefonsus of Toledo (607-667), in a book on Mary's virginity written against three infidels, criticizes Helvidius for daring to defame the virginity of Mary by begetting Jesus²¹, then rhetorically he asks him not to oppose the power of this majesty, so as not to diminish the property of God with his reckless daring nor to damage with his presumption the mansion of the godhead, and not to collapse the house of the Lord with insults of corruption, and let it not pretend to affirm that the door of the house of God, closed after He passed, can be passed through by anyone²². The bishop of Toledo goes on to say that the God of virtues is the Lord of this possession, that the King of Heaven is the owner of this property, and that Almighty God is the builder of this house, the only one who enters it and the custodian of the door through which he entered²³. Ildefonsus also emphasizes that, when entering

that house (being conceived as a man), God the Son did not remove the seals of his mother's virginity, and when leaving (at birth), he enriched her with integrity (perpetual virginity)²⁴. In another sermon on the Assumption of Mary attributed to him²⁵, St. Ildefonsus describes Mary as a "Good house" into which the Deity of the Word enters, sliding into the house in which the Wisdom of God the Father erected his seven columns²⁶, which sustain the whole house and construct the Church²⁷.

Towards the middle of the 9th century, the Benedictine monk Retramnus of Corbie (c. 800-c. 870) assures in a book on the Nativity of Jesus that the virginity of Mary before childbirth, in childbirth, and after delivery can be affirmed because "the royal palace of her modesty" (the vulva) remained inviolate; therefore when recognizing the truth of the birth of Christ, we acknowledge the reality of the birth of his mother, Mary²⁸. Because—Retramne asks rhetorically—what else does it mean that Mary is a virgin before childbirth but that her virginity was fertilized? And what else does it mean that Mary is a virgin in childbirth but that she gave birth being a virgin? And what else does it mean that Mary is a virgin after delivery, but that she kept her virginity perpetually?²⁹

A couple of centuries later, the Benedictine monk St. Peter Damian, bishop of Ostia (1007-1072), in his 15th Sermon for the Nativity of Mary, declares that, as it was impossible for the redemption of Humanity if Christ had not been born of the Virgin, it was necessary for the Virgin to be born in which the Word of God was incarnated; therefore, it was convenient for the King of heaven to build a house first—as Solomon said when he pointed out that "Wisdom had built her house"—, in which he wanted to have his lodging when he descended to earth, a house that the eternal Wisdom has built in such a way that it was worthy to receive him and to procreate him from the womb of her immaculate flesh³⁰.

¹⁹ "Ingrediens namque sanctus Spiritus virgineam pudicitiae aulam, talem Christum, hominem factum ex ea fecit procedere, qui perdita restauraret, et omnium delicta relaxaret, qui innocens innocentem sanguinem suum pro redemptione humanae fragilitatis effunderet, et per hominem visibilem Deus invisibilis unigenitum suum visibilem hominibus praesentaret". (Eleutherius Tornacensis, *Sermo De Incarnatione Domini*. PL 65, 92).

²⁰ "Aula Dei, ornatus paradisi, gloria regni; hospitium vitae, pons penetrando polos. Arca nitens et theca potens gladii bis acuti, ara Dei adsurgens, luminis alta pharos". (Venantius Fortunatus, *Miscellanea. Liber VIII. Caput VII. In laudem sanctae Mariae Virginis et matris Domini*. PL 88, 281).

²¹ "Quid sine reverentia occurris [Helvidius]? Quid sine pudore vexaris? Quare virginis nostrae principia corruptionis fine coarctas? Quam ob rem initia pudoris exitu actae procreationis infamas? Cur integritatem divinitate sacram humana conventionem deturpas?" (Ildefonsus Toletanus, *Liber de virginitate perpetua S. Mariae adversus tres infideles*, II. PL 96, 61).

²² "Nolo hujus maiestatis vim irrupas, ne possessionem Dei convexare ausu temerario pertentes, ne mansionem divinitatis noceas praesumptione contemptionis, ne domum Domini injuriis corruptionis confodias, ne portam domus Dei, ejus exitu clausam, a quocumque posse adiri contendas". (Toletanus, *Liber de virginitate...*, 61).

²³ "Virtutum Deus est Dominus possessionis hujus. Coelorum rex est possessor juris istius. Omnipotens est artifex aedificii hujus. Solus egressor et custos est portae egressionis hujus". (Toletanus, *Liber de virginitate...*, 61).

²⁴ "Hanc domum ingrediens non pudoris spolia tulit, sed egrediens integritate ditavit." (Toletanus, *Liber de virginitate...*, 61).

²⁵ Jacques-Paul Migne places this sermon among the dubious works of St. Ildefonsus.

²⁶ When mentioning these seven columns of the House of Wisdom, St. Ildefonsus transcribes almost literally the already quoted sentence of *Proverbs* (Prov. 9, 1).

²⁷ "Bona siquidem domus, charissimi, in qua tota simul divinitas illabitur Verbi, in qua sapientia Dei Patris septem sibi columnas erexit, super quam omnis innititur domus, et fabricatur Ecclesia". (Ildefonsus Toletanus, *Sermo III. De eadem Assumptione beatae Mariae III*. PL 96, 257).

²⁸ "Propter namque inviolatam pudoris aulam, virginitatem praedicat et ante partum, et in partu, et post partum: et propter verae nativitatis exortum, verum parientis partum confitetur". (Retramnus Corbeien-sis, *Liber de Nativitate Christi*, 2. PL 121, 84).

²⁹ "Quid est virgo in partu, ni pariens virgo? Et quid virgo post partum, nisi virgo perseverans post partum?" (Corbeien-sis, *Liber de Nativitate...*, 84).

³⁰ "Sicut ergo impossibile erat ut humani generis redemptio fieret, nisi Dei Filius de Virgine nasceretur; ita etiam necessarium fuerat ut Virgo, ex qua Verbum caro fieret, nasceretur. Oportebat quippe prius aedificari domum, in quam descendens coelestis Rex habere dignaretur hospitium. Illam videlicet, de qua per Salomonem dicitur: 'Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum, excidit columnas septem' (Prov. 9). [...] Quam utique aeterna Sapientia, quae attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter (Sap. 8), talem construxit quae digna fieret illum suscipere, et de intemeratae carnis suae visceribus procreare". (Petrus Damianus, *Sermo XLV. II. In Nativitate Beatissimae Virginis Mariae (VIII Sept.)*. PL 144, 741).

Later, in a series of lyrical poems in honor of the Virgin, Peter Damian reiterates similar ideas. Thus, for example, in one of them, he exclaims:

The beautiful royal palace of the heavenly King,
Supported by the seven columns of wisdom:
You lock up in your belly
The One whom the entire universe cannot contain³¹.

And in another Marian canticle, the holy poet expresses

Mary, splendid honor of humankind,
Throne of the Eternal King
House [built] by Wisdom³².

In another ode, the bishop of Ostia praises the Virgin Mary in these metaphorical terms:

You are the closed door of the temple,
Palace of the Supreme King:
Treasury of wealth
For which we are redeemed³³.

In an umpteenth poem, Peter Damian proclaims:

The whole Trinity, God the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit,
Made you his mansion and fixed his seat;
So now you offer yourself in greater abundance
As a lesson for the devotion of the faithful³⁴.

Several decades later, the Italian Benedictine sage St. Anselm, bishop of Canterbury (1033-1109), in a prayer in honor of the Virgin, goes to her in search of protection, calling her “Royal Palace of Universal Propitiation, cause of general reconciliation, vessel, and the temple of life and salvation for all”³⁵. Then, after extolling Mary, calling her “admirable Lady for her unique virginity,

kind for her healthy fertility, venerable for her inestimable holiness,” he asserts that she showed God to the world which did not know him, she made her Creator visible to the world, which did not see him; and she begot and gave birth to the reconciler that sinners needed³⁶. In another sermon in honor of Mary, the prelate of Canterbury exclaims: “Oh, blessed Mother of God, Virgin Mary, the temple of the living God, the palace of the eternal King, the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit!”³⁷

Then, in a series of hymns of a Psalter that he composed in honor of the Virgin, St. Anselm repeatedly praises her with some poetic compliments related to the house of God, as when he says:

Hail, mother of the lawyer [Jesus],
Who, happy with his advice,
Left the royal palace of the virgin womb
As if coming out of a bridal room³⁸.

Some verses later, he insists, saying:

Hail, singular Virgin,
Rewarding virginal palace,
In whose temple the Lord stands
Who is also based in heaven³⁹.

After several stanzas, he goes on:

Hail, the entrance of heaven,
Divine room
Of the one who is to us son,
Brother and redemption⁴⁰.

And shortly afterward, he stresses:

Hail, heavenly mansion,
Through whose temple,
We receive the incarnate
The mercy of God⁴¹.

³¹ “Aula caelestis speciosa Regis,
Fulta septenis sophiae columnas:
Quem nequit totus cohibere mundus
Claudis in alvo”. (Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. XLVII. In assumptione ipsius S. Virginis, Hymus ad vespas*. PL 145, 934-935).

³² “Maria, decus hominum,
Regis aeterni solium,
Septem columnis edita
Domus a Sapientia”. (Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. LIII. Hymnus ad tertiam*. PL 145, 936).

³³ “Tu porta templi clausa,
Superni Regis aula:
Aerarium talenti,
Per quod sumus redempti”. (Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. LXI. Rhythmus de S. Maria Virgine*. PL 145, 938).

³⁴ “Tecum tota Trinitas fecit mansionem,
Pater, Verbum, Spiritus fixit sessionem;
Propter quod nunc largius ad devotionem
Teipsam fidelibus praebes lectionem”. (Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. LXI. Rhythmus de S. Maria Virgine*. PL 145, 949).

³⁵ “Aula universalis propitiationis, causa generalis reconciliationis, vas et templum vitae et salutis universorum, nimium contraho merita tua, cum in me homunculo vili singulariter recenseo beneficia tua, quae mundus amans gaudet, gaudens clamat esse sua”. (Anselmus Cantuariensis, *Orationes sive Meditationes. 7. Oratio ad Sanctam Mariam pro impetrando eius et Christi amore, in Obras completas de San Anselmo*, vol. 2 (Madrid: BAC, 1953), 316).

³⁶ “Tu namque Domina admirabilis singulari virginitate, amabilis salutari fecunditate, venerabilis inaeestimabili sanctitate, tu ostendisti mundo Dominum suum et Deum suum quem nesciebat, tu visibilem exhibuisti mundo creatorem suum quem prius non videbat, tu genuisti mundo restauratorem quo perditus indigebat, tu peperisti mundo reconciliatorem quem reus non habebat”. (Cantuariensis, *Orationes...*, 316).

³⁷ “O beata Dei genitrix, virgo Maria, templum Dei vivi, aula Regis aeterni, sacrarium Spiritus sancti”. (Anselmus Cantuariensis, *Oratio LV. Ad eandem Sanctam Virginem Mariam*. PL 158, 961).

³⁸ “Ave, mater advocati,
Qui beatus consilio,
Aula ventris incorrupti
Processit ut ex thalamo”. (Anselmus Cantuariensis, *Hymni et Psalterium de Sancta Virgine Maria. Psalterium Dominae nostrae (Pars I)*. PL 158, 1037).

³⁹ “Ave, Virgo singularis,
Placens aula virginalis,
Cujus in templo Dominus
Et in coelo sedes ejus”. (Cantuariensis, *Hymni et Psalterium...*, 1037).

⁴⁰ “Ave, coeli introitus,
Divina habitatio,
Cujus est nobis filius
Et frater, et redemptio”. (Cantuariensis, *Hymni et Psalterium...*, 1040).

⁴¹ “Ave, coelestis mansio,
De cuius templi medio,
Suscepimus incarnatam
Dei misericordiam”. (Cantuariensis, *Hymni et Psalterium...*, 1040).

A couple of generations later, the Benedictine abbot Geoffrey of Vendôme (c. 1070-1132), in a sermon on the Nativity of Jesus, reiterates that the Virgin Mary, worthy of God, is called “house of the Lord,” whose eastern door was always closed; and with complete justice, Mary is called by the name of the house, that is, the temple of God, because God himself dwelt in her both for the sanctification of the Holy Spirit and for human conception⁴². Therefore –the abbot of Vendôme goes on–, preserving the property of his divine nature, God the Son became flesh in the womb of the Virgin and, after becoming a true man in body and soul, was born of a virgin mother leaving for the eastern door of the temple, which neither suffered in its integrity by him nor was opened by any other man⁴³.

In another Marian sermon, Geoffrey of Vendôme affirms that God the Father sent his Only-Begotten Son to the Virgin Mary so that he would become her son and husband at the same time⁴⁴. God the Father arranged it by for his charity, God the Son perfected it by his will, and the Holy Spirit prepared and decorated the nuptial room, cleaning the womb of the Virgin from all corruption of sin and filling it with multiple sanctities. There God, who had previously created all things, created in Mary his royal palace⁴⁵.

Some fifty years later, Peter of Celle, bishop of Chartres (c. 1115-1183), affirms in a sermon for Advent that Mary is “the palace built with wonderful efforts, but enriched with incomparable treasures, enriched only for God and for God the Son”⁴⁶.

A couple of decades later, the diplomat and poet Peter of Blois (c. 1135-c. 1203) states in a sermon on the birth of Mary that

For her strength she is the city *founded by the Most High*; for the integrity of her virginity she is *the closed garden, the sealed fountain*, the closed door, *the uncut [cedar of] Lebanon*; for her holiness, she is the temple of God, the door of the sanctuary, the ark of God, the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit; for her glory, she is the King’s palace, the cell of scents, *the source of the orchards*, the paradise of delights⁴⁷.

⁴² “Honorabilis et praedicabilis femina, digna Deo virgo Maria domus Domini appellatur, in qua porta orientalis clausa semper esse perhibetur. Recto nomine Maria, domus, id est templum Domini dicitur, quia Deus ipse habitavit in ea, et per sanctificationem Spiritus, et per humanam conceptionem”. (Goffridus Vindocinensis, *Sermo IV. In Nativitate Domini IV.* PL 157, 249).

⁴³ “Servata itaque divinae proprietate naturae, in utero virginis factus est caro, et perfectus homo in veritate carnis et animae, et per portam templi quae respicit ad Orientem, quae nec per se patuit, nec ab alio aperta fuit, processit de virgine matre”. (Vindocinensis, *Sermo IV...*, 250).

⁴⁴ “Ad hanc beatissimam virginem Deus Pater ex se genitum Filium misit, ut ipse Dei Filius, virginis etiam filius fieret et sponsus”. (Goffridus Vindocinensis, *Sermo VIII. In omni festivitate B. Mariae Matris Domini.* PL 157, 267).

⁴⁵ “Hoc Pater disposuit charitate, Filius voluntate complevit, Spiritus sanctus paravit thalamum et ornavit, id est ab omni corruptione peccati mundavit virginis uterum, et multiplici sanctitate replevit. Ibi tanquam in aula regia Deus qui omnia ante creaverat, seipsum creavit in Maria”. (Vindocinensis, *Sermo VIII...*, 267).

⁴⁶ “Ecce palatium mirificis impensis constructum, sed et gazis incomparabilibus locupletatum; solique Deo Dei Filio locupletatum”. (Petrus Cellensis, *Sermo VI. In eodem tempore VI Adventu.* PL 202, 649-654).

⁴⁷ “Propter fortitudinem civitas quam fundavit Altissimus; propter virginitatis integritatem hortus conclusus, fons signatus, porta clausa, Libanus non incisus, propter sanctitatem templum Dei,

A few lines later, Peter of Blois goes on to say that the Wisdom of which we speak when we say that “Wisdom has built her house” is Christ, power, and wisdom of God, because Christ chose the womb of Mary as his shelter, and she, Mary, is “the house of the modest breast,” “the house of God and the door of heaven”⁴⁸.

About three generations later, the prestigious Franciscan teacher St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217 / 21-1274), Church Doctor and cardinal, assures in a sermon on the Assumption that the entire divine Trinity, with favorable influence, with great joy and with the glory of divinity, knew Mary (in the sense of maintaining a symbolic marital relationship with her) as a wife of chaste love, a palace of holy cohabitation, a factory of admirable operation, for which we must explicitly say that God the Father knew the blessed Mary as the home of his royal majesty⁴⁹.

Now, at the end of this incursion into the Latin patristic sources, it is time to bring to light an extremely significant fact, namely: the symbolic identification of the Virgin Mary with the “palace of God,” the “throne of divinity,” the “royal palace” of God the Son, the “house of Wisdom” and with other similar expressions is not only found in the explanatory texts of well-known Latin Fathers and theologians. Still, it is also documented in countless medieval liturgical hymns, almost all of them anonymous. Let us see then, by way of representative examples, some passages of those Latin hymns –which we extract from the outstanding collection compiled and critically edited by Franz Josef Mone⁵⁰— that metaphorically allude to the Virgin Mary as the palace or throne of God or the house of Wisdom. We designate each one of these hymns with the number and title with which they appear in the compilation above by F. J. Mone.

Hymn 335, in honor of the conception of Mary, states:

Hail, the palace of the Word,
The comfort of sinners,
Oh, how clean shelter!
Mary, take us, save.

porta sanctuarii, arca Dei, sacrarium Spiritus sancti; propter gloriam aula regis, cella aromatum, *fons horticorum*, paradisus deliciarum”. (Petrus Blesensis, *Sermo XXXVIII. In Nativitate Beatae Mariae.* PL 207, 673).

⁴⁸ “Haec est sapientia de qua loquimur: haec est sapientia quae aedificavit sibi domum, hic est Christus Dei virtus, et Dei sapientia. Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum, quia Jesus Christus in habitationem uterum Mariae elegit. Haec est domus pudici pectoris. [...]: haec est domus Dei et porta coeli”. (Petrus Blesensis, *Sermo XXXVIII. In Nativitate Beatae Mariae.* PL 207, 673).

⁴⁹ “Occurrit enim tota Trinitas, etsi non motu locali, tamen influentia favorabili, laetitia principali et gloria deiformi. Tota siquidem beata Trinitas te cognovit, Maria, sponsam castae dilectionis, aulam sanctae inhabitationis, officinam mirae operationis. Vel distinctivè dicamus: Cognovit beatam Mariam Pater domum suae maiestatis”. (Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *De Assumptione B. Virginis Mariae. Sermo III, in Obras de San Buenaventura*, vol. 4 (Madrid: BAC, 1963), 706-707).

⁵⁰ Franz Josef Mone, ed., *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi. E Codd. Mss. edidit et adnotationibus illustravit Franc. Jos. Mone. Tomus Secundus. Hymni ad B. V. Mariam* (Friburgi Brisgoviae: Supmptibus Herder, 1854).

[...]
Hail, molten metal tabernacle,
Triclinium of the Trinity
O sanctuary of the pigment!⁵¹

In turn, Hymn 358 in honor of Mary states:

The King enters the royal palace
From the holy mansion,
The solid door is closed
With the key of [the new] Solomon [Christ]⁵².

Hymn 491, dedicated to the glory of Mary, notes in one of its stanzas:

Palace of the Supreme King,
Emperor's Throne,
Husband's bed,
You, the Creator's wife⁵³.

On the other hand, Hymn 504, a Psalter in homage to the Virgin, enthusiastically proclaims:

Hail, virgin, from the supreme law
The high seat of the Supreme King,
In which the governor of the universe,
Sits as emperor of kings⁵⁴.

Hymn 505 intones a supplication to the Virgin with these poetic analogies:

Holy Mary, the palace of the eternal King,
Bed of [the new] Solomon [Christ],
Palace of the true Pacific,
Heavenly Bridegroom's Room,
Pray for us the blessed
Fruit of your belly⁵⁵.

Hymn 507, written to sing the beauty of the Virgin, praises her in these exquisite terms:

Hail, the heaven of divinity,
Paradise of joy,
Palace of the Supreme Majesty,
Temple of the Holy Trinity,
Tabernacle of Christ⁵⁶.

In a similar wave of praise, Hymn 508 lauds Mary with these heartfelt compliments:

Hail, the palace of the supreme King,
You illustrate the heart from the laws,
You cover the crime of the desperate
And you drive to paradise
Who loves you⁵⁷.

Hymn 619, composed to praise the royalty of the Virgin, proclaims with lyrical outbursts:

God sits down
On a special throne of clouds,
Like on a sapphire throne
And of solar flames.
But the womb of the Virgin
is an ivory throne,
In which the King of Heaven,
Holy man-God,
Remained bodily
Supernaturally
For the condemned humankind
Live spiritually⁵⁸.

After this lengthy analysis of texts through which for more than a millennium—from the 4th to the 15th century—many medieval Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers insisted on interpreting, with Christological and Mariological projection, some expressions such as

⁵¹ “Ave Verbi palatium,
Peccatorum solatium,
O quam mundum hospitium!
Maria transfer nos, ave.
O quam mundum hospitium!
Maria transfer, etc.
Ave flatus sacrarium,
Trinitatis triclinium
O pigmenti cellarium!” (“Hymnus 335. Ejusdem festi [de conceptione Mariae] ad matutinas hymnus.” In *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi. Edidit et adnotationibus illustravit Franc. Jos. Mone. Tomus Secundus. Hymni ad. B.V. Mariam*, edited by Franz Josef Mone (Friburgi Brisgoviae: Sumptibus Herder, 1854), 21).

⁵² “Aulam rex ingreditur
Sacrae mansionis,
Porta firma clauditur
Clave Salomonis.” (“Hymnus 358. De S. Maria”, in *Hymni Latini...*, 51).

⁵³ “Summi regis palatium,
Thronus imperatoris,
Sponsi reclinatorium,
Tu sponsa creatoris”. (“Hymnus 491. De b. Maria v.”, in *Hymni Latini...*, 211).

⁵⁴ “Ave, virgo, summae legis
Sedes alta summi regis,
In qua rerum gubernator,
Regum sedet imperator”. (“Hymnus 504. Psalterium Mariae”, in *Hymni Latini...*, 250).

⁵⁵ “Sancta Maria, aula aeterni regis,
lectulus Salomonis,
palatium veri pacifici,
cubile coelestis sponsi,

ora pro nobis benedictum
ventris tui fructum”. (“Hymnus 505. Letania de domina nostra Virgine Maria”, in *Hymni Latini...*, 260-261).

⁵⁶ “Ave, coelum deitatis,
Paradisus voluptatis,
Aula summae majestatis,
Templum sanctae Trinitatis,
Christi tabernaculum”. (“Hymnus 507. Oratio, quae dicitur crinale beatae Mariae virginis”, in *Hymni Latini...*, 268).

⁵⁷ “Salve, aula summi regis,
Tu illustras cor ex legis,
Desperantis crimen tegis
Et in paradisum vehis,
Qui te amavere”. (“Hymnus 508. Roseum crinale b. v. Mariae”, in *Hymni Latini...*, 278).

⁵⁸ “Tanquam in sapphideo
Ac solari flammeo
Deus sedet nubo
Throno speciali:
At venter virgineus
Thronus est eburneus,
In quo rex aethereus
anctus homo-Deus
Mansit corporaliter,
Supernaliter,
Ut spualiter
vivat homo reus”. (“Hymnus 619. Thronus b. Mariae”, in *Hymni Latini...*, 444).

domus Sapientiae, domus Dei, palatium Regis, and other analogous terms, we now have to see if and to what extent these texts are reflected in the images of the Annunciation of the 15th century. This raises two crucial problems at the outset: first of all, whether it is possible to justify in any way the intrinsic relationship between these images and those texts, many of them produced several centuries before those; secondly, the problem of knowing if the artists who depicted these Annunciations had sufficient doctrinal culture to be perfectly aware of the precise meanings of each of the symbolic elements that they included in their images of the Annunciation.

We think that the first problem can be solved based on the Christian doctrinal tradition that, from the early centuries of our era, countless Fathers and theologians have been building and consolidating to explain the dogmatic contents of the Christian faith, to combat heresies, to defend Christianity against other beliefs, and, ultimately, to try to verbalize the ineffable, as well as to convince the faithful to “believe what we do not see.” This doctrinal tradition, started in the first centuries with certain insecurity and a variety of criteria –to the extent, for example, that the divine nature of Christ or the virginal divine motherhood of Mary were not yet entirely clear—quickly became uniform and strengthening. In this order of ideas, it is well known, as those who frequent the primary sources of Christian doctrine soon find out, that the successive Fathers and thinkers of the Eastern and Western Churches knew the systematic thought of their predecessors. The writings of the prestigious formerly teachers, often translated from Greek to Latin, were copied over and over again in monasteries and religious teaching centers to serve as conceptual and spiritual nourishment for other later teachers and enlightened collectives, such as the monks, the ecclesiastics, and the students in the developing universities. For the rest, the successive teachers of Christian thought did not hesitate to repeat --sometimes *ad pedem litterae*, without fear of plagiarism; other times through paraphrases-- many concepts, arguments, and conclusions of their predecessors, thus producing other doctrinal texts (treatises, sermons, commentaries, apologies, etc.) in which it is easy to appreciate, like a patchwork, a set of ideas of different authorship, now consolidated into “new” documents. Thus all along the centuries, a definitive and irrevocable dogmatic *corpus* was finally established, which constituted the vital atmosphere of beliefs in which Christians of all times and regions lived, even when many of them were not aware of it, in the same way, that many living beings, including man, are not conscious of the air they breathe so naturally. This means that although most of the 15th century Christians did not know the dogmatic meanings brought out by the medieval Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers when interpreting the abovementioned metaphorical expressions, the intellectuals of that century (monks, clergymen, humanists), aware of these meanings, could correctly communicate them to the artists in charge of pictorially or sculpturally representing the salvific episode of the Annunciation

This leads us directly to the second problem: that of knowing if the artists who represented those Annuncia-

tions to be analyzed next had sufficient doctrinal culture to be aware of the dogmatic meanings of each symbolic element --in this specific case, the palace-shaped house of Mary-- included in those Annunciations. It is logical to suppose, in fact, that, except for some exceptional painters, such as Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi, who, due to their condition of friars, had a vast theological culture, most artists of the period were not especially experts in profound doctrinal questions. Faced with such a problem, we believe it is legitimate to propose two different responses, even if not antithetical, but complementary. The first, and simplest, answer is that, regardless of their degree of doctrinal instruction, every artist in charge of an Annunciation had before him a compositional model or iconographic type multisecularly configured for that Marian theme, namely, an angel and a Virgin respectfully dialoguing, a beam of light, the dove of the Holy Spirit, a bust or a half-length figure on top representing God the Father, a book, a stem of lilies⁵⁹, and some other elements: thus the artist could rightly fulfill the commission received by repeating “automatically” (with the compositional variations that his imagination dictates to him) this conventional compositional model. The second answer, the most satisfactory, although not necessarily the most frequent, is to suppose the existence of an iconographic programmer or intellectual mentor (probably a clergyman, a monk, or a humanist) who instructed the artist on the convenient way to illustrate the conceptual contents that they wanted to transmit when representing the Annunciation. Thus, this iconographic programmer, the genuine intellectual author of the image represented, dictated to its material author, the artist, the narrative guidelines (characters, attributes, posturing, objects, etc.) that allowed illustrating the doctrinal meanings embodied in one or the other of the symbols included in these Annunciations: the stem of lilies, the beam of light, the dove, the prayer book, the closed door, the bed or, in our specific case, the house of Mary shaped like a palace. We have already said that, except for Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi or Fra Bartolomeo, who, as friars they were, could have been at the same time the intellectual and the material authors of their paintings, it is to be expected that most of the other authors of the images of the Annunciation had as their inspiration an external “iconographic program,” conceived by the genuine “intellectual author” of the artistic work. This does not mean, however, that

⁵⁹ We have studied the symbolic meaning of the lily stem in the Annunciations of the XIV and XV centuries in the following papers: José María Salvador-González, “*Flos de radice Jesse*. A hermeneutic approach to the theme of the lily in the Spanish Gothic painting of The Annunciation from patristic and theological sources”, *Eikón Imago* 4, no. 2 (2013): 183-222; José María Salvador-González, “*In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur*. Nueva interpretación del lirio en La Anunciación gótica española a la luz de fuentes patristicas y teológicas”, *Anales de Historia del Arte* 24 (2014): 37-60, https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_ANHA.2014.v24.47177; José María Salvador-González, “*Flos campi et lilium convallium*. Third interpretation of lily in the iconography of *The Annunciation* in Italian Trecento art from patristic and theological sources”, *Eikón Imago* 5, no. 1 (2014): 75-96; José María Salvador-González, “*Sanctitate vernans virga Aaronis*. Interpretation of the stem of lilies in the medieval iconography of the Annunciation according to theological sources”, *Art Studies and Architectural Journal* 10, no. 9 (2015): 2-32.

each artist always had an iconographic programmer at his side who dictated to him how to paint the Annunciation: as we said before, the artist had only to “copy” in a mechanical way the established structural model or iconographic type of the Annunciation, whose essential narrative components we have just indicated.

3. Iconographic interpretation of the house/palace of Mary in seven Annunciations of the 15th century

The iconography of the Annunciation showed all along the centuries an extended and profound evolution⁶⁰. During the Late-Antiquity and the High Middle Ages, its composition was straightforward, with the mere representation of the angel Gabriel and Mary in hieratic dialogue in front of a bare scenography, almost always reduced to a piece of furniture (recliner, seat) or some synthetic architectural element, as a metonymy of the home of the Virgin or the village of Nazareth. In this long period, the two protagonists appear frequently cut out on an abstract background, such as the brilliant gold leaf in paintings on wood or a flat color in the frescoes.

All along with the Late Middle Ages, the images of the Annunciation gradually incorporated some architectural components and furniture and reached an extreme complexity in the 14th and 15th centuries⁶¹. Due to the growing approval of the earthly world, during these two centuries, the artists depicted the scene of the Annunciation with a realistic portrayal of houses, furniture, tools, everyday devices, clothing, landscapes, and even episodes of contemporary urban life.

Now, in the growingly complex images of the Annunciation produced in Europe throughout the 15th century, some of them depict the modest home of the humble Virgin of Nazareth⁶² as a luxurious construction that looks more or less like a palace or an aristocratic abode. We will now analyze seven European paintings in which the home of Mary is shaped in such unusual appearance of a royal residence or palace.

Fra Angelico (c. 1395-1455) staged *The Annunciation Altarpiece*, c. 1425-1426, from the Prado Museum (Fig. 1)⁶³ inside a building in the form of a loggia or por-



Figure 1. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation Altarpiece*, c. 1425-1426. Source: ©Prado Museum, Madrid.

ticoed atrium, while in the outer garden Adam and Eve, recently expelled from Paradise by the angel located in the upper left border, wander with sadness.

More than about the elements usually included in this event—the presence of the Most High (pictured here aniconically by two luminous open hands in the upper left corner), the beam of rays of light (symbol of God the Son), and the dove of the Holy Spirit in flight to the Virgin—, it is worth highlighting here the fantasy “house” where the scene takes place. Indeed, this arcaded building with vaulted naves cannot be the actual home of the humble Nazarene girl.

A house whose interior is completely open and exposed (it is a small porch), and whose bedroom—which can be seen in the background by its open door—cannot reveal its privacy to prying eyes, being open to the porch and outside garden. Neither can a “building” be real that, in its vaulted naves, lacks the indispensable dividing column, on which the four central vaults must necessarily be lowered, which start from the four central supports—the two second columns and the two intermediate corbels—, and that should end precisely in this non-existent central column⁶⁴.

Thus the absence of that dividing column and the total opening of this construction reveal that this porticoed building does not represent the objective reality of the Virgin Mary’s humble dwelling in Nazareth, but rather a double metaphorical or symbolic ideality: the house painted here by the wise friar-painter Fra Angelico is an ideal symbol of “Mary as the palace or domicile of God” and, at the same time, a sym-

⁶⁰ For a study on the evolution of the iconography of the Annunciation through the centuries, see, for example: *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, s.v. “L’Annonciation dans l’art”, by Henri Leclercq; *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, s.v. “L’Annunciazione, Nell’Archeologia”, by Enrico Josi; *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, s.v. “L’Annunciazione, Nell’Arte”, by Adriano Prandi; Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l’art chrétien*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), 174-194; Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, vol. 1 (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 50ss.

⁶¹ David M. Robb proposes an essentially formalist approach to the representation of the Annunciation over these two centuries in his article “The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries”, *The Art Bulletin* 18 (1936): 480-526.

⁶² It seems logical to suppose that in a small town like Nazareth in Biblical times there should not have been many palaces; and, if there were any, it probably would not be the property of the humble couple of Josef and Mary, who nine months after the Annunciation did not have anything to pay for a lodging in Bethlehem or some simple clothes to cover the newborn.

⁶³ Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation Altarpiece*, c. 1425-1426, tempera and gold on wood, 194 x 194 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid. This altarpiece has been studied, among others, by Michel Laclotte, “El retablo de la Anunciación. Fra Angelico”, in *Obras maestras del Mu-*

seo del Prado, eds. Avigdor Arikha, Michel Laclotte, et al. (Madrid: Fundación Amigos del Museo del Prado, 1996), 17-25.

⁶⁴ The portico or loggia that Fra Angelico includes in this Annunciation of the Prado Museum is made up of four groin vaults (*volta a padiglione*). Now, any groin vault necessarily requires four supports, be they columns (or pillars) or modillions (corbels) embedded in the wall. This “house” painted by Fra Angelico has four interconnected groin vaults each of which requires its corresponding four supports. In this specific case, one of these four supports, the central one—precisely the central column that is missing in the painting—must serve as a common support in which four arches get off the edge, one for each of the four groin vaults.

bol of the body or human nature of Christ, that divine Wisdom “has built” like a house in Mary’s virginal womb for hypostatically uniting his divine nature to it (the human nature), as established in the millennial interpretive tradition of the medieval Fathers and theologians.



Figure 2. Dello Delli, *The Annunciation*, c. 1434-1445, a section of the *Main Altarpiece of the Old Cathedral of Salamanca*. Source: Francisco Javier Panera Cuevas, *El retablo de la Catedral Vieja de Salamanca* (Salamanca: Caja Duero, 2000), 117.

Dello Delli (1404-c.1466) staged his Annunciation of the *Main Altarpiece of the Old Salamanca Cathedral*, c. 1434-1345 (Fig. 2)⁶⁵ inside a luxurious building with a particular aspect of a Renaissance palace. This is evidenced, among other elements, by its semicircular arches on columns of composite order, its vaulted gallery with cassettes, its beautiful furniture, and the upper body of the tower-shaped building with battlements and twin windows. For the rest, there is no lack here of the foreseeable presences of God the Father—blessing Mary from the top left of the scene—and the Holy Spirit, who flies like a white dove towards the demure Virgin. The angel Gabriel, kneeling in the courtyard that precedes the main hall and bowing reverently to his heavenly Lady in front of a closed-door (*porta clausa*), through which he has entered without

opening it⁶⁶, transmits the message of God to her. On her knees before a luxurious lectern, Mary turns her head towards Gabriel to hear the surprising announcement of her choice as the mother of God the Son incarnate.

More than the symbolism inherent in the bouquet of lilies and the spotless bed that you can perceive at the back of the room⁶⁷ is interesting to highlight here the palace’s appearance that the house of the simple maiden of Nazareth presents. That aspect of a palace—whose doctrinal meaning Francisco Javier Panera Cuevas⁶⁸ ignores, when commenting on this painting—seems to want to illustrate, as a *visual metaphor*, the dogmatic implications deciphered by the Fathers and theologians when interpreting in a Mariological and Christological sense the *textual metaphors* of the “house of Wisdom,” “palace of God,” “royal palace,” “throne,” and other expressions referring to royal spaces, as we have explained before.



Figure 3. Fra Filippo Lippi, *L'Annunciazione delle Murate*, c. 1443-1450. Source: ©Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

⁶⁵ This altarpiece has deserved a monographic study by Francisco Javier Panera Cuevas, *El retablo de la Catedral Vieja de Salamanca* (Salamanca: Caja Duero, 2000).

⁶⁶ We have studied the doctrinal meanings of Ezekiel’s *porta clausa* in images of the Annunciation in the papers José María Salvador-González, “*Haec Porta Domini*. Exegeses of some Greek Church Fathers on Ezekiel’s *porta clausa* (5th-10th centuries)”, *Cauriensia* 15 (2020): 615-633, <https://doi.org/10.17398/2340-4256.15.615>; José María Salvador-González, “*Porta clausa es, Virgo*. Exegeses on Ezekiel’s *porta clausa* by some Latin Fathers and theologians between the 6th and 13th centuries” (article under evaluation in an international academic journal).

⁶⁷ We have studied the doctrinal meanings of the bed in images of the Annunciation in the paper: José María Salvador-González, “The Symbol of Bed (*Thalamus*) in Images of the Annunciation of the 14th-15th Centuries in the Light of Latin Patristics”, *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies* 5, no. 4 (2019): 49-70, <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2454-7654.0504005>.

⁶⁸ Panera Cuevas, *El retablo...*, 116-117.

Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1489)⁶⁹ in the *L'Annunciazione delle Murate*, c. 1443-1450 (Fig. 3)⁷⁰ –initially painted for the Suore Murate convent in Florence, and today in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich–, represents Mary's house as a royal marble palace, built with arches, entablatures, columns, and Renaissance-style pilasters.

In that elegant palatial construction, the angel kneels reverently before Mary, holding a massive stem of lilies. In contrast, behind her, a second angel peeks out the side door with another stem of lilies in her left hand. Standing before them, Mary, surprised and frightened by the heavenly messenger's unexpected appearance, seems to have suddenly risen from the kneeler in which she prayed with the prayer book which appears open on the armrest.

As expected, in the upper left corner of the painting, the figure of God the Father radiating with his open hands towards the Virgin the fertile beam of rays of light (God the Son) carrying in his wake the dove of the Holy Spirit symbolizes the instantaneous conception/incarnation of God the Son in Mary's virginal womb, thus materializing the divine plan announced by Gabriel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you". Even without expressing it with written inscriptions on the painting, as other artists do, Fra Filippo Lippi illustrates here that immediate conception of Christ –verified at the very moment that Mary accepts the divine plan unrestrictedly– with the submissive gesture of the Virgin bowing the head, squinting and putting the right hand on her chest, in a clear sign of unconditional submission as a humble "slave of the Lord" (*ancilla Domini*).

Apart from these familiar elements in the Annunciations from the period, it is essential to highlight here the leading presence of this open and luxurious palace in which the scene takes place, a palace that, far from objectively representing the physical home of the Virgin in Nazareth, ideally symbolizes Mary and the human body of Christ, according to the double exegetical interpretation offered with a full agreement for more than a millennium by the Latin and Greek-Eastern Fathers.

Dirk Bouts (1415-1475)⁷¹ depicts the scene of *The Annunciation* (Fig. 4)⁷² in the left panel of the *Triptych of the Life of the Virgin*, c. 1445⁷³, from the Prado Mu-

seum in Madrid in a small place with the appearance of a royal palace, an aristocratic hall, or a chapel. Kneeling reverently in his luxurious cope, the angel points her right index finger at the Virgin to signify that she has been chosen by the Most High to be the mother of God the Son incarnate. Mary, on her knees, before a prayer book open on a bench, extending her right hand forward and resting her left arm on her chest, shows her surprise at the mysterious message that Gabriel transmits to her.



Figure 4. Dirk Bouts, *The Annunciation*, left panel of the *Triptych of the Life of the Virgin*, c. 1445. Source: ©Prado Museum, Madrid.

In tune with the well-known dogmatic tradition that intrinsically links the Annunciation (of the Redeemer) with Original Sin and the Redemption of Humankind, Bouts represents in the sculptures of the precious Gothic portal framing the scene two prophets who announced the Messiah, and six scenes from Genesis that relate from left to right, the creation of Eve, the prohibition against eating the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, the Original Sin, the expulsion from Paradise, the labors of Adam and Eve on earth, and Cain killing Abel. Most significant for our purposes in this study is the shape of the elegant "house" in which the episode stages⁷⁴, structured in a

⁶⁹ On the life and work of Fra Filippo Lippi, see: Giuseppe Marchini, *Filippo Lippi* (Milano: Electa, 1979); Jeffrey Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi. Life and Work with a Complete Catalogue* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993); Megan Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi. The Carmelite painter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Gloria Fossi, and Eliana Princi *Filippo e Filippino Lippi* (Firenze: Scala, 2011).

⁷⁰ Fra Filippo Lippi, *L'Annunciazione delle Murate*, c. 1443-1450, tempera on wood, 203 x 186 cm., Alte Pinakothek (Munich), accessed April 14, 2020, https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciazione_delle_Murate#/media/File:Fra_Filippo_Lippi_014.jpg.

⁷¹ On the artistic production of Dirk Bouts, see among others Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish painting*, vol. 3 (Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1968); Dirk De Vos, *Les primitifs flamands: les chefs d'oeuvre* (Brugge: Fonds Mercator, 2002).

⁷² Dirk Bouts, *The Annunciation*, left wing of the *Triptych of the Life of the Virgin*, c. 1445, oil on wood, 80x217 cm (the whole triptych); 80x50 cm (*The Annunciation*). Prado Museum, Madrid [Nº. Inv. P1461].

⁷³ This triptych from the Prado Museum consists of four Marian episodes, all of them framed by a "Gothic" portico decorated with sculptural scenes from the Old Testament, painted in *grisaille*. The central panel of this triptych is made up of two similar scenes sepa-

rated by a painted red column: *The Visitation* and *The Nativity with the adoration of the angels*. The left wing represents *The Annunciation*, and the right wing depicts *The Adoration of the Magi*.

⁷⁴ In his large comment on this *Annunciation* of Dirk Bouts, Alfredo Sarabia, *Cinco Anunciaciones en el Museo del Prado* (Madrid: Fundación Amigos del Museo del Prado, 1998), 67-87, says nothing about the doctrinal meaning of Mary's house.

vaulted palatial hall, an aristocratic residence, or a small chapel. Thus, by depicting the austere Nazarene home of Mary with the appearance of a palatial room or chapel⁷⁵, Bouts seems to illustrate the interpretation of the Fathers and theologians about the *domus Dei* or the *aula regia* as a double metaphor that simultaneously symbolizes Mary –in whose womb God the Son became incarnate– and the human body that God the Son took (“has built”) from the Virgin’s womb to dwell in it like a true man⁷⁶.



Figure 5. Sandro Botticelli, *The Annunciation*, c. 1490. Source: ©Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510)⁷⁷ conceives his *Annunciation*, c. 1490, from the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow (Fig. 5)⁷⁸, using a highly monumental composition. He places the Marian episode in-

side a splendid and neat Renaissance palace with pillars, arches, and vaults devoid of any decoration, balancing the compositional elements around the dominant axis of the central support in the foreground, although without insisting on perfect symmetry, thanks to the light sliding perspective to the left. On the left side –framed by the vaulted anteroom and the porticoed courtyard, through one of whose arches one perceives the closed garden (*hortus conclusus*) of the *Song of Songs*–, the angel already touches the ground after completing his flight, with the stem of lilies in his left hand, while blessing the Virgin with his right hand. Located in the right room, at the end of which you can glimpse the bedroom with its symbolic bed, Mary is standing, having suddenly risen from the kneeler in which she prayed, surprised by the unexpected appearance of the heavenly messenger. Raising his cloak to cover her body modestly, she bows the torso and lowers the head and eyes as a sign of humble compliance with the divine design announced by Gabriel. Crossing the opening on the left, the beam of rays of light (God the Son) emitted by God the Father reaches the head/ear of Mary, as a sign of her instantaneous supernatural fertilization (*conceptio per aurem*), after unconditionally accepting the will of the Most High like humble *ancilla Domini*.

Apart from the foreseeable narrative resources in the representation of this Marian event, it is interesting to highlight in this Annunciation in Glasgow the monumental palace with which Botticelli depicts the modest house of the maiden of Nazareth. Undoubtedly the painter –almost certainly induced by some ecclesiastical mentor– wants to illustrate through this, like a *visual metaphor*, the dogmatic Christological and Mariological meanings explained by the Latin Fathers and theologians when interpreting the biblical *textual metaphors* that we are analyzing.

Pedro Berruguete (c. 1450-1503)⁷⁹ structures his *Annunciation*, c. 1496-1500, from the Cartuja de

⁷⁵ When analyzing this painting by Dirk Bouts, Max J. Friedländer, plates 1-2, does not mention the form of a temple of the house where this *Annunciation* takes place.

⁷⁶ In his study on this painter Maurits Smeyers, (*Dirk Bouts. Peintre du silence*. Tournai: La Renaissance du Livre, 1998) says nothing about the dogmatic symbolisms embodied in this *Annunciation*.

⁷⁷ On the life and work of Botticelli, see: Charles Diehl, *Botticelli* (Paris: Librairie de L'art Ancien et Moderne, 1904); Herbert P. Horne, *Alessandro Filipepi commonly called Sandro Botticelli, painter of Florence* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1908); René Schneider, *Botticelli. Biographie critique* (Paris: Henri Laurens, Librairie Renouard, 1911); Sergio Bettini, *Botticelli* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1947); Giulio Carlo Argan, *Botticelli. Étude biographique et critique* (Genève: Skira, 1957); Gabriele Mandel, *L'opera completa del Botticelli* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1967); Ronald William Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 2 vols. (London: Elek, 1978); Herbert P. Horne, *Botticelli, painter of Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Stanley Meltzoff, *Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola. Theologia poetica and painting from Boccaccio to Poliziano* (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1987); Ronald William Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli. Life and work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989); Alexandra Grömling, and Tilman Lingesleben, *Alessandro Botticelli, 1444/45-1510* (Colonia: Könemann, 2000); Daniel Arasse, Pierluigi de Vecchi, and Patrizia Nitti, *Botticelli. De Laurent le Magnifique à Savonarole* (Milano: Skira, 2003); Silvia Magaluzzi, *Botticelli. The artist and his works* (Florence: Giunti, 2003); Alessandro Cecchi, *Botticelli* (Milan: F. Motta, 2005); Barbara Deimling, *Sandro Botticelli: 1444/45-1510* (Köln-Madrid: Taschen, 2007).

⁷⁸ Sandro Botticelli, *The Annunciation*, c. 1490, tempera on wood, 49,5 cm × 58,5 cm., Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, accessed April 13, 2020, [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anunciaci%C3%B3n_\(Botticelli,_Glasgow\)](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anunciaci%C3%B3n_(Botticelli,_Glasgow)).



Figure 6. Pedro Berruguete, *The Annunciation*, c. 1496-1500. Source: ©Cartuja de Miraflores, Burgos.

⁷⁹ On the life and work of Pedro Berruguete, see, among others, María de los Santos García Felguera, *Pedro Berruguete* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1985); and Victor Nieto Alcaide, and Juan Pérez de Ayala, *Berruguete* (Madrid: Sarpe, 1990).

Miraflores in Burgos (Fig. 6)⁸⁰ in a refined building with a bright appearance of a royal palace or ecclesial construction. That palatial character is revealed by the pointed double-headed window on the far wall and the “Gothic” cover framing the scene in the foreground: in its jambs, you can see the sculptural figures of Adam and Eve (in allusion to Original Sin) and six prophets which announced the coming of the Redeemer, who is being conceived by Mary at the very moment when, at the end of the Annunciation, she gives her full consent to the divine design proclaiming “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word.”

In this elegant palatial setting embodied by Berruguete, the angel, clad in a cope, bends his right knee before the Virgin while giving her the laudatory salute that appears inscribed in the meandering phylactery that floats before him. Kneeling on her kneeler in front of the prayer book, Mary turns with surprise and demure towards Gabriel, opening her hands in a gesture similar to that of the priest celebrating Mass. With this “liturgical” gesture, the Virgin implies her unconditional obedience as *ancilla Domini* to the will of the Most High, designating her as the mother of her divine incarnate Son. This is also revealed by the Holy Spirit’s active presence as a dove and the beam of rays of light projected towards the head of Mary to signify the immediate Christ’s conception/incarnation.

It is vital for our aims in this study to emphasize that Berruguete, by depicting Mary’s house with this appearance of a royal palace or ecclesial construction, seems to want to visually illustrate the symbolic Christological and Mariological meanings already explained by Fathers and theologians.

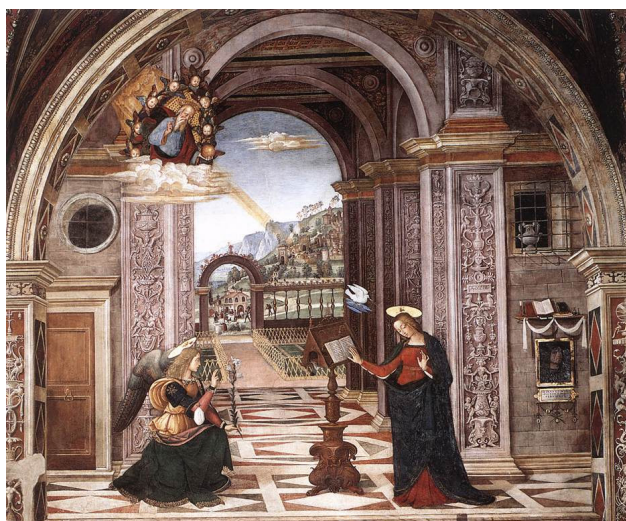


Figure 7. Pinturicchio, *The Annunciation*, 1501. Cappella Baglioni. Source: ©Collegiata di Santa Maria Maggiore, Spello.

Bernardino di Betto, better known as Pinturicchio (1454-1513)⁸¹, locates his *Annunciation*, 1501, of the Cappella Baglioni in the Collegiata di Santa Maria Maggiore in Spello (Fig. 7)⁸², inside a monumental and spectacular classical palace, of vast arches and splendid pilasters decorated *a candelieri*. The room where both protagonists of the story dialogue and the large gallery that prolongs the building space open onto a fenced garden and a vast landscape, beyond the pergola that delimits the palace’s domains.

In this precious environment, Gabriel kneels respectfully while blessing the Virgin with his right hand and holding a stem of lilies in his left hand. Mary, interrupting her meditation before the book, surprised by the unexpected arrival of the celestial messenger and the mysterious content of his message, opens her hands and lowers her head and eyes humbly, to indicate her full obedience to the design of God by choosing her as the virginal mother of God the Son incarnate. Such design is made visible here by the presence of God the Father who, blessing the Virgin among clouds and cherubs, sends to her right ear the beam of rays of light (God the Son) with the dove of the Holy Spirit flying in his wake⁸³.

Undoubtedly Pinturicchio (or the iconographic mentor who would have guided him doctrinally in this painting) even goes so far as to exaggerate in this fresco the appearance of a luxurious and splendid palace when depicting the humble house of the Virgin in Nazareth, to insist on the already explained symbolic meanings of the *palatium Regis* or the *aula regia* as metaphors that simultaneously identify Mary (her virginal womb) as the body or human nature of God the Son incarnate.

4. Conclusions

At the end of this double comparative analysis of texts and images, we can draw the following conclusions:

For more than a millennium, from at least the middle of the fourth century to the end of the fifteenth century, many Latin Fathers and theologians agreed to interpret with a dogmatic projection some metaphorical expressions like “house of Wisdom” (*domus Sapientiae*), “house of God” (*domus Dei*), “palace of the King” (*palatium Regis*), “royal palace” (*aula regia*), “domicile of the Trinity” (*domicilium Trinitatis*), and other similar

⁸¹ On the life and work of Pinturicchio, see Austen Henry Layard, *The frescoes by Bern: Pinturicchio, in the collegiate church of S. Maria Maggiore, at Spello* (London: Arundel Society, 1854); Cristina Acidini Luchinat, *Pinturicchio* (Florence: Scala, 1999); Claudia La Malfa, *Pinturicchio* (Florence: Giunti, 2008).

⁸² Pinturicchio, *The Annunciation*, 1501, fresco, Cappella Baglioni, Collegiata di Santa Maria Maggiore, Spello, accessed April 14, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baglioni_Chapel#/media/File:Pinturicchio_cappella_baglioni_02.jpg.

⁸³ With that direction of the ray of light towards the Virgin’s ear, Pinturicchio wants to illustrate the suggestive thesis of the *conceptio per aurem* (conception through the ear), thesis on which we have written the following article: José María Salvador-González, “*Per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam*. Aproximación iconográfica a la *conceptio per aurem* en la pintura italiana del Trecento desde fuentes patristicas y teológicas”, *Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones*, 20 (2015): 193-230, http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_ILUR.2015.v20.50410.

⁸⁰ Pedro Berruguete, *The Annunciation*, c. 1496-1500, oil on wood, Cartuja de Miraflores, Burgos, accessed April 14, 2020, [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:La_Anunciaci%C3%B3n_\(Pedro_Berruguete\).jpg](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:La_Anunciaci%C3%B3n_(Pedro_Berruguete).jpg).

terms alluding to some kind of sumptuous dwelling or protocol space exclusively reserved to God or the king.

The comparative analysis of these exegetical comments reveals a substantial concordance because, except for some small differences, all these Latin masters consider those metaphors as eloquent symbols of God the Son's incarnation in Mary's virginal womb, as well as symbols of Mary's virginal divine motherhood.

Nevertheless, despite this essential concordance, the positions of these Latin Fathers and theologians on the matter assume three different interpretative variants, although not antithetical, but substantially complementary: one strictly Mariological, another one strictly Christological, and a third double, at the same time Christological and Mariological.

The Mariological variant is preferred by almost all Latin writers studied here. Thus St. Jerome, St. Maximus of Turin, Arnobius Junior, St. Eleutherius of Tournai, St. Venantius Fortunatus, St. Ildefonsus of Toledo, Ratramnus of Corbie, St. Peter Damian, St. Anselm of Canterbury, Geoffrey of Vendôme, Peter of Celle, Peter of Blois, and St. Bonaventura of Bagnoregio advocate that the metaphorical expressions mentioned above symbolize Mary, and more specifically, her virginal womb when conceiving and giving birth to God the Son incarnate, and therefore represent also her virginal divine motherhood.

The Christological variant –which interprets these metaphorical expressions as a symbol of the human body that God the Son took from Mary's womb, and to which substantially united his divine nature to configure a single person with two natures, human and divine– is sustained only by St. Augustine of Hippo.

The double interpretative version, Mariological and Christological simultaneously, is mastered only by St. Ambrose of Milan.

Now, regardless of which of those three exegetical variants each one adopts, all the Latin authors studied

in this article show an eloquent conceptual concordance by using identical or very similar arguments when interpreting the metaphorical expressions under analysis. This undoubtedly reveals a strong influence of the most prestigious teachers on other authors of lesser category.

Regarding the seven Annunciations analyzed here, we can also infer several conclusions. Although the artist, the material author of the painting, was at the same time –as in the cases of Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi– its intellectual author, it seems unquestionable that every painter of medieval Annunciations had to abide for an “iconographic program”, perfectly suitable for this topic. Now, each artist could have followed this iconographic program either by mere mechanical “copying” of the prevailing structural model to capture that Marian episode, or, at best, by having had an intellectual mentor next to him who personally dictated to him the narrative/conceptual guidelines necessary to reflect the doctrinal content of the topic.

In any case, it seems evident that the house of Mary shaped with a more or less explicit form of a palace or royal residence that appears included in the seven pictorial Annunciations analyzed above seems to illustrate, as a *visual metaphor*, the deep Christological and Mariological meanings brought to light by the Latin Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers when deciphering as symbols of Christ's incarnation the *textual metaphors* “house of Wisdom” (*domus Sapientiae*), “house of God” (*domus Dei*), “palace of the King” (*palatium Regis*), “royal palace” (*aula regia*), “domicile of the Trinity” (*domicilium Trinitatis*), and the other similar expressions abovementioned. So, this depicted house/palace is a Mariological symbol of Mary, in whose virginal womb Son of God was conceived and inhabited, and simultaneously is a Christological symbol of the human body and nature of God the Son incarnate, as many Fathers, theologians, and medieval hymnographers have put into light.

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