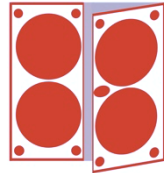




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The Symbol of Door as Mary in Images of the Annunciation of the 14th-15th Centuries

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Abstract

The current article addresses the topic of the symbolic identification of the Virgin Mary as a door according to a double possibility, namely, as an open door and as a shut door. This implies designating Mary simultaneously as *ianua coeli* and as *porta clausa*. These two possibilities suggest very different, though complementary, doctrinal meanings. Through the textual analysis of various quotes from the Church Fathers and theologians and medieval liturgical hymns referring to one or other of these two metaphorical expressions, the Author will determine the doctrinal meanings inherent in each one.

In the second instance, the iconographic analysis of seven images of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries that include some door in special conditions will allow us to validate the hypothesis that the intellectual authors of these seven paintings introduced that door into them as a visual metaphor capable of illustrating both textual metaphors of *porta clausa* and *ianua coeli*.

Keywords: Virgin Mary; Divine motherhood; Perpetual virginity; Co-redemption; Patristics

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1. Introduction

Among the many and imaginative metaphors or symbolic figures with which the Virgin Mary has been identified, there are two that the Author will briefly address in this article: that of Mary as a closed-door (*porta clausa*)¹ and that of Mary as an open door (referring to the *ianua coeli*)². Each of these two moods refers to some doctrinal meanings that are quite different. However, despite their intrinsic mutual difference, both metaphors can coexist and complement mutually in the same textual or pictorial narrative.

This paper, focused on the iconographic analysis of some images of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries³ that include a semi-open door or a door in an indistinguishable and ambiguous situation, seeks to shed light on the possibility of such coexistence and, ultimately, bivalence of that Mariological symbol.

To proceed in order, the Author will follow two complementary steps. Firstly, by analyzing a few brief quotes from some Church Fathers and medieval theologians who interpret the very different doctrinal meanings inherent in the symbols of *porta clausa* and *ianua coeli*. Secondly, in the light of these patristic and theological interpretations, by iconographically analyzing seven paintings of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries that include some door in a bivalent situation (semi-open/semi-closed) or an imprecise situation, in the sense that the door is represented in a neutral way, which does not allow to determine with certainty if it is open or closed. Thus, the analyzes of the patristic and theological texts will allow to adequately justify the iconographic analyzes of these seven Annunciations.

2. Checking the Christian doctrinal tradition

2.1 Mary as *porta clausa* according to some Fathers of the Church and theologians

The Mariological symbol of the *porta clausa* derives from the shut gate facing East that the prophet Ezekiel pointed out as an essential element of the temple that had to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. Ezekiel refers to that Eastern gate or portico this way:

- 1 Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east. And it was shut.
- 2 And the Lord said to me, «This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it. Therefore, it shall remain shut.
- 3 Only the prince may sit in it to eat bread before the Lord. He shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate and shall go out by the same way⁴.

¹ The Author of the current article has analyzed the symbolism of the *porta clausa* in images of the Annunciation in Salvador-González 2021a and Salvador-González 2021b.

² The Mariological theme of the open door (*ianua coeli*) is now brought out briefly, seeking to develop it more broadly and in-depth in a later study.

³ On this generic iconography of the Annunciation along the Christian era: Réau 1957; Schiller 1971; all along these two centuries above: Robb 1936.

⁴ Ezek. 44,1-3 (*Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*: 847): *Et convertit me ad viam portae sanctuarii exterioris, quae respiciebat ad orientem; et erat clausa. Et dixit Dominus ad me: Porta haec clausa erit; non aperietur, et vir non transibit per eam, quoniam Dominus Deus Israel ingressus est per eam; eritque clausa principi. Princeps ipse sedebit in ea, ut comedat panem coram Domino; per viam portae vestibuli ingredietur, et per viam eius egredietur.* English Standard Version: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/ezekiel/44.html> – Last access: 01.11.2021.

This prediction of Ezekiel was from relatively early dates interpreted by numerous Fathers of the Eastern and Western Churches with a double Mariological and Christological projection. In the first instance, in effect, they interpreted it as a clear foreshadowing of the virginal conception and birth of the Son of God incarnated as a man in Mary's womb, as well as her perpetual virginity. In the second instance, as a necessary correlate of the previous Mariological interpretations, the Fathers interpreted this Ezekiel's shut door also with a Christological projection, in the sense that God the Son became man without opening the shut door (without destroying the virginity) of his mother Mary when he was conceived or when he was born. Those multiple dogmatic meanings deciphered by medieval Fathers and theologians about Ezekiel's *porta clausa* have been explained by the Author of this article in a 2020 paper and two other articles currently in press⁵.

As we have already specified in two of the three articles cited in footnote 6, many Greek-Eastern Church Fathers substantially coincide in these Mariological and Christological interpretations of Ezekiel's *porta clausa*. Faced with the impossibility of re-exposing now the proposals of each Greek-Eastern thinker, we will present here only a couple of quotes from two authors as an illustration of this Eastern exegetical tradition.

Proclus (*ante* 390-446), patriarch of Constantinople, is one of those who repeatedly comment on Ezekiel's passage with the double doctrinal approach already mentioned. Thus, in the first sermon in Mary's honor, he is astonished by the fact that God dwelt without any limitation in a human womb and that Mary's womb contained Whom the heavens cannot encompass⁶. Then he points out that God was not ashamed to be born of a woman because that is how life was generated, without staining her in any way, since only with the mother remaining a virgin the man (Jesus) could be born pure in admirable childbirth⁷. And, as Mary remained a virgin after giving birth, it shows that her son is God, delivered in an unspeakable mystery: in fact, the one who entered his virgin mother's closed womb was born as a man without producing any corruption in his mother, proving so that he had two natures, the divine and the human, indissolubly united, just as the apostle Thomas recognized it when the resurrected Jesus entered the disciples' cenacle without being prevented by its closed doors⁸.

Towards the end of the 7th century or the beginning of the 8th Andrew of Crete (c. 660-c. 740), bishop of Gortyn (Crete), states in his fourth sermon on the Nativity of the Virgin that, among the innumerable ways in which the Sacred Scripture prefigures Mary is the «door», according to Ezekiel's prophecy about the temple's shut Eastern door⁹. This Father then says that Mary, the Mother of God, is the common refuge of all Christians and the gate of heaven, through which only the Lord of heaven passed, not allowing anyone else to enter through it either

⁵ Salvador-González 2020, 2021a, 2021b.

⁶ *Quis vidit, quis audivit, inhabitasse Deum in utero incircumscripse; ac eum quem coeli capere non poterant, nullis arctatum angustiis, ventrem Virginis comprehendisse?* (Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio I*, PG 65: col. 682).

⁷ *Unde peccati ille principatum tenens Cain emerserat, inde Redemptor generis Christus sine semine prodiit. Non erubuit Clemens Deus nasci ex muliere. Nam vita erat quod ita moliebatur: nullam contraxit labem vulvae hospitio quam nullo ipse condiderat suo dedecore. Nisi enim mater virgo perseveravit, utique purus homo est qui est natus, nec est partus mirabilis* (Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio I*, PG 65: col. 682-683).

⁸ *At si etiam post partum virgo permansit, quomodo non etiam erit Deus, ac mysterium quale nemo effari potest? Nulla is corruptione natus est, qui nullo prohibente clausis januis ingressus est; cujus Thomas coniunctas naturas videns, exclamavit dixitque: Dominus meus et Deus meus* (Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio I*, PG 65: col. 682-683).

⁹ *Vide itaque multimodis eam honestatam nominibus, multisque Scriptura; [...] Porta: Et dixit Dominus ad me: Porta haec clausa erit; non aperietur, et vir non transibit per eam; quoniam Dominus Deus Israel ingredietur et egredietur per eam: Et erit clausa porta* (Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio IV*, PG 97: col. 867-870).

before or after¹⁰. And in his Sermon V on the Annunciation, Andrew of Crete confirms that the Virgin is blessed because Ezekiel foreshadowed her as the East and as the shut door through which only God passes and that will remain shut again¹¹.

Like the Greek-Eastern Fathers, the Latin Church's Fathers and theologians also interpret Ezekiel's *porta clausa* with the Mariological and Christological meanings explained above¹². Also, in this Latin area, the Author will restrict to a few quotes from a couple of Christian doctrine teachers. Saint Ambrose of Milan, in his famous treatise *De institutione virginis*, begins by asserting that Ezekiel's shut door, as well as the closed garden and the sealed fountain of the *Song of Songs*, are synonymous with Mary's virginity¹³. In this sense, he rhetorically challenges the Virgin, telling her that she is the closed door prophesied by Ezekiel and that no one opens it, since the Holy and True (Jesus) closed it once and for all, who opened it (in the sense of «went through it») and nobody closed it, and he closed it, and nobody opens it¹⁴. In another paragraph of that treatise, after pointing out that this closed door is precisely Mary in her condition as a virgin – with a similar rhetorical question: «What is this door but Mary, and therefore closed precisely because she is a virgin?»¹⁵ – the bishop of Milan maintains that this identification is justified because «Mary is the door through which Christ entered this world when he was begotten in a virginal birth, without breaking the genital closures of virginity»¹⁶. Saint Ambrose further specifies that «When He whose immensity the world cannot contain came out of the Virgin's womb, the barrier of her mother's modesty remained untouched, and her virginity's seals remained inviolate»¹⁷.

Towards the middle of the 11th century, the Benedictine reformer and cardinal Saint Peter Damian (1007-1072), bishop of Ostia, states that, just as the ray is born from the star leaving it intact, so the son Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary, making her virginity intact, just as Ezekiel announced when he prophesied that the door facing the East would permanently be shut and no one will pass through it¹⁸. In another sermon on Virgin's Birth, the Ostia's prelate assures that Mary is this temple's Eastern door, permanently closed, previewed by Ezekiel, since Mary is always closed because she remains uncorrupted

¹⁰ *Haec Maria Dei Genitrix est, commune Christianorum omnium perfugium [...]. Coelorum porta, per quam solus transivit coelorum Dominus, nemini ante postve pervium concedens ingressum. Haec Maria Dei Genitrix est, commune Christianorum omnium perfugium* (Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio IV*, PG 97: col. 879).

¹¹ *Vere benedicta tu, quam Ezechiel Orientem praenuntiavit, «et portam clausam, per quam Deus solus transeat, et quae iterum clausa maneat»* (Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio V*, PG 97: col. 899).

¹² The Author has studied in depth this issue in Salvador-González 2021b.

¹³ *Porta ergo clausa virginitas est: et hortus clausus virginitas: et fons signatus virginitas* (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De Institutione Virginis*, PL 16: col. 321).

¹⁴ *Porta clausa es, virgo, nemo aperiat januam tuam, quam semel clausit Sanctus et Verus, qui habet clavim David, qui aperit, et nemo claudit: claudit ct nemo aperit* (Apoc. 3,7) (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De Institutione Virginis*, PL 16: col. 321).

¹⁵ *Quae est haec porta, nisi Maria; ideo clausa quia virgo?* (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De Institutione Virginis*, PL 16: col. 319-320).

¹⁶ *Porta igitur Maria, per quam Christus intravit in hunc mundum, quando virginali fusus est partu, et genitalia virginitatis claustra non solvit* (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De Institutione Virginis*, PL 16: col. 319-320).

¹⁷ *Mansit intemeratum septum pudoris, et inviolata integritatis duravere signacula; cum exiret ex Virgine, cujus altitudinem mundus sustinere non posset* (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *De Institutione Virginis*, PL 16: col. 319-320).

¹⁸ *Et sicut radius processit a stella, stella integra permanente; sic filius ex Virgine, virginitate inviolabili perdurante, secundum quod et propheta Ezechiel inquit: «Porta, quam vides, semper erit clausa, et nullus transibit per eam (Ezek. 44)»* (Petrus Damianus, *Sermones*, PL 144: col. 508).

before and after childbirth when conceiving a man without having intercourse with any male¹⁹. A few lines later, Peter Damian says that, as Mary remained a virgin when conceiving when she gave birth, she could not experience pain because whoever was born from her so ineffably did not corrupt her virginity's closure. In short, Christ, coming to a virgin, entered her at being conceived and left her a virgin when he left her at birth²⁰.

Complementing – and being inspired by – the Fathers' and theologians' statements on this subject, many medieval liturgical hymns²¹ also proclaim the Virgin Mary as *porta clausa*. Among the many cases that the Author has documented in this regard, which constitute the documentary nucleus of new work in process, he now presents just a couple of examples.

Hymn 260, *De sancta Maria*, from the 13th century, states:

Blooming garden insuflated by the South Wind,
the door shut after and before,
unviable path for males²².

Hymn 326, *De conceptione beatae Mariae virginis* proclaims:

O Mary, the shut door
that nobody opened,
that prince, who passed [through it],
was God and man,
and neither when entering nor leaving
he violated the closure [hymen],
but he assumed the fibula of the flesh
that he before did not have²³.

2.2. *Mary as ianua coeli according to some Fathers and theologians*

On the other hand, according to Greek-Eastern and Latin Fathers and theologians, the expressions *ianua coeli* and *porta paradisi* imply the idea of the Virgin Mary's exclusive privilege as mediator and co-redeemer of Humanity. In this sense, Mary cooperates with Christ in his redemptive work to ensure that the faithful enter heaven and obtain eternal salvation: it is as much as saying that the Virgin has, together with her son Jesus, the keys of the heavenly kingdom, thus constituting herself, together with Christ, as the «gate of Heaven». Many Eastern and Western Fathers and theologians defend this thesis. The Author selects now only a few, with a brief quote that illustrates the idea under study.

In the Greek-Byzantine sphere, the monk and poet Saint Joseph the Hymnographer (c. 816-886), in writing in honor of Mary, praises her as the door of those who achieve salvation

¹⁹ *Haec est denique porta illa, de qua Ezechiel testatur, dicens: «[...] Et dixit Dominus ad me: Porta haec, quam vides, clausa erit, et non aperietur, et vir non transibit per eam, et semper erit clausa (Ezek. 44)». Vere semper clausa, quia semper incorrupta. Incorrupta ante partum, incorrupta post partum, concipiens virum, nesciens virum (Petrus Damianus, Sermo XLVI, PL 144: col. 753).*

²⁰ *Quae enim Virgo permansit concipiendo, dolorem sentire non potuit patiendo. Ille quippe, qui ex ea ineffabiliter prodiit, claustrum virginalis pudicitiae non corrumpit. Virginem denique veniens, introivit, Virginem nihilominus exiens, dereliquit (Petrus Damianus, Sermo XLVI, PL 144, col. 760-761).*

²¹ The Author will keep as reference the excellent anthology Mone 1854.

²² *Florens hortus austro flante, / porta clausa post et ante, / via viris invia (Hymnus 260. De sancta Maria. In Mone 1854: 53).*

²³ *O Maria, clausa porta, / quam nemo aperuit, / princeps ille, qui transivit, / deus et homo fuit, / nec ingressus nec egressus /violavit clausulam, /sed quam prius non habebat, / sumpsit carnis fibulam (Hymnus 326. De conceptione b. Mariae virg. In Mone 1854: 11).*

by faith, because she is the door through which only the one who incarnated for us passed. That is why this writer asks Our Lady to open the doors of justice (that is, eternal life) to all those who praise her²⁴.

Similarly, in the Western Latin context, the Benedictine monk and Cardinal Saint Peter Damian (1007-1072) affirms in a sermon for Mary's Nativity:

Today the queen of the world was born, the window of heaven, the door of paradise [...], the celestial scale, by which the super-excelled God descended humiliated [as a man] to the depths [to the earthly world], and by which man, who lay prostrate, ascended exalted to the highest. Today the star appeared in the world, through which the Sun of Justice illuminated the world²⁵.

About thirty years later, the Benedictine Saint Anselm of Aosta, Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109), proclaimed in a hymn in honor of the Virgin Mary:

Hail, heavenly gate,
through which healthy joy
from God, the Father proceeded
uniquely delivered to us²⁶.

In perfect concordance with the Mariological interpretations that the Fathers and theologians offer in this regard, many medieval liturgical hymns also extol Mary as the door of heaven. By way of illustration, the Author presents here some examples.

Hymn 504, *Psalterium Mariae*, from the 12th century, greets the Virgin in these poetic terms:

Hail, Virgin, the gate of Heaven,
From which the true light was born,
By which the fallen are repaired,
and the upright in heart are glorified²⁷.

Hymn 590, *Ad beatam virginem Mariam*, from the 15th century, proclaims in reference to Mary:

The gate of heaven,
The light of the angels,
The joy of the righteous,
The hope of sinners²⁸.

²⁴ *O janua eorum, qui per fidem salutem consequuntur: o porta per quam solus ille pertransivit, qui propter nos incarnatus est; aperi nobis portas justitiae, qui te fideliter collaudamus* (Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. Theotocia Ex Paracletica Graecorum*. PG 105: col. 1299).

²⁵ *Hodie nata est regina mundi, fenestra coeli, janua paradisi, tabernaculum Dei, stella maris, scala coelestis, per quam supernus Rex humiliatus ad ima descendit; et homo, qui prostratus jacebat, ad superna exaltatus ascendit. Hodie apparuit stella mundo, per quam Sol justitiae illuxit mundo* (Petrus Damianus, *Sermo XLVI. Homilia In Nativitate Beatissimae Virginis Mariae (VIII Sept.)*, PL 144: col. 753-754).

²⁶ *Ave coelestis janua. / Qua Dei Patris unica / processit nobis reddita / Salutaris laetitia* (Anselmus Cantuariensis, *Hymni et Psalterium De Sancta Virgine Maria*, PL 158: col. 1040).

²⁷ *Ave, virgo, coeli porta / De qua vera lux est orta, / Per quam lapsi reparantur, / recti corde gloriantur* (Hymn 504, *Psalterium Mariae*. In Mone 1854: 238).

²⁸ *Janua coelorum, / Lux angelorum, / Gaudium justorum, / Spes peccatorum* (Hymn 590, *Ad b. v. Mariam*. Mone 1854: 405).

3. The double metaphor of the door as Mary in images of the Annunciation

The Author will now analyze seven paintings of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries that include a door in the scene in a more or less bivalent way, in the sense that it can be interpreted indistinctly as a closed door or an open door. Three clarifications are necessary in this case. First, the Author has considered only European paintings because the images of the Annunciation in the Byzantine East do not have such a complex scenography as those of the European West. Secondly, he has chosen some images from the 14th and 15th centuries because, in the preceding centuries, European representations of the Annunciation usually lacked any developed scenery, reduced only to a brief architectural element or furniture.

The third clarifying point – the most important undoubtedly – refers to the relationship between the patristic, theological, and liturgical texts explained above (many of them expressed several centuries before) and the artistic images of the 14th and 15th centuries that will be analyzed below. In that order of ideas, four possible explanations – which are not mutually exclusive but complement each other – allow us to understand and justify such a relationship. In the first place, the teachings of the great masters of Christian doctrine, such as Saint Ambrose, Saint Anselm, Saint Peter Damian, who are *auctoritates* of thought within the Church, were widely known, used, and reformulated by ecclesiastics, and the intellectuals of subsequent centuries, who often quoted and paraphrased them in their writings and sermons. Furthermore, those same dogmatic teachings of the Fathers and theologians are reflected in the poetic verses of medieval liturgical hymns, such as those mentioned above, which were recited or sung in public religious services and private prayers.

Third, there is no reason to think that painters – except for some cultured friar painters, such as Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, or Fra Bartolomeo – knew theology in-depth and, even less, the subtle epistemological complexities of some theological issues, such as that of God the Son's human conception/incarnation in Mary's virginal womb: to adequately illustrate with suitable symbols (such as the «closed door» or the «open door») the doctrinal depth of the Christian episodes to be represented, artists used to have – especially in important commissions – the guidance of an intellectual mentor (generally a friar or ecclesiastic) who, as the true intellectual author of the artistic work, instructed them on the characters, attributes, objects, attitudes and situations with which the episode should be performed. Fourth, it is well known that many artists did not need to have an intellectual mentor by their side, since it was enough for them to «copy» reformulating it to their liking, the conventional compositional-narrative model or scheme of the episode to be represented: in the specific case of the Annunciation, the traditional model called for a respectful angel before a demure Virgin, the flying dove of the Holy Spirit, a ray of light descending from on high towards Mary, a lily stem, and other common elements in this Marian representation.

On this multiple argumentative basis, it will now be legitimate to interpret these seven paintings of the Annunciation in the light of the patristic, theological, and liturgical texts explained.



1 Duccio di Buoninsegna, the Annunciation, panel of the front predella of *La Maestà*, from Siena Cathedral, c. 1308-1311. National Gallery of Art, London.

Duccio di Buoninsegna²⁹ (c. 1255-1318/1319), in the Annunciation, former first panel of the front predella of the *Maestà* in Siena Cathedral, structures the composition inspired by Byzantine models. Carrying a long flowery staff in his left hand, the Archangel Gabriel strode through the door of the Virgin's residence while blessing her with his right hand. Surprised standing

with an open book – in which the prophecy of Isaiah *Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium et vocabitur*³⁰ is read—, Mary retreats on the porch of her house with modest shyness, throwing her body back, tilting her head and covering her chest with the right arm. At the upper edge of the painting, just suggested by a brief arc of a blue circle, the Most High sends, together with the dove of the Holy Spirit, the fertile beam of rays, which penetrates the ear of the Nazarene maiden to signify Jesus' virginal *conceptio per aurem*³¹. In the center of the floor, forming an axis with the suggested God the Father and serving as a nexus between both interlocutors, a bundle of lilies emerging from a vase symbolizes the unspoiled divine motherhood of Mary.

Ultimately, Duccio includes in this small panel a significant element for the subject studied here: the shady semi-open door, which, since it has one leaf open and the other closed, could be interpreted bivalently as a closed door, and as an open heavenly door. Located behind and almost above the figure of the Virgin, this door included in the painting establishes a virtual compositional continuity with Mary, as if subtly wanting to suggest their mutual symbolic identification: Mary as *porta clausa*, and Mary as *ianua coeli*.

²⁹ On the work of Duccio di Buoninsegna, see Baccheschi, Cattaneo 1972; Stubblebine 1979; Deuchler 1984; Ragionieri 1992; Carli 1999; Bellosi 1999; Bagnoli et alii 2003.

³⁰ Is 7,14.

³¹ The Author has studied the thesis of the *conceptio per aurem* in Salvador-González 2016.



2 Master of the Madonna Strauss, the Annunciation, c. 1390-1395, tempera on panel, 212x219 cm. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Firenze.

The Master of the Madonna Strauss presents the scene in a relatively conventional way. Holding a giant stalk of lilies in his left hand, the kneeling angel raises his right hand as a sign of blessing the Virgin and pointing upward to the origin of the message he is communicating to her. Sitting timidly inside the house, Mary places the right hand on her chest, as if surprised that she is the one chosen to be the Mother of God while holding open on the lap a book in which the

prophecy of Isaiah: *Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium* is read. From the upper left angle, God the Father emits the luminous fertilizing ray that, after passing through a symbolic *oculus* in the lateral frieze and bearing the dove of the Holy Spirit in its wake, falls on the body of Mary, whose bulging belly shows signs of her already effective impregnation by work and grace of divinity.

Remarkable here is the door that, on the back wall, interconnects the Virgin with the archangel, compositionally and conceptually. Also, in this painting, as in Duccio's just analyzed, that slightly ajar door conveys the sense of bivalence, as a partially open and partially closed door. In such a circumstance, this door of the Annunciation of the Master of the Madonna Strauss constitutes a powerful double *visual metaphor* that illustrates the two *textual metaphors* under study: that of Ezekiel's *porta clausa*, and that of *ianua coeli*, whose respective Christological and Mariological scopes so many Fathers and theologians put in evidence.



3 Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), the Annunciation, c. 1437-1439, tempera on wood, 64x23 cm (each panel). Frick Collection, New York.

The Carmelite friar and painter Fra Filippo Lippi³² structures the Annunciation with a serene and simple composition. This quiet simplicity is perceived above all in the bare architectural scenography, in the sparse expressiveness of the characters, and even in the absence of the typical accessories usual in this Marian episode: kneeler, prayer book, presence of God the Father, the beam of rays of light are absent here.

The artist captures the scene in a stripped

portico, in which the elegant archangel with colorful wings bows respectfully before the Virgin, lifting her cloak with the left hand, while with his right hand, he holds a long stem of lilies. With evident modesty, bowing her head and eyes, placing her right hand on her breast, and opening her left arm as a sign of acceptance, Mary manifests her humble submission as *ancilla Domini*. With these means, the painter illustrates the Virgin's unconditional agreement before the will of the Most High to make her the virginal mother of his divine Son, as evidenced by the flight of the Holy Spirit shaped like a dove, which is almost touching her right ear.

Now, following the theme dealt with here, Fra Filippo Lippi, analogously to that represented by Duccio in the panel just analyzed, also paints behind Mary a dark door – supposedly accessing to her bedroom's privacy – in such a way that the physical continuity between both, the door and Mary, suggests once again the symbolic identification of the door with the Virgin. It should be noted that, by painting it in a dark and uniform color, Lippi leaves in ambiguity the verification of whether that door is open or closed: as it is painted, one can interpret it as open or as closed. Perhaps this has been a subtle trick arranged by the cult Carmelite priest Fra Filippo Lippi to illustrate the double Mariological metaphor of the Virgin as simultaneous *porta clausa* and *ianua coeli*.

³² On Fra Filippo Lippi, see, among others: Marchini1979; Ruda 1993; Holmes 1999.



4 Fra Angelico,
the Annunciation,
c. 1438-1440, fresco
187×157 cm, Cell 3,
Museo di San Marco, Firenze.

The Dominican painter Fra Angelico (1395-1455)³³ sets the Annunciation with a straightforward and weighted composition, and with a palette restricted to the maximum, almost monochrome, with a preponderance of soft creamy ochre. The painter stages the Marian event in a bare portico – similar to an austere monastic cell – open to the left towards another similar room, in front of which the Dominican Saint Peter Martyr appears looking at the angel's announcement.

Complementing the rigorous nakedness of the scenography, Fra Angelico also simplifies the figures, infusing them with a hieratic solemnity. A motionless Gabriel stands before Mary, who, kneeling on a footrest holding an open book in the hand – a symbol of the ancient prophecies that come true at that moment with her decision to accept the divine plan, crosses the arms over her chest as a sign of humble submission as *ancilla Domini*.

Fra Angelico introduces in this fresco an element very significant for the analyzed topic. Next to the back wall and at the end of the right wall, he painted a door whose monochrome and narrowing (because of perspective) allow it to be interpreted as both an open door and a shut door. Furthermore, by shaping the door just above the Virgin, the artist establishes a perfect physical continuity and a symbolic identification of that door with Mary. That is why the hypothesis that the Dominican scholar Fra Angelico wanted to illustrate here the double metaphor of Mary as *porta clausa* and Mary as *ianua coeli*, with all the doctrinal meanings contained by both metaphors, cannot be ruled out.

³³ On the work of Fra Angelico, see Pope-Hennessy 1952; Argan 1965; Baldini 1970; Guillaud 1986; Hood 1993; Bartz 2000; Zuccari *et alii* 2009; Scudieri 2010.



5 Dirk Bouts, the Annunciation, left panel of the *Triptych of the Virgin's Life*, c. 1445. Prado Museum, Madrid.

Dirk Bouts (c. 1415-1475)³⁴ stages the Annunciation, left panel of the *Triptych of the Life of the Virgin*³⁵, inside a small enclosure that looks like a chapel, with an unusual mix of styles³⁶. Several standard conventions in this Marian theme were foreseeable in this work, such as the respectful attitude of the angel, the posture in the prayer of the demure Virgin, kneeling before an open book, and even – as in many other images of the subject framed by Flemish painters from the 15th century – some everyday objects, such as the water jug or the lamp, loaded with religious symbolisms referring to the virginity of Mary and the Redemption of Humanity.

In addition, in line with the link that the unanimous doctrinal tradition established between the Annunciation and the Redemption of Original Sin, Dirk Bouts – imitating Rogier van der Weyden in his *Triptych of Miraflores* in the Gemäldegalerie in

Berlin – embodies in the arch of the portal framing this Annunciation, together with two prophets who pre-announced the Messiah, six scenes from Genesis related to our first parents' original guilt: they are, from left to right, the creation of Eve, the prohibition of eating the fruit of the Tree of the Good and Evil, Original Sin, the expulsion from the Earthly Paradise, the labors of Adam and Eve on earth, and Cain killing Abel.

Apart from these relatively predictable elements, two unusual details distinguish this Annunciation by Dirk Bouts. Firstly, despite the gesture of the luxuriously attired archangel pointing with his right index upward, there is no trace here of the traditional ways of representing the intervention of divinity in this Marian episode. The artist, in fact, completely omits the figure of God the Father, the dove of the Holy Spirit, and even the beam of luminous rays descending from heaven on the Virgin. More important for the current article is the door that, on the back wall, appears ajar (partially open and partially closed) and located in perfect physical continuity/symbolic identification with the figure of the Virgin. With such partial opening and partial closing of the door, the intellectual author of this painting has perhaps wanted to suggest the two metaphors of Mary as *porta clausa* and Mary as *ianua coeli*, with their enclosed doctrinal meanings³⁷.

³⁴ On the work of this Flemish painter, see, for example, *Dirk Bouts en Zijn Tijd* 1975; Smeyers 1998.

³⁵ This triptych consists of four Marian episodes framed by a «gothic» portico decorated with sculptural scenes from the Old Testament, painted in grisaille. The central panel is composed of two similar scenes separated by a painted red column: the Visitation and the Nativity with the adoration of angels. The left wing represents the Annunciation, and the right represents the Adoration of the Magi.

³⁶ The semicircular shapes of the vault and the arch of the portico in the foreground, clearly Romanesque, do not agree with the door and the stained-glass window on the back wall, nor with the sculptures with a base and canopy of said portico, clearly Gothic.

³⁷ In his large analysis on this Dirk Bouts' Annunciation, Sarabia 1998: 67-87, states on this door (p. 79): «La puerta entreabierta del fondo nos sugiere el paso al *hortus conclusus* de María, el complemento de la recoleta habitación en que trabaja y ora».



6 Benozzo Gozzoli, the Annunciation, panel of the predella of *La Madonna della Cintola*, c. 1450-1452. Pinacoteca Vaticana.

Benozzo Gozzoli (1420-1295) represents the Annunciation in the scenic setting of a classical portico open to a garden enclosed by a high wall, about the metaphor of the *hortus conclusus* from the *Song of Songs*. The artist here arranges the Marian event in a relatively conventional way, with the angel Gabriel, who, bearing a lily stalk in his left hand, kneels reverently before the Virgin, while

the luminous ray of divinity descends on Mary's body. However, Benozzo Gozzoli introduces in this painting a surprising novelty: on both sides of Mary, the painter places two doors, one bright (that is, open) and the other dark (that is, closed). Thus, by «framing» Mary between both doors – almost in continuity/identification with them, the intellectual author of this painting seems to suggest the double metaphor that identifies Mary at the same time with the enclosed *porta clausa* and with the open *ianua coeli*, with all the doctrinal meanings that both metaphors contain respectively.



7 Piero della Francesca, the Annunciation, c. 1469-1470, mixed media on wood, 122x194 cm. Top of the *Polittico di Sant'Antonio*, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia.

Piero della Francesca (c. 1416 /1417-1492)³⁸ painted the Annunciation as the apex of the *Polittico di Sant'Antonio*, made for the Franciscan tertiary sisters of the Sant'Antonio alle Monache convent in Perugia. In this

Annunciation, the archangel Gabriel appears on the left kneeling before the Virgin Mary, who, carrying the usual prayer/prophecy book in her right hand, is framed by a miniaturized portico with a square base³⁹ lowered on four pedestals with four columns each.

For our purposes in this article, it is important to highlight two elements in this Annunciation. First of all, the two open «doors» that frame Mary: a clear and transparent one in the foreground, like the arch of the portico in which Mary stands; the second, of a dark hue (as if to indicate that it is open), located behind the Virgin, as a proper entrance door to an interior room. In this sense, through the compositional relationship between these two open «doors» that frame the Virgin, the intellectual author of this painting seems to suggest a symbolic continuity/identification between them and the Virgin, to illustrate the metaphor of Mary as *ianua coeli*.

In addition, perhaps the most striking component in this Annunciation is the long and narrow porticoed gallery, which stands as the true physical center and compositional axis of the painting. It should be emphasized here that this long and narrow corridor (suggestive metaphor of the vagina) concludes and is hermetically closed with a compact marble plate, which symptomatically assumes the shape of a shut door (poetic simile of the hymen). Thus, Piero della Francesca would probably also be hinting at the other metaphor of Mary as *porta clausa*, with the well-known dogmatic meanings of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and her perpetual virginity.

³⁸ On the work of Piero della Francesca, see Clark 1951; Venturi 1990 (1954); Busignani 1967; Clark 1969; Hendy 1968; de Vecchi 1970; Longhi 1989 (1927); Centauro 1990; Angelini 1991; Battisti 1992; Lightbown 1992; Lavin 2002; Bertelli, Paolucci 2007.

³⁹ The monumental scale that the artist has deliberately given to both characters affects the miniaturization of the architecture, which is thus seen *ex professo* as a mere scenography.

3. Conclusion

A first remark is evident, namely, the substantial agreement between the sentences of many medieval Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers when metaphorically identifying the Virgin Mary with Ezekiel's enclosed *porta clausa* and with the open *ianua coeli*.

The first of these symbolic identifications, Mary as *porta clausa*, refers to the dogmatic meanings of Mary's virginal divine motherhood – with the immaculate begetting and the supernatural birth of the Son of God from the Virgin's womb, and Mary's perpetual virginity. The second symbolic identification, Mary as *ianua coeli*, refers to Mary's universal mediation and co-redemption in favor of Humankind.

From the comparative analysis of these patristic, theological, and liturgical texts, a conclusion can be inferred by analyzing iconographically some images of the Annunciation that include a door in a bivalent situation: the intellectual authors of the seven paintings analyzed here have included in them, as a *visual metaphor*, a door alternatively appreciable as open or closed, with the probable purpose of illustrating the double *textual metaphor* of Mary as *porta clausa*, and Mary as *ianua coeli*, with the respective Mariological meanings revealed by the Church Fathers and medieval theologians.

List of Illustrations

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