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The Vase in Paintings of the Annunciation, a Polyvalent Symbol of the Virgin Mary

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Abstract: This article tries to highlight the deep doctrinal meanings underlying the vase that is often included in artistic depictions of the Annunciation. This apparently banal everyday object has been deliberately placed there in a prominent position to symbolize the Virgin Mary in her condition as the virginal mother of God the Son, and the bearer of all virtues to the highest degree. As methodological resources to justify our iconographic interpretations of that symbol in these images, our study is based on the analysis of texts by several Church Fathers and medieval theologians, as well as numerous liturgical hymns, which for more than a millennium agreed to designate the Virgin Mary as a “vase”, “vessel”, and other types of containers. Thus, this ancient patristic, theological and hymnographic tradition legitimizes our iconographic interpretation of the “vase” included in fifteen paintings of the Annunciation produced by artists from Italy, Flanders and Spain during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Keywords: Mariology; Marian iconography; Mary’s divine motherhood; Annunciation; theological sources; doctrinal symbol



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1. Introduction

Before undertaking the exploration in the patristic-theological and liturgical writings that constitute the essential core of this article, it is useful to draw attention to a symptomatic fact: in the famous *Lauretan Litanies*, a set of invocations and supplications directed in honor of the Virgin Mary, there are three that acclaim her as *Vas spirituale* (Spiritual Vessel), *Vas honorabile* (Vessel of honor) and *Vas insigne devotionis* (Singular vessel of devotion). Indeed, it is surprising that the Church has officially legitimized this triple designation of Mary as a “vessel” or “vase”, additionally qualified as “spiritual”, “of honor” and “of devotion”. What could be the doctrinal bases that would justify this strange triple reference to a vase or vessel to signify the Virgin?

Bearing in mind that these Litanies of Loreto began to take shape in various parts of Christianity as early as the 7th century, until they were almost completely expanded during the 12th century, it seems reasonable to conjecture that they were gradually structured, inspired by the exegetical doctrine that, as we will see later, many Church Fathers, theologians, and liturgical hymnographers had been producing since the 4th century around the metaphor of the vase or vessel as a symbol of the Virgin Mary.

On the other hand, from the 13th century and, above all, from the 14th, many artistic representations of the Annunciation include in the scene a vessel or vase in which a stem of lilies frequently stands.

In view of the apparent correlation between these texts and these images, we will try to explain the possible doctrinal meanings that the vase could have in the context of the Annunciation to Mary. It is not in vain that the History of the Salvation of Humanity begins in this decisive Marian episode, when the human conception/incarnation of God the Son, coming into the world as a man to redeem the fallen humankind, takes place at that moment.

Now, to achieve a correct iconographic interpretation of this vase in the images of the Annunciation, we need to investigate the primary sources of Christian doctrine—especially

in the patristic and theological writings, and in the liturgical prayers and hymns—, which are the primary sources that inspire and support the works of Christian art.

On the other hand, we must point out a linguistic precision: since all texts in primary sources that we have found on this subject use the Latin word “*vas*”, which means “vase”, “vessel”, “jar”, and other forms of “container”, in our article we will translate it almost always, for terminological simplicity, as “vase” or “vessel”.

2. Analyzing Some Patristic-Theological and Liturgical Texts

In this section, we will begin by exposing some exegetical texts of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians that praise the Virgin symbolically designating her as a vessel or an especially valuable vase. In the second part of the section, we will present numerous fragments of medieval Latin liturgical hymns that allude to Mary as a vessel or some other similar container.

2.1. Some Interpretations of Fathers and Theologians Designating Mary as a Vase

Without pretending to be exhaustive, we will present some testimonies from the Church Fathers and medieval theologians who interpret this metaphor of the vase referring to the Virgin from a Mariological perspective. We will first mention some texts of the Greek Patrology, before exposing other similar quotes from Latin Church Fathers and theologians.

Towards the middle of the 4th century, the influential St. Athanasius (295–373), Bishop of Alexandria, in a sermon on the Virgin and her cousin St. Elizabeth, praises Mary for her incomparable greatness, superior to all other greatness, for having been the domicile of the Word of God. He then praises her for being “the ark of the Covenant” covered with gold, an ark which keeps the golden vessel containing the true manna, which is the flesh of Christ in which the godhead of God the Son resides. St. Athanasius establishes here the parallelism—later assumed by many other Christian thinkers—between the ancient Ark of the Covenant, containing the vessel of manna, and the new ark/Mary, whose womb contained the new manna/Christ (the manna in essential relationship with the Eucharist). St. Athanasius of Alexandria is even more explicit in this symbolic allusion to the vessel in a homily on the Virgin, stating: “this glorious and virginal jewel remained totally immaculate: this vessel, which contained the Most High God, was not stained according to heaven, nor was it profaned.”¹

Some three decades later, St. Epiphanius of Salamis (310–403) in an apologetic book against heretics reproaches them for attacking this incorrupt Virgin who deserved to be the domicile of God the Son, who was the only one among the infinite number of the Israelites who was chosen to become the containing vessel and the habitation of her divine Son.² In another passage of this apologetic treatise, St. Epiphanius corroborates that Mary was the true mother of God the Son, from whom he received flesh (human nature) and to whom she gave birth, perpetually preserving her virginity; she is his mother so that the body of God the Son was received from her, and the wonderful vessel of her body received no stain.³

In the first half of the 6th century, the exquisite Byzantine hymnographer St. Romanos the Melodist (c. 485/90–c. 555/62) states in a hymn that the Holy Scriptures call Jesus the manna and the vessel that contains it, others call him the flower that sprouted from the root (of Jesse), while his mother Mary is called a flower, a stem, a door closed forever, who gave birth as a virgin and after childbirth remained a virgin in perpetuity (Cantor 1979). As you can see, Romanos the Melodist prefers to slide towards Christ the symbolic parallelism of the vessel of manna, instead of doing it directly towards Mary, of whom he highlights her virginal divine motherhood, which is what the symbol of the vessel referring to the Virgin means.

Probably around the same 6th century, an anonymous Greek writer assumes several similar ideas in a homily on the Annunciation. After specifying that the angel Gabriel was sent to the most chaste Virgin Mary, whom he honored with the greeting “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (Lk 1, 28), he praises her as the full of grace, because she is the vessel

and the receptacle of supracelestial joy, since she gestated the Creator of the universe in her entrails.⁴

Towards the end of the 6th century or the beginning of the 7th, Theotecnos, bishop of Livias, in his well-known and prescient writing on Mary's Assumption to Heaven, declares that no one should distrust the miracle that the most holy body of the Mother of God remained virginal and incorrupt, since that was what was convenient for the one who had been the spiritual ark that contained Aaron's budded dry rod and the manna (that is, Christ) (Theotecnos 1979). A few lines later, he goes on to say that Mary is the ark, the vessel, the throne and heaven, for which she deserved to see the glory of God face to face. It is interesting to note that Theotecnos, as many other Christian thinkers will do later, uses here the simile of the "ark" as a synonym for "vessel", in the sense that, just as the ancient Ark of the Covenant contained the tables of the law, the manna and the flowered rod of Aaron (all objects directly linked to God), with even greater reason the Virgin Mary can be designated as an "ark", for having been a "vessel" or "container" that housed (conceived, gestated, and gave birth) to God the Son incarnate as a man.

In the second half of the 7th century or in the first decades of the 8th, St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (c. 634–733/40), in a sermon on the Presentation of Mary to the temple, extols her with these praises: "God save you, urn forged with pure gold, and containing the sweetest sweetness for our souls, which is the manna [Christ]."⁵ In another homily on the Annunciation, he expresses similar praises, noting: "God save you, full of grace, urn all of gold containing the manna, and tabernacle really made of purple."⁶ In his third sermon on the Dormition of the Virgin, Germanus of Constantinople imagines Jesus telling his dying mother Mary that death will not boast with her, because she conceived him in her womb, and was made the vessel containing God the Son, so neither death nor darkness would affect her. With these sentences, St. Germanus of Constantinople indistinctly shuffles the metaphorical figures "urn", "tabernacle", "vessel"—all of them container instruments of a sacred nature and function—as alternative symbols to designate Mary, who, as the Mother of God the Son incarnate, contains/houses/protects the divine Christ in her entrails.

In the first half of the 8th century, the famous apologist St. John Damascene (675–749), in his second homily on the Nativity of Mary, praised her with these lyrical terms: "God save you, urn, vessel made of gold, secret of every vessel, and with which the whole world received for itself the manna, that is, the bread baked with the fire of divinity."⁷ In his first homily on Mary's Dormition, the Damascene insists on praising the Virgin with these words:

God save you, candelabrum, golden and solid vessel of virginity, whose wick is the grace of the Spirit, and the oil of that holy body, which was assumed from your immaculate flesh; from which Christ [was born], light that knows no sunset; which you kindled to everlasting life for those who once sat in darkness and in the shadow of death.⁸

Again, the Damascene moves between the synonyms "urn", "vessel" and even "candelabrum" to metaphorically designate Mary as "container" or "sustainer" of the deity.

Around the middle of the 9th century, the fine Greek-Byzantine poet St. Joseph the Hymnographer (c. 816–886) proclaimed in a canticle in honor of the Virgin: "Oh, Mary, the purest tabernacle of the Word, purify my heart from all evil affections, and, the vessel of the divine Spirit, make this world praise you and magnify you, who are the worthiest of all praise."⁹

Perhaps around the same decades, George of Nicomedia (9th century), in his fifth sermon on the Presentation of Mary to the Temple, affirms that when her parents took her to the temple at the age of three, they were carrying this supreme and cleanest vessel of the treasure of grace, the spotless vessel, the receptacle of light, from which the rays of salvation (Christ) shone for the whole world.

Analogous to these Greek-Eastern interpretations, we now present another selection of exegetical statements by Latin writers who coincide in interpreting the metaphors under study.

In the second half of the 6th century, the Italian poet St. Venantius Fortunatus (c. 530–c. 607/9), Bishop of Poitiers, praises the Virgin in a hymn in her honor with these verses:

Image of the model, decorum on all vessels,
and gleaming mass of the new creature.
Pure candelabrum, containing the lamp of the Word,
To whom the Maker carved a form so superior to the stars,
Gracious beauty that adorns the holy Jerusalem,
Vessel standing in front of the temple in honor of God.¹⁰

Around the middle of the 7th century, St. Ildefonsus (607–667), bishop of Toledo, in an apologetic book on the perpetual virginity of Mary, after stating that “Certainly her virginity is always incorrupt, always whole, always unharmed, always inviolate”, asserts that “This woman is the vessel of sanctification, the eternity of the virginity [the perpetual virginity], the mother of God, the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit, the singularly unique temple of her Creator.”¹¹

In the second half of the 11th century, the Benedictine St. Anselm of Aosta (1033–1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, in a prayer imploring the love of Mary and of Christ, praised the Virgin with these poetic concepts:

The hall of universal propitiation, the cause of general reconciliation, the vessel and the temple of life and of the salvation of everybody, I certainly collect your merits, when I review your benefits singularly on me, a little man, which the world that loves enjoy, and claim enjoying being his.¹²

In a hymn in honor of the Virgin St. Anselm proclaims:

The heaven of heaven, the house of God,
The vessel of mercy.
But it exists for you prone
and completely easy.¹³

In the first half of the 12th century, St. Amadeus, bishop of Lausanne (c. 1110–1159), in his third homily on the conception and incarnation of Christ, designates the Virgin Mary as “the most precious and holiest vessel in which the Word of God was conceived.”¹⁴

At the beginning of the 13th century, the distinguished Franciscan thinker St. Anthony of Padua (1195–1231) expressed in a sermon in honor of the Virgin Mary:

Blessed Mary is called a “vessel” because she is “the bedchamber of the Son of God, the special shelter of the Holy Spirit, the triclinium of the Holy Trinity.” That is why she says in the book of Wisdom: “He who created me rested in my tabernacle”. (24, 14. In [Nocilli 1995](#), p. 157)

This “vessel” of Mary was an admirable work of the Most High Son of God, who made her more beautiful than all mortals, holier than all saints: in her “the Word became flesh and came to dwell in our midst”. (John 1:14)¹⁵

Approximately half a century later, the also Franciscan St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217/21–1274), an influential theologian and philosopher who, due to his pure mysticism, was known as the Seraphic Doctor (*Doctor Seraphicus*), brings some similar concepts in his fourth sermon on the Annunciation. After quoting St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who said that the Virgin Mary had been blessed by God with a supreme sanctification at her birth and in her later life, immune from all sin, St. Bonaventure points out:

This was well symbolized in the last chapter of Exodus, in the figurative tabernacle, when Moses is told: *You shall anoint the tabernacle and its vessels*; and goes on to say later. *And when all these things were finished, a cloud covered the tabernacle of*

the testimony, and everything was filled with the glory of the Lord. This tabernacle is the Virgin Mary, and the vessels are the receptacles of the virtues. The Son of God anointed them when, sanctifying the Virgin, he filled her with grace, and after sanctifying her, he covered her with his shadow and protected her with glory, so that neither in soul nor in body part remained that was not full of the grace of the Deity.¹⁶

In his Sermon 5 in honor of Mary, St. Bonaventure states: “That is why the flesh of the Virgin is designated as *the purest vessel*, because in her flesh neither sin reigned, nor did the flesh rebel against the spirit, nor did the flesh retard the spirit; and for that reason she was not only pure, but the purest.”¹⁷ In another Marian sermon, the Seraphic Doctor insists on similar concepts about the Virgin symbolized as a vessel, with a series of ingenious disquisitions that it is not possible to comment on in this brief article. As a synthesis of the approach of the Franciscan master in this last sermon, we can only present this quote:

But the royal maiden [Mary] was an *admirable vessel* because of her *matter*; because of its *form*, and because of its *content*. Because of the matter it was an admirably *precious vessel*; because of its shape it was an admirably *beautiful vessel*; but because of its contents it was an admirably *abundant vessel*.¹⁸

2.2. Invocations to the Virgin Mary as a Vase in Some Medieval Liturgical Hymns

As expected, this solid and multi-secular exegetical tradition established by the Fathers and theologians of the Eastern and Western Churches, by unanimously interpreting the metaphor of the “vase” as a clear symbol of the Virgin Mary, will take shape too in the Middle Ages in countless devotional prayers and liturgical hymns. We will now give some examples of these liturgical testimonies.

In this regard, we are fortunate that from 1853 to 1922 the conspicuous German historians Franz Josef Mone, Guido Maria Dreves and Clemens Blume compiled, transcribed and published in critical editions many of these Latin liturgical hymns in two monumental collections of indispensable reference. A pioneer in this field was Franz Josef Mone, who between 1853 and 1855 collected and edited many hymns in the three volumes of his collection *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi*: the first of them, dedicated to God (Mone 1853); the second, to the Virgin Mary (Mone 1854); the third, to the saints (Mone 1855). For this reason, in our article we will consider the second volume, dedicated entirely to Mary.

Immediately after Mone, Guido Maria Dreves edited between 1886 and 1898 the first 28 volumes of the impressive collection *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* (AHMA 55 volumes in all), the next 22 volumes of which he published from 1898 to 1907 alone or co-authored with Clemens Blume. Blume then continued this collection until 1922 with its last 5 volumes.

Thus, these two great collections of medieval liturgical hymns serve us to compose the sequence of stanzas that we present below, in which Mary appears designated as “vase”, “vessel”, “container”, “urn”, or some other analogous type of receptacle. We will cite these liturgical hymns with the numbering and the title with which they appear catalogued in the collections *Hymni Latini Medii Aevi* (Mone 1854) and *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* (AHMA). On the other hand, we will present these stanzas in chronological order, grouping them by centuries, to try to appreciate any possible evolution in the symbolic treatment applied to Mary over the centuries.

2.2.1. Hymn of the 10th Century

From the 10th century, we have only been able to document *Hymnus 3. De nativitate Beatae Mariae Virginis*, which in one of its stanzas poetically expresses the role of Mary as Mother of the Redeemer, stating:

Merito debuerat
Benedicta scribi,
Qua deletus fuerat
Morbus primi cibi,

Deus hanc voluerat,
 Ut maneret ibi,
 Vas generale suis.
 vas speciale sibi.
 (Hymnus 3. AHMA 2, Dreves 1886, 123)

Deservedly should
 Be blessed to the scribe
 The one with which
 The sickness of the first meal [Adam and Eve's apple]
 would be eliminated,
 God would like that
 She stayed there
 As a general vessel for yours,
 And as a special vessel for him.

2.2.2. Hymn of the 11th Century

From this century, we have only found, in reference to the analyzed subject, *Hymnus* 68. *In Assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis*, which in brief verses praises the mother of God as follows:

6a. Genus regale,
 Vas spiritale.
 6b. Templum virginale,
 Donum speciale.
 (Hymnus 68. AHMA 9, Dreves 1890, 56)

6a. Royal lineage,
 Spiritual vessel.
 6b. Virginal temple,
 Special gift.

2.2.3. Hymns of the 10th–12th Centuries

From an uncertain date in the interval between the 10th and 12th centuries, we have found *Hymnus* 82. *De Beata Maria Virgine*, which acclaims in these terms the favorite of the divine Trinity, the mother of God the Son:

11a. Tu vas imbutum nectare
 Virtutum, sine compare
 Tu trinitatis templum.
 11b. Tu aequitatis semita,
 Humilitatis orbita,
 Munditiae exemplum.
 (Hymnus 82. AHMA 9, Dreves 1890, 68)

11a. You are the vessel full of nectar
 Of the virtues, you are the incomparable
 Trinity Temple.
 11b. You are the path of equity,
 The orbit of humility,
 The example of purity.

2.2.4. Hymns of the 12th Century

Dated from the 12th century, we have found these two hymns.

Hymnus 145. *De Beata Maria Virgine* exalts the Virgin with various symbols, among them that of the “vessel”, when pointing out:

7a. Porta clausa, fons hortorum,
In qua sedit rex coelorum
Nulli viro pervia.
7b. Nardus spirans, flos odorum,
Odor floris, vas decorum,
Cella pigmentaria.
(Hymnus 145. AHMA 10, Dreves 1890, 110)

7a. Closed door, source of the orchards,
In which the King of heaven sat,
And it is not passable for any male.
7b. Nard exhalant of smell, flower of smells,
Smell of flower, honorable vessel,
Aroma cell.

Hymnus 150. De Beata Maria Virgine praises the mother of God the Son, designating her as a “vessel” of various kinds and qualities, saying:

4a. Dextra Dei vas politum,
Vas purgatum, vas ambitum
Castitatis circulo.
4b. Ut prophetae praedixere,
Vas electum continere
Deum matris gremio.
(Hymnus 150. AHMA 10, Dreves 1890, 113)

4a. Vessel polished by the right hand of God,
Purified vessel, vessel circled
by the circle of chastity.
4b. As the prophets foretold,
The chosen vessel contains
To God in the mother’s womb.

2.2.5. Hymns of the 13th Century

Dating from the 13th century, we have found the following four hymns alluding to the subject under study:

Hymnus 5. In Adventu pleads with the mother of the Redeemer in these warm stanzas:

8a. O Maria, vas pudoris,
Nostri mater salvatoris
Hac in die tu Messiae
Servos reconcilia;
8b. Ut quos ipse jam redemit
Et cruore suo emit,
Prece tua nos ad sua
Reducat palatia.
(Hymnus 5. AHMA 8, Dreves 1890, 14)

8a. Oh, Mary, vessel of modesty,
mother of our Savior,
On this day reconcile your servants
With the Messiah.
8b. So that he leads to his palaces
by your prayers
those whom he has already redeemed
And he ransomed with his blood.

Hymnus 365. De beata Maria virgine extols Mary for her virginal divine motherhood that way:

Rubus urens,
Non comburens,
Vas signatum,
Vas ditatum,
vas imbutum
melle et balsamo:
non te laedit,
dum procedit
sol de stella,
rex de cella,
virginalis sponsus
de thalamo.
(Hymnus 365. Mone 1854, 58)

Burning bush,
that is not consumed,
Sealed vessel,
Enriched vessel,
Vessel full
of honey and balm:
It doesn't hurt you
as long as the sun
proceeds of the star,
the king [leaves] the royal hall
and the virginal husband
[comes out] of the nuptial bed.

In the *Hymnus X. Psalterium Beatae Mariae Virginis, auctore Edmundo Cantuariensi. Secunda Quinquagena*, its author, Edmund of Canterbury, celebrates the Virgin as the mother of the Redeemer in these expressive terms:

Ave, per quam
fit Deo subdita
Gens aeterno
tormento dedita,
Per te gentes
salvavit perditas
Calceata
carne divinitas,
O vas deitatis.
(Hymnus X. AHMA 35, Blume, Dreves 1900, 141)¹⁹

Hail, by whom
the human people,
Delivered to torment,
became a subject of God,
For you, O vessel of the Deity,
The Deity
coated with flesh
saved the lost people.

Hymnus I. Psalterium beatae Mariae Virginis. Secunda Quinquagena sings to the mother of God the Son with these poetic concepts:

Ave, verbi vas arcanum
 Mundo ferens caeli granum,
 Cuius odor reddit sanum,
 Cuius sapor ius profanum
 Prorsus tollit, quod per manum
 Primae matris hausimus.
 (Hymnus I. AHMA 36, Blume, Dreves 1901, 20)

Hail, arcane vase of the Word,
 That brings to the world the grain of heaven,
 whose smell heals,
 Whose taste completely removes
 the profane right we extracted
 By the hand of our first mother [Eve].

2.2.6. Hymns of the 12th–15th Centuries

Datable approximately to some imprecise date of this long interval of three centuries, we have found two hymns:

Hymnus 101. De Beata Maria Virgine, c. 12th–13th centuries, applauds the excellence of the Virgin thus:

Tu vas mannae sanctioris,
 Vas dulcoris et honoris
 Habens privilegium.
 (Hymnus 101. AHMA 8, Dreves 1890, 81)

You are the vessel of the holiest manna,
 the vessel of sweetness and honor,
 who has privilege.

Hymnus 53, datable to some dubious date between the 13th and 15th centuries, celebrates Mary's virginal divine motherhood with this lyrical stanza:

Pudoris signaculum,
 Servans illibatum
 Et quem virgo concipit,
 Virgo parit natum.
 Non decet vas flosculi
 Esse defloratum,
 Neque inde tollere
 Matris coelibatum.
 (Hymnus 53. AHMA 1, Dreves 1886, 92)

Preserving immaculate
 the seal of virginity,
 The Virgin gives birth to a Son,
 Whom she conceives while a virgin.
 It is not convenient that the vase of the little flower
 be deflowered,
 Nor that, therefore, it is removed
 The celibacy of the mother.

2.2.7. Hymns of the 14th Century

Dated to the 14th century we have found numerous hymns alluding to the subject. An untitled hymn acclaims Mary with these metaphorical figures:

Ave sidus clarissimum,
 templum dei sanctissimum,
 virtutum vas mundissimum,
 Maria mater Christi.
 (Untitled hymn. Mone 1854, 108)

Hail, very clear star,
 the Holiest Temple of God,
 the clean vase of virtues,
 Mary, the mother of Christ.

Hymnus 401. Ave Maria commends the Virgin through these terms:

Gratia plena te perfecit
 spiritus sanctus, dum te fecit
 vas divinae bonitatis
 et totius largitatis.
 (Hymnus 401. Mone 1854, 111)

The Holy Spirit perfected you
 Like the full of grace, while he made you
 The vessel of divine goodness
 And of total generosity.

Hymnus 465. De gaudiis beatae virginis Mariae celebrates the glory of the mother of God the Son with this stanza:

Gaude splendens vas virtutum,
 cujus pendens est ad nutum
 Tota coeli curia,
 Te benignam et felicem,
 Jesu dignam genitricem,
 venerans in gloria.
 (Hymnus 465. Mone 1854, 176)

Rejoice, splendid vessel of virtues,
 From whom all heavenly curia
 is pending at the slightest sign,
 Worshiping you in glory
 Like the benign and happy
 Worthy mother of Jesus.

Hymnus 325. Conceptio beatae Mariae virginis exalts the divine motherhood of Mary by stating:

Aurora lucis oritur,
 conceptio recolitur
 Mariae, quae verbigenae
 Vas est provisae gratiae.
 (Hymnus 325. Mone 1854, 7)

The dawn of light is born,
 the conception of Mary is considered,
 who is the vessel that begets the Word
 who provided the grace.

Hymnus 2. Crinale Beatae Mariae Virginis pleads for the repairing help of the Virgin with these lyrical verses:

Gaude schola disciplinae,
 Glossa legis, fons doctrinae,
 Vas coelestis medicinae,
 His, quos culpae pungunt spinae,
 Funde medicamina.
 (Hymnus 2. AHMA 3, Dreves 1888, 24)

Rejoice, school of discipline,
 Gloss of the law, source of the doctrine,
 Vessel of heavenly medicine,
 To these, whom the thorns of guilt pierce,
 Produce medicines.

Hymnus 5. De Beata Maria Virgine et Sancto Johanne evangelista celebrates the mother of God the Son with these inspired praises:

Salve, mater Salvatoris,
 Vas electum, vas honoris,
 Vas coelestis gratiae,
 Ab aeterno vas provisum,
 Vas insigne, vas excisum
 Manu sapientiae.
 (Hymnus 5. AHMA 3, Dreves 1888, 117)²⁰

Hail, mother of the Savior,
 Chosen vessel, vessel of honor,
 Vessel of the heavenly grace,
 Vessel prearranged from eternity,
 Insigne vessel, vessel chiseled
 By the hand of Wisdom.

Hymnus 49. De Beata Virgine Maria glorifies the Virgin with these imaginative compliments:

O regina regni Dei,
 O coelestis vas diei,
 Verbi Dei felix aula,
 Coeli melos et coraula.
 (Hymnus 49. AHMA 4, Dreves 1888, 38)

Oh, Queen of the kingdom of God,
 Oh, vessel of heavenly day,
 the happy throne room of the Word of God,
 the song and the choir of heaven.

The Hymnus 34. De sancta Anna. In 1 Nocturno. Antiphonae applauds the birth of the Virgin Mary with these verses:

Hinc nascitur de gratia
 Vas juste plenum gratia,
 Pro cuius abundantia
 Mensuram transit copia.
 (Hymnus 34. AHMA 5, Dreves 1892, 106)

From here the vessel just full of grace,
 is born by grace
 for whose abundance
 Pass the measure abundantly.

Hymnus 86. De Beata Maria Virgine glorifies the mother of the Savior with these eloquent metaphors:

1a. Salve, stella, mundi lumen,
Salve, cella celans numen,
Salve, decus gloriae;
1b. Splendor rerum et cacumen,
Vas sincerum, pons, et flumen
Aromatum gratiae.
2a. O coelestis figuli
Vas desiderabile,
2b. Vas medelae saeculi,
Vas decens, vas utile,
3a. O Maria, gratia
Plena sancti spiritus,
3b. Dux in via praevia,
Lux praefulgens coelitus.
(Hymnus 86. AHMA 9, Dreves 1890, 70)

1a. Hail, star, light of the world
Hail, cell that hides the Godhead,
Hail, honor of glory;
1b. Splendor and summit of things,
Sincere vessel, bridge and river
Of the aromas of grace.
2a. Oh, desirable vessel
Of the celestial modeled [Christ].
2b. World Medicine Vessel,
Convenient vessel, useful vessel,
3a. Oh Mary, full
Of the grace of the Holy Spirit,
3b. Guide on the previous path,
Light that shines the heavenly.

Hymnus 89. De Beata Maria Virgine celebrates the virginal divine maternity of Mary with these eloquent metaphors:

4a. Tu puella sola prolem,
Sola paris stella solem
De Jacob egrediens;
4b. Tu figulum contra ritum
Concepisti, vas politum,
Vas laesuram nesciens.
(Hymnus 89. AHMA 9, Dreves 1890, 73)

4a. You are the only virgin who gives birth,
The only star that gives birth to the Sun,
Which proceeds from Jacob;
4b. You, clean vessel,
Vessel that knows no injury,
You conceived a child against the norm.

Hymnus 91. De Beata Maria Virgine highlights the virginal divine motherhood of Mary through these expressive symbolic figures:

2a. Summi regis palatium,
Thronus imperatoris,

Sponsi reclinatorium,
 Tu sponsa creatoris.
 2b. O pauperum solatium,
 Remedium languoris,
 Dignum Dei sacrarium,
 Vas aeterni splendoris.
 (Hymnus 91. AHMA 9, Dreves 1890, 74)

2a. Supreme King's Palace,
 Emperor's Throne,
 husband's kneeler,
 You are the wife of the Creator.
 2b. Oh, consolation of the poor,
 Remedy of the weakness,
 worthy tabernacle of God
 Vase of eternal splendor.

The Hymnus 73. From Gaudiis Beatae Mariae Virginis commemorates the divine motherhood of Mary, whose saving help it begs in these verses:

Gaude, florens virgo Jesse,
 Ecce Deus fecit esse
 Florem et amygdalum,
 Vas insigne plenum melle,
 Omne malum procul pelle,
 Aufer omne scandalum.
 (Hymnus 73. AHMA 15, Dreves 1893, 100)

Rejoice, flourishing Virgin of Jesse,
 Behold, God made you to be
 flower and almond,
 Distinguished vase full of honey,
 Throw away all evil,
 Eliminate all scandal.

Hymnus 103. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem extols the Virgin with these praises:

Ave, Jesse flos pudoris,
 Pia proles, vas honoris,
 Fons dulcoris, stilla roris.
 (Hymnus 103. AHMA 15, Dreves 1893, 129)

Hail, modest flower of Jesse,
 Pious offspring, vessel of honour,
 Source of sweetness, drop of dew.

Hymnus IX. Psalterium beatae Mariae Virginis, auctore Engelberto Admontensi. Oratio praeambula ad secundam Quinquagenam expresses the sublimity of the Mother of God with these lyrical verses:

O vas mellis expers fellis,
 Cinnamomo et amomo
 Nomen habens dulcius,
 Post tuorum unguentorum
 Vel odorem vel dulcorem,
 Fac, ut currem citius.
 (Hymnus IX. AHMA 35, Blume, Dreves 1900, 135)²¹

O vase of honey devoid of gall,
 who has a sweeter name
 than cinnamon and balm,
 make me run faster
 after the smell or after the sweetness
 of your ointments.

2.2.8. Hymns from between the 14th and 15th Centuries

Related to the topic we are studying, we have found these three hymns written between the 14th and 15th centuries:

Hymnus 52. Salutationes Beatae Mariae Virginis sings to the virginal mother of the Son of God with these eloquent metaphors:

Salve, nostri vas salutis,
 Arca vere, vas virtutis,
 Vas coelestis gratiae;
 Vas ad unguem levigatum,
 Vas decenter fabricatum
 Manu sapientiae.
 (Hymnus 52. AHMA 15, Dreves 1893, 69)

Hail, vessel of our salvation,
 Ark truly, vessel of virtue,
 Vessel of heavenly grace;
 vessel levigated with the greatest care,
 decently made vessel
 By the hand of Wisdom.

Hymnus XIV. Psalterium beatae Mariae Virginis. Tertia Quinquagena praises the mother of God with these expressive verses:

Ave, virgo virginum,
 mater salvatoris,
 Vas electum Domini,
 titulus amoris,
 Vas Dei altissimi
 nostri redemptoris,
 Angelorum domina,
 sponsa creatoris.
 (Hymnus XIV. AHMA 35, Blume, Dreves 1900, 216)

Hail, Virgin of virgins,
 Mother of the Savior,
 Chosen vessel of the Lord,
 love title,
 Vessel of the Most High God
 Our Redeemer,
 Lady of the angels,
 Creator's Wife.

An untitled hymn, from around the 15th century, states:

Ave, virgo, vas ornatum,
 Soli Deo vas sacratum,
 Lingua mea te laudabit,
 Os extollet, cor cantabit.
 (Untitled hymn. Mone 1854, 249)

Hail, Virgin, ornate vase,
sacred vessel only for God
my tongue will praise you,
my mouth will praise you, my heart will sing to you.

Hymnus 522. De Beata Maria, datable to the 15th century, enounces:

Salve, mater Salvatoris,
Vas electum creatoris,
Decus coeli civium;
Salve, virgo benedicta,
Per quam terra maledicta
Meruit remedium.
(Hymnus 522. Mone 1854, 307)

God save you, mother of the Savior,
Creator's chosen vase,
Honor of the heavenly citizens;
God save you, blessed Virgin,
For whom the earth cursed
He deserved remedy.

2.2.9. Hymns of the 15th Century

As expected, most hymns we have found related to our topic date from the 15th century.

Hymnus 507. Oratio, quae dicitur crinale beatae Mariae virginis proclaims the virginal divine motherhood of Mary with these suggestive metaphorical figures:

Vale, urna, manna, merum,
panem coeli portans verum,
Qui conservat cor sincerum
Et in finem est dierum
Omnibus sufficiens.
(Hymnus 507. Mone 1854, 269)

Be well, urn, manna, pure wine,
That you carry the true bread from heaven,
that keeps the sincere heart
And it's enough for everyone
At the end of time.

Hymnus 509. Deliciae Mariae virginis hails the immaculate mother of God with these warm notions:

Salve, tantae puritatis
Vas, ut regem majestatis
De supernis traheres,
Gabriele nuntiante
Inaudita post et ante
Nuntia susciperes.
(Hymnus 509. Mone 1854, 280)

Hail! vessel of such great purity,
As for you to bring from heaven
To the King of majesty [Christ],
And with Gabriel's announcement
receive some good news
Never heard before or after.

Hymnus 510. Ad beatam Mariam virginem praises the Virgin with these lyrical tropes:

Ave, vas sinceritatis,
Lux lucens in tenebris,
Ave stella claritatis,
Luna sine nebulis.
(Hymnus 510. Mone 1854, 284)

Hail, vessel of sincerity,
Light that illuminates in the darkness,
Hail, star of clarity,
Moon without fog.

Hymnus 511. Salutationis beatæ Mariæ virginis celebrates the mother of the Son of God with these illustrative metaphors:

Ave, vas clementiae,
gratiae piscina,
Radix innocentiae
Stella matutina,
Palmaque victoriae,
vitae medicina,
vitis abundantiae,
Coelorum regina.
(Hymnus 511. Mone 1854, 289)

Hail, vessel of mercy,
grace pool,
root of innocence,
Morning Star,
And palm of victory,
medicine of life,
vine of abundance,
Queen of heaven.

Hymnus 525. Sequentia de beata virgine Maria rejoices the greatness of the mother of God the Son with this eloquent figure:

Tu auri vas solidum,
Vas ornatum fulgidum,
Quod decore praeeminet.
(Hymnus 525. Mone 1854, 312)

You, solid vase of gold,
Ornate and shining vase,
Which stands out for its beauty.

Hymnus 539. Ad eandem [Mariam] glorifies the Virgin with these imaginative metaphors:

Apellaris maris
Fulgens stella, cella
Regis, legis
Novae speculum;
Tu vasculum
Aromaticum,
Coeli tripudium.
(Hymnus 539. Mone 1854, 329–30)

You are told shining
 Star of the sea, room
 of the King, mirror
 Of the new law;
 you are
 the aromatic little vase,
 The favorable omen from heaven.

Hymnus 601. Hortus rosarum Dei genitricis Mariae praises and supplicates the Virgin in these warm verses:

Tu panis vas et olei,
 Columna nostrae fidei,
 Nos dulcora sine mora
 Poli roris cellula.
 (Hymnus 601. Mone 1854, 415)

You are the container of bread and oil,
 the column of our faith,
 Sweeten us without delay
 with the abundance of heavenly dew.

Hymnus 604. De laudibus beatae virginis Mariae proclaims the saving help of the mother of God in this stanza:

Vas electum Creatoris,
 medicina peccatoris,
 Super choros angelorum
 Exaltata, spes lapsorum.
 (Hymnus 604. Mone 1854, 421)

Creator's chosen vessel,
 sinner's medicine,
 exalted above the choirs of angels,
 hope of the fallen
 Oh, vessel of honey, exempt from gall,
 Which has a sweeter name
 That cinnamon or amomo:
 make me run faster
 After the smell and the sweetness
 Of your ointments!

Hymnus 607. Laus Mariae acclaims the excellence of the virtues of and the divine motherhood of Mary with these verses:

Vas decoris et honoris,
 Vas coelestis gratiae,
 Templum nostri Redemptoris,
 Forma pudicitiae.
 (Hymnus 607. Mone 1854, 426)²²

Vessel of virtue and honor,
 Vessel of heavenly grace,
 Temple of our Redeemer,
 form of modesty

Ulrich Stocklins von Rottach (Udalricus Wessofontanus), in his *Hymnus 45. Abecedar-ius 5*, calls for the saving aid of the virtuous Mother of God the Son with these expressive words:

Vas coelestis gratiae
 Vasque pietatis,
 Semper omni specie
 Carens foeditatis,
 Onus et tristitiae
 Nostrae gravitatis
 Oleo laetitiae pelle
 Cum peccatis.
 (Hymnus 45. AHMA 6, Dreves 1889, 148)

Vessel of heavenly grace
 And vessel of mercy,
 always lacking
 of all forms of ugliness,
 expel the load of our gravity
 of sadness
 with the oil of joy
 with the sins.

Ulrich Stocklins von Rottach, in his *Hymnus 17. Acrostichon super Ave Maria*, requests the protection of the merciful Mother of the Savior with this stanza:

Ave, mater gratiae,
 Mater pietatis,
 Vas misericordiae,
 Vas divinitatis,
 Evae prolem respice,
 Fons benignitatis,
 Mundans nos a crimine
 Nostrae pravitatis.
 (Hymnus 17. AHMA 6, Dreves 1889, 49)

Hail, mother of grace.
 Mother of mercy,
 vessel of mercy,
 Vessel of Deity,
 Look at the offspring of Eve,
 Source of kindness,
 clearing us of crime
 of our wickedness.

Again, Ulrich Stocklins von Rottach, in his *Hymnus 25. Laudatorium Beatae Virginis Mariae. Pars tertia. Ad Primam*, extols the merciful mother of God, whose saving help he beseeches in those moving verses:

Salve, vas clementiae
 Ac benignitatis,
 Vas coelestis gratiae,
 Vas divinitatis,
 Da misericordiae
 Manum tribulatis,
 Per donum laetitiae
 Et prosperitatis.
 (Hymnus 25. AHMA 6, Dreves 1889, 95)

Hail, vessel of mercy
 And kindness,

Vessel of heavenly grace,
 Vessel of Deity,
 Give to the troubled
 the hand of mercy,
 Through the gift of joy
 And prosperity.

Once again Ulrich Stocklins von Rottach, in his *Hymnus 25. Laudatorium Beatae Virginis Mariae. Sexta pars. Ad Nonam*, celebrates the virginal divine motherhood of Mary with these poetic expressions:

Salve, vas mirabile
 Minime extensum,
 Tamen ineffabile
 Verbum es immensum
 Continens, id nobile
 Carmen sic expensum
 Tibi acceptabile
 Sit velut incensum.
 (Hymnus 25. AHMA 6, Dreves 1889, 104)

Hail, admirable vessel
 minimally extended,
 And yet ineffable,
 You are the one that contains
 To the immense Word, this noble
 Poem so carefully weighed
 be acceptable to you
 Like incense.

Lastly, Ulrich Stocklins von Rottach, in his *Hymnus 25. Laudatorium Beatae Virginis Mariae. Septima pars. Ad Vesperas*, commends the privileged dignity of the mother of the Lord, whose intercession before her divine Son requests in these terms:

Gaude, vas mirabile,
 Continens immensum
 Verbum nec sensibile
 Hominis per sensum,
 Melos istud sedule
 Tibi sic impensum
 Mihi placet frivole
 Dominum offensum.
 (Hymnus 25. AHMA 6, Dreves 1889, 108)

Rejoice, admirable vessel,
 which contains the immense
 Verb not perceivable
 By the sense of man,
 This song is for you
 carefully vehement
 And please me frivolously
 To the offended Lord.

Hymnus 13. In Nativitate Domini Nostri sings of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary with these illustrative expressions:

6a. Vas insigne, vas probatum,
 Templum Deo dedicatum,
 In quo Deus clausit natum,
 Sicut docet litera.
 6b. Templum intus adornatum
 Talem habet principatum,
 Quod non fuit violatum
 Et parit puerpera.
 (Hymnus 13. AHMA 10, Dreves 1891, 17)

6a. Insigne vessel, proven vessel,
 Temple dedicated to God,
 In which God shut himself up at birth,
 As the [Holy] Scripture teaches.
 6b. Ornate temple inside
 Has such principality,
 that was not raped
 And gives birth as a parturient.

Hymnus 137. De Beata Maria Virgine praises the divine motherhood of Mary with these affectionate metaphors:

1a. Ave, mater genitoris.
 Via vitae, vas decoris,
 Liliū munditiae,
 1b. Stella maris, sol splendoris,
 Veri virgultum amoris,
 Paradisus gratiae.
 (Hymnus 137. AHMA 10, Dreves 1891, 105)

1a. Hail, mother of the Father,
 Path of life, vessel of decorum,
 lily of purity
 1b. Star of the sea, sun of splendor,
 Stem of true love,
 paradise of grace

Hymnus 48. De Conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis. Ad Vesperas extols the virginal divine motherhood of Mary with these illustrative verses

Ut infractum perforatur
 Radio vas vitreum,
 Nec in partu reseratur
 Conclave virgineum,
 Et chaos tartareum.
 (Hymnus 48. AHMA 11, Dreves 1891, 36)

Just like the vase
 is pierced without breaking
 by the ray of light,
 That way the closure of virginity
 doesn't open at birth
 And the emptiness of hell.

Hymnus 94. Acrostichon super "Ave Maria" glorifies the Virgin as the beloved mother of God through these poetic analogies:

Summus artifex omnium
 Te providet, vas nobile,
 Vas dignum, vas egregium,
 Vas gratum, vas laudabile,
 Vas cunctis venerabile.
 (Hymnus 94. AHMA 15, Dreves 1893, 118)

The Supreme Creator of the universe
 organizes you in advance, noble vessel,
 Worthy vessel, egregious vessel,
 Pleasant vessel, laudable vessel,
 Venerable vessel for all.

Hymnus 110. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem exalts the virginal divine motherhood of Mary with these poetic symbolic expressions:

Verbi patris atrium,
 Vas provisum carum,
 Pneumatis palatium,
 Trium personarum
 Simplex hoc triclinium.
 (Hymnus 110. AHMA 15, Dreves 1893, 138)

Atrium of the Word of the Father,
 dear vessel arranged in advance,
 Palace of the [Holy] Spirit,
 This is the simple triclinium
 Of the three [divine] Persons.

The Hymnus 36. In Conceptione Virginis Mariae Beatae. Ad Vesperas sings of Mary as the virginal mother of God the Son through these vivid rhymes:

1. Ave, fluens mella,
 Trinitatis cella,
 Melos et laus oris,
 Flos fragrantis floris.
 2. Alvo senectutis
 Conceptae virtutis
 Vas et lucis via,
 Genitrix Maria.
 (Hymnus 36. AHMA 16, Dreves 1894, 44)

1. Hail, flowing honey,
 Trinity Room,
 Song and praise of the mouth,
 Flower of fragrant flower.
 2. From the womb of old age
 Conceived of virtue,
 Vessel and path of light,
 Mother Mary.

2.2.10. Hymns with No Documented Date

We have also found these three hymns, whose dating we could not specify:
Hymnus 597. Laudes Mariae applauds to the Virgin with these delicate verses:

O Maria, maris stella
 plena gratiae,

mater simul et puella,
vas munditiae.
(Hymnus 597. Mone 1854, 409)

Oh, Mary, star of the sea
Full of grace,
Mother and at the same time virgin,
Vessel of purity.

Hymnus 42 exalts the Virgin for her eximious virtues that way:

O vas deitatis,
Tu fons pietatis,
Manans largiter.
(Hymnus 42. AHMA 1, Dreves 1886, 87)

Oh, vessel of divinity,
You are the source of mercy,
That you flow with abundance.

Hymnus 90. Jubilus de singulis membris Beatae Mariae Virginis begs for the protective assistance of the mother of God with these expressive verses:

Vas repletum cunctis donis,
Patens malis atque bonis,
Dans pacis beneficia,
In hoc vase me concludere,
Dulcis mater, nec excludere
A tua grata gratia.
(Hymnus 90. AHMA 15, Dreves 1893, 111)

Vase full of all gifts,
available for the bad and the good,
that you give the benefits of peace,
enclose me in this vase,
sweet mother, don't exclude me
of your grace.

3. An Iconographic Analysis of Some Pictorial Annunciations with Vase

After this extensive exploration of patristic, theological, and liturgical texts related to the metaphor of the “vase” as a symbol of Mary in her privileged condition as the virginal mother of God, and the sublime holder of virtues and supernatural privileges, it is now time to analyze some artistic images of the Annunciation that include a vase, vessel or container in its scene. Such an iconographic analysis is necessary to try to determine whether there is any relationship between these doctrinal texts and these images.

Among the multiple representations of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries that we could choose for the iconographic analyses around the symbol of the “vase”, we have chosen fifteen important works painted by artists from Italy, Flanders and Spain, perfectly representative for the topic at hand.

In collaboration with his brother-in-law Lippo Memmi, Simone Martini (1284–1344) elaborates the altarpiece of the *Annunciazione con i Santi Ansano e Margherita*, 1333 (Figure 1) with a still quite medieval approach. You can see this medieval treatment above all in the central panel, since the figures of the angel Gabriel and Mary are cut out on an abstract background of gold leaf, omitting all scenic elements, except for the throne where the Virgin sits and the vase with the stem of lilies placed on the ground. Kneeling reverently before the enthroned Mary, Gabriel offers her an olive branch with his left hand as a sign of peace, while pointing his right index finger towards heaven to indicate the origin of the message

he is announcing to her. This heavenly message guarantees Mary the supernatural privilege of being the mother of God the Son incarnate preserving her virginity, thanks to the power of the Most High who “will cover her with his shadow”: *virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi* (Lk 1, 35. [Biblia Sacra 2005](#), p. 1011). Such is the meaning of the introductory greeting of the angel *Ave, gratia plena, Dominus tecum* (Lk 1, 27. [Biblia Sacra 2005](#), p. 1011), which appears written in golden letters in the inscription that comes out of the angel’s mouth and reaches up to Mary’s ear. The Virgin shows her unrestricted obedience to the design of the Most High as “slave of the Lord” (*ancilla Domini*) by humbly bowing her head, placing the right arm on her chest.

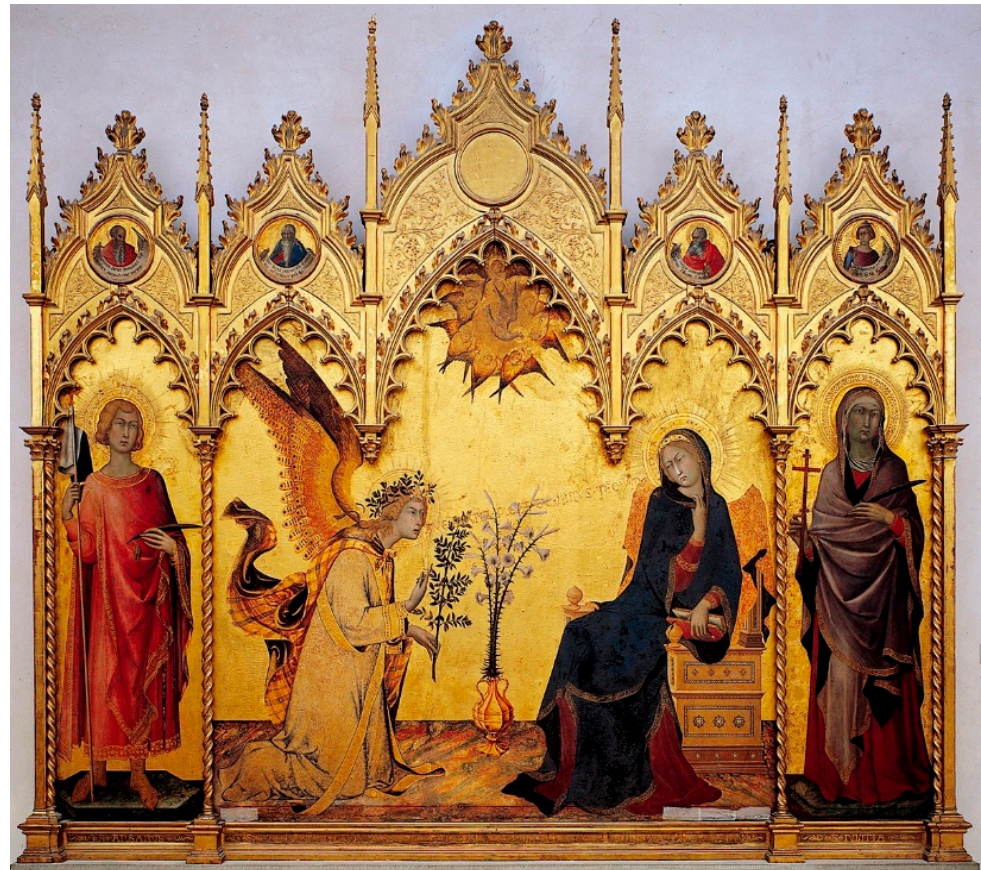


Figure 1. Simone Martini (with Lippo Memmi), *L’Annunciazione con i Santi Ansano e Margherita*, 1333. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Apart from that eloquent gesture of Mary, it is interesting to highlight in this altarpiece the large vase from which several flowered lily stems emerge. Now, we have shown in other articles that the stem of lilies in the artistic images of the Annunciation is a symbol of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary, in the sense that the stem represents the Virgin, while the flower (the lily) represents her divine Son Jesus. We have justified such an iconographic interpretation based on the ancient and concordant tradition of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians when interpreting three texts from the Old Testament: Isaiah’s prophecy about the flowering of a stalk sprouting from the root of Jesse (Is 11, 1–2) ([Salvador-González 2013](#)); the miraculous flowering of Aaron’s dry rod ([Salvador-González 2016](#)), and the phrase from the *Song of Songs* in which the Bridegroom declares to be “the flower of the field and the lily of the valleys” (Song 2, 1) ([Salvador-González 2014](#)).

From this interpretive perspective, the close relationship/continuity between the stem (the Virgin) and the vase where it stands allows us to affirm the symbolic identity, doubly reinforced, of Mary as stem and as vase. As if that were not enough, the shape of an inverted uterus that this vase presents in this altarpiece further reinforces this symbolic identification of Mary as a vessel or vase, which so many Fathers, theologians and hymnographers

brought to light in perfect agreement for more than a millennium. In addition, the clear protagonist position of this vase, isolated in the center of the altarpiece scene, as an element that connects Gabriel and Mary, reinforces the conjecture that the intellectual author of this *Annunciation* had in mind the Mariological symbolism of the metaphor of the vase, according to the unanimous patristic-theological exegesis and the countless invocations of medieval liturgical hymns.

That is why it is surprising that the commentators we know of this altarpiece, such as Maria Cristina Gozzoli (1970), Marco Pierini (2002), Enrico Castelnuevo (2003), Pierluigi Leone de Castris (2003) and Pietro Torriti (2006), have not documented the Mariological symbolism of this vase in primary sources.

For the rest, everything that we have explained in this altarpiece by Simone Martini about the continuity/identity between the vase and the stem of lilies as two symbols of the virginal divine maternity of Mary applies to all images of the Annunciation that we will analyze in this article. Therefore, we will not repeat these explanations in each of the tables that we will analyze.

Andrea di Bartolo Cini (c. 1360–1428) performs his *Annunciation Diptych*, c. 1383, from the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts (Figure 2), with two compositional details similar to Simone Martini's *Annunciation*. The first is that di Bartolo also places the angel kneeling before the seated Virgin, although distancing himself from Martini by incorporating Mary in a stylized house in the form of a porch. The second and most important detail—copied from Simone Martini—is to place a large vase with stems of lilies on the floor as a narrative-symbolic link between the Virgin and the angel, who also, as in the case of Martini, carries an olive branch in the left hand. Thus, given the solid patristic-theological tradition and the abundant liturgical hymnody around 1383 (probable date of execution of this painting), it is very likely that the intellectual author of this Budapest diptych was inspired by the multiple exegetical texts referring to the vase as a symbol of Mary.

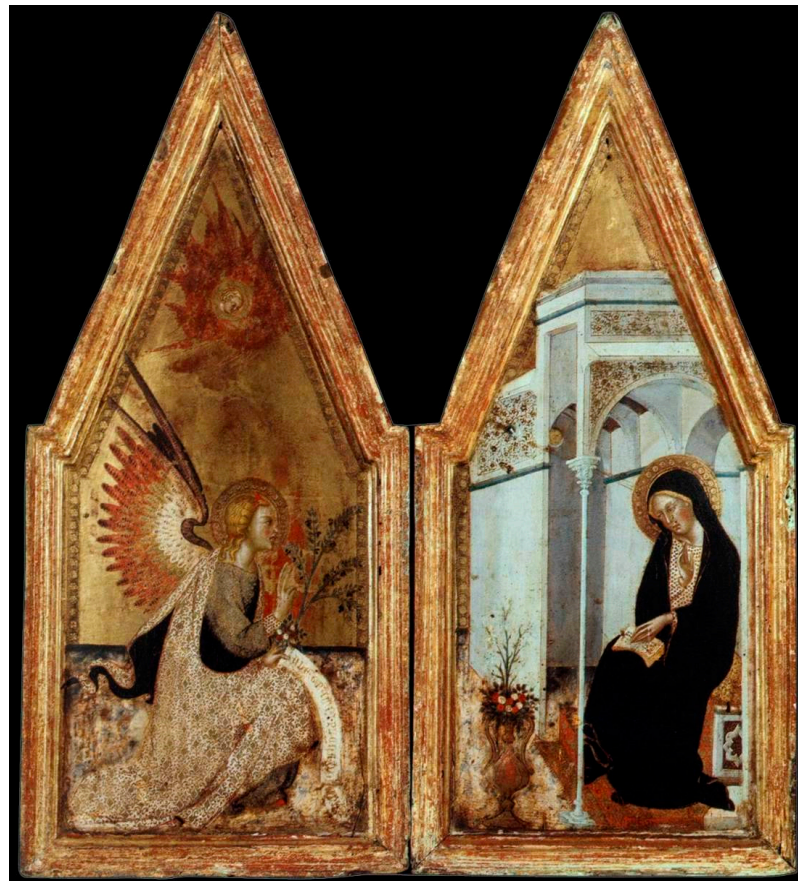


Figure 2. Andrea di Bartolo, *Diptych of the Annunciation*, c. 1383. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

For the rest, Andrea di Bartolo adds the surprising detail of representing the godhead not with the usual figure of God the Father like an adult man, but through the little head of Christ as a child, surrounded by a mandorla of cherubs at the top of the left panel. Such an unusual detail of the little head seeks to illustrate that the Annunciation episode concludes with the human conception/incarnation of God the Son in Mary's womb at the very moment that she accepts the divine plan announced by Gabriel.

Robert Campin (c. 1376–1444)—helped, according to experts, by his workshop assistants—places *The Annunciation* of the *Mérode Triptych*, c. 1427–1432, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 3), inside an elegant bourgeois room, equipped with exquisite furniture and precious domestic utensils. Despite their apparent insignificance, many of these everyday objects—a vase with stems of lilies, a cauldron of water, a towel, candlesticks with or without candles, books—condense several interesting doctrinal meanings, interpreted by some historians with variable accuracy.



Figure 3. Robert Campin's workshop, *The Annunciation*, central panel of the *Mérode Triptych*, c. 1427–1432. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the intellectual author of this *Annunciation* “complemented” the conventional ray of light coming from the (here invisible) Most High with the figure of Christ like a tiny naked child carrying a cross on his shoulder: as already said commenting on the previous painting by Andrea di Bartolo, this figurine of the child Jesus illustrates the thesis of the immediate human conception/incarnation of God the Son when the Virgin declared her absolute obedience to the plan of the Most High at the conclusion of the Annunciation event.

Without stopping now to interpret the other symbols, we are interested in highlighting in this *Mérode Annunciation* the porcelain vase with its stem of lilies, placed on the table right in the center of the composition, fully visible (with no other overlapping objects), and as a narrative-symbolic link between Gabriel and Mary. It is reasonable to infer that the

intellectual author of this *Mérode Annunciation* has arranged this vase with great visual relevance to evidence its Mariological symbolism according to the concordant interpretations of the Fathers and theologians, and the acclamations of the liturgical hymns.

For these reasons, it seems strange that, apart from Patricia [Platgett-Lea \(2022\)](#), none of the commentators we know of this *Mérode Triptych* has documented the Mariological symbolism of the splendid vase depicted here. You can see such an omission in Max J. [Friedländer \(1924, pp. 61–66; 1967, pp. 36–41\)](#), David M. [Robb \(1936, pp. 500–25\)](#), Millard [Meiss \(1945, pp. 178–79\)](#), Meyer [Schapiro \(1945, pp. 182–87\)](#), Erwin [Panofsky \(\[1953\] 1966, pp. 142–43, 164–67, 304–5\)](#), Margaret B. [Freeman \(1957, pp. 130–39\)](#), Théodore [Rousseau \(1957, pp. 117–29\)](#), Charles Ilsley [Minott \(1969, pp. 267–71\)](#), Carla [Gottlieb \(1970, pp. 65–84\)](#), Martin [Davies \(1972, pp. 257–60\)](#), Lorne [Campbell \(1974, pp. 638–45\)](#), Barbara G. [Lane \(1984, pp. 42–45\)](#), Shirley Neilsen [Blum \(1992, pp. 46–47\)](#), [Châtelet \(1996, pp. 93–113\)](#), Stephan [Kemperdick \(1997, pp. 77–104, 181–86\)](#), Felix [Thürlemann \(2002, pp. 65–76\)](#), and [Kemperdick and Sander \(2009, pp. 150–52\)](#), to name just a few of the leading experts.

The Sienese painter Sassetta, whose real name was Stefano di Giovanni (c. 1400–1450), depicted *The Annunciation*, c. 1437–1444, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 4), originally as the central pinnacle of the reverse of the double-sided altarpiece painted between 1437 and 1444 for the Franciscan church of Borgo San Sepolcro in Arezzo. Although it has suffered many deteriorations and repaintings, and has even been cut down in size—which explains why both protagonists, especially the angel, are cut—, we are interested in highlighting the vase with the lily stems: fully exempt and prominently placed between Gabriel and Mary it conveys all Mariological meanings already explained.



Figure 4. Sassetta, *The Annunciation*, c. 1437–1444. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1399/1400–1464) stages *The Annunciation*, c. 1434–35, central panel of the *Triptyc of the Annunciation*, in the Musée du Louvre in Paris (Figure 5), in a luxurious living room plenty of refined furniture and utensils, open to the outside through the large windows at the back and on the right side. In this elegant setting, the angel Gabriel, clad in a precious embroidered cope, begins to kneel before the seated Virgin, who, surprised by the appearance of the unexpected visitor, interrupts reading the book she is holding open with her left hand, while slightly turning her head towards the heavenly messenger.

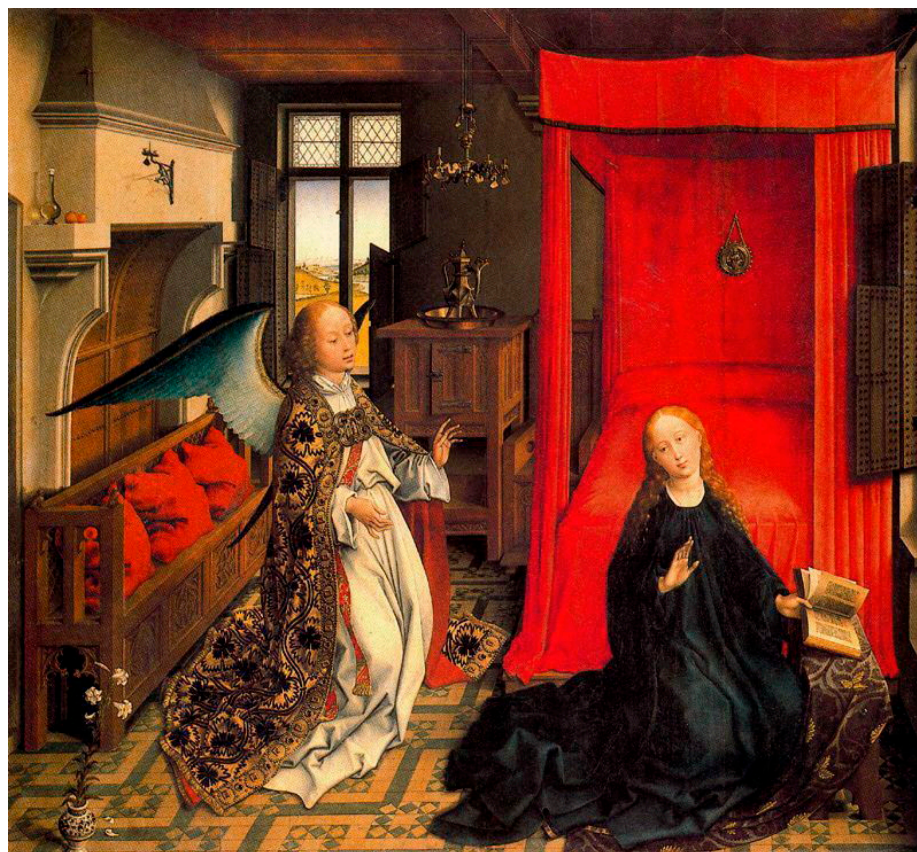


Figure 5. Rogier van der Weyden, *The Annunciation*, c. 1434–1435, central panel of the *Triptyc of the Annunciation*, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In that living room, van der Weyden has surprisingly placed a neat marriage bed to illustrate its profound dogmatic meanings that we cannot detail here, since we have already explained them extensively in other works (Salvador-González 2019, 2020a, 2021d). The angel has entered this living room by the closed door—barely visible on the left side, suggested by its jamb—without opening it, a closed door whose Mariological and Christological symbolisms we have elucidated in another study (Salvador-González 2020c).

However, more than these two connoted symbols and other no less significant elements present in this painting, we are now interested in underscoring the three vessels that appear in it: the vase with the stem of lilies placed on the ground in the foreground, the crystal vessel with water placed on the ledge between the fireplace and the door, and the pitcher of water from the ewer located on the sideboard attached to the back wall. In this regard, it does not seem necessary to repeat now that these three vessels, each in its own way, symbolize the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and the fullness and sublimity of her virtues and supernatural privileges, as many Fathers, medieval theologians, and liturgical hymnographers unanimously manifested for more than a millennium.

That is why it is surprising that the commentators we know of this *Annunciation* by van der Weyden have not justified, based on primary sources, the Mariological symbolism

inherent in these three vessels. Erwin Panofsky ([1953] 1966, vol. I, pp. 250–56), Martin Davies (1972), Odile Delenda (1987, pp. 33–36), Châtelet (1999a, p. 43; 1999b, pp. 97–99), and Dirk De Vos (1999, pp. 98, 195–99), among others, incur in that omission.

Stefan Lochner (c. 1400/10–1451), in representing *The Annunciation*, in two panels of the closed *Magi Altarpiece*, 1440, from the Cologne cathedral (Figure 6), opts for a relatively conventional composition: the angel beginning to kneel in the left sector, carrying a herald's staff and showing a wide phylactery with the message of the Most High; the Virgin kneeling to the right before a kneeler on which she has her prayer book open. Nevertheless, the painter surprises us with some other symbolic details, such as the closed book placed on the platform in the foreground in the right angle, or the open piece of furniture, on which we cannot stop now. We just intend to highpoint once again the voluminous vase from which a lily stem emerges in the center of the scene, as a narrative-compositive link between the heavenly messenger and the *Annunziata*.



Figure 6. Stefan Lochner, *The Annunciation*, two panels of the closed *Magi Altarpiece*, Cologne cathedral, 1440.

Fra Filippo Lippi (1406–1489) structures with great originality *The Martelli Annunciation*, c. 1440, from the Martelli Chapel in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence (Figure 7). From the outset, he stages the episode in an ostentatious and complex Renaissance palace, with a long perspective. In addition, he surprisingly adds two other angels as companions of the archangel Gabriel, who fill the left half of the composition, while in the right half he places Gabriel and Mary.

Without dwelling now on interpreting the doctrinal meanings of the house of Mary shaped as a palace, which we have explained in other articles (Salvador-González 2021a, 2021c), nor those of the closed garden (*hortus conclusus*) that one can see in the intermediate planes, we are interested in emphasizing a very significant detail: after placing the stem of lilies in the hand of the genuflected Gabriel, Lippi includes in the very foreground—as a linking element between the heavenly messenger and the Virgin—a transparent glass vase, half full of clear water.



Figure 7. Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Martelli Annunciation*, c. 1440. Cappella Martelli, Basilica di San Lorenzo, Florence.

It seems completely evident that the cult Carmelite monk who was Fra Filippo Lippi has introduced here in a leading role that brilliant glass vase to symbolically signify Mary as the virtuous mother of God the Son, drawing inspiration from the numerous patristic-theological testimonies and medieval hymns on the symbol of the “vase”, which Lippi seems to know firsthand, given his careful ecclesiastical training and his practical life as a friar.

Therefore, it is surprising that the commentators we know on this *Martelli Annunciation*, such as Giuseppe Marchini (1979), Jeffrey Ruda (1993, pp. 163–65, 428), Megan Holmes (1999), and Glossi and Pinci (2011), have avoided to explain with convincing documentary arguments the Mariological symbolism of this exceptional glass vase.

In the *L’Annunciazione delle Murate*, c. 1443 (Figure 8)—originally painted for the Suore Murate convent in Florence, and today at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich—Fra Filippo Lippi places the episode inside a luxurious Renaissance palace, with elegant marble arches, pilasters, and entablatures.

In that sumptuous palace, open onto a walled garden (*hortus conclusus*), the archangel Gabriel, bearing a large stem of lily in his left hand, kneels reverently before his heavenly Sovereign. Behind Gabriel, a second angel appears through the door with another stem of lilies. The Virgin remains standing, modestly lowering her head and her eyes, while placing the right hand on her chest in an attitude of humble obedience in accepting the divine plan announced by Gabriel.

In the upper left corner of the painting, the Most High, surrounded by angels, opens his hands to send towards the Virgin the fertilizing beam of light—symbol of God the Son, as we have shown in other articles (Salvador-González 2021a, 2021c)—, in the middle of whose wake appears the Holy Spirit flying in the form of a white dove.

Apart from these foreseeable elements at the time in these representations of the Annunciation, it is worth underlining in this work the bulky glass vase located in the foreground, which contains roses and other flowers. Undoubtedly, the erudite Fra Filippo Lippi wanted to illustrate through this crystalline vase with flowers the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and the fullness of her virtues and supernatural attributes, draw-

ing inspiration from the centuries-old exegetical tradition of Fathers, theologians, and hymnographers, which he must have known perfectly, due to his condition as well-trained Carmelite friar.

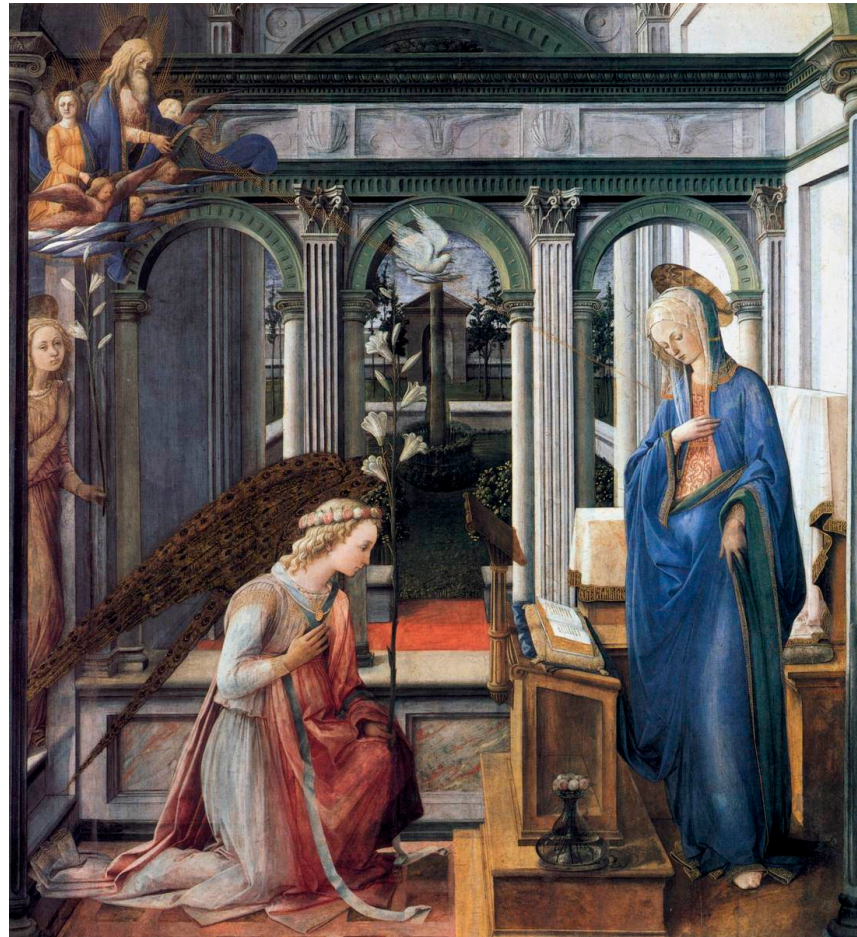


Figure 8. Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Murate Annunciation* (*L'Annunciazione delle Murate*), 1443. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Fra Carnevale, stage name of Bartolomeo di Giovanni Corradini (c. 1429/25–1484), places *The Annunciation*, c. 1448, from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (Figure 9) in the narrow arcaded courtyard of a monumental palace, which reveals a distant landscape in the background through the open door in the wall. In the foreground of that courtyard, the angel, who carries in his left hand a long stem of lilies, kneels reverently before his heavenly Lady, while she, standing, places her right hand on her chest, as if wondering if she is the very recipient of the design of the Most High. Once again, it is important to highlight in this painting the huge vase full of roses and other flowers, as a link between both protagonists. It seems evident that Fra Carnevale placed this great vase here as an eloquent symbol of Mary as the virginal mother of God and the sublime model of all virtues, in perfect harmony with the centuries-old exegetical tradition of Fathers, theologians and hymnographers, which he undoubtedly knew for his status as a learned Dominican friar.

Rogier van der Weyden stages *The Annunciation* on the left wing of the *Altarpiece of the Adoration of the Magi* (*St. Columba Altarpiece*), painted around 1450–1456 for the high altar of the parish church of St. Columba in Cologne, and today in the Alte Pinakothek from Munich (Figure 10), in a comfortable bourgeois room in Flanders. The painter places the angel standing here blessing Mary, who prays on her knees before a book, while extolling her with his initial greeting AVE GRATIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM, made visible in an epigraphic inscription that comes out of his mouth towards the ear of the Virgin.



Figure 9. Fra Carnevale, *The Annunciation*, c. 1448. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Figure 10. Rogier van der Weyden, *The Annunciation*, left wing of *The St. Columba Altarpiece*, c. 1455, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

In addition, van der Weyden introduces several symbolic elements in this painting, such as the large, canopied marriage bed, the closed door through which the archangel has entered without opening it, and the fertilizing ray of light coming from the Most High that passes through the crystals of the window without breaking or staining them. We have explained the doctrinal symbolism of this ray of light in another article ([Salvador-González 2020b](#)). However, without reiterating here the doctrinal meanings of these and various other symbolic details of this painting, which we have already analyzed in other works, we are now interested in highlighting the metal vase that contains the lily stem in the foreground between Gabriel and Mary. In such leading circumstances, it is undeniable that this shiny vase, with its complementary lily stem, constitutes a clear symbol of Mary as the virginal mother of God, as the incomparable possessor of all virtues, and the holder of some exclusive divine privileges: this is confirmed by the already explained patristic and theological texts, and the hymnic acclamations that designate the Virgin as “vase”, vessel, ark, urn, or other analogous expressions alluding to some valuable container.

Therefore, it is unfortunate that the commentators we know of this important *Annunciation* by van der Weyden do not justify the Mariological symbolism of that vase based on primary sources. You can find such an omission in Max Julius [Friedländer \(1924, 1967\)](#), Erwin [Panofsky \(\[1953\] 1966, vol. I, pp. 203–4, 249–51, 284–88\)](#), Martin [Davies \(1973, pp. 268–70\)](#), Odile [Delenda \(1987, p. 54\)](#), Paul [Philippot \(1994, p. 40\)](#), [Châtelet \(1999a, pp. 112–17; 1999b, pp. 97–99, 195–200\)](#), [Dhanens and Dijkstra \(1999, pp. 35–36\)](#), Dirk [De Vos \(1999, pp. 276–84; 2002, p. 83\)](#), [Kemperdick and Sander \(2009, pp. 96, 100–1\)](#), and [Campbell and van der Stock \(2009, p. 351\)](#).

Hans Memling (c. 1433/40–1494)—or, according to other experts, a presumed disciple of Rogier van der Weyden, whose design the disciple would have used to execute this painting—organizes the scene of *The Clugny Annunciation*, c. 1465–1470, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 11) in an elegant bourgeois residence, equipped with precious furniture, through whose window a large walled garden can be seen.

The painter places the two protagonists of the episode in this splendid setting. Dressed in luxurious clerical clothing embroidered in gold, and carrying a herald’s staff in his left hand, the Archangel Gabriel announces the divine plan to the Virgin. Kneeling on her prie-dieu, Mary extends her right hand over the book of hours, as in a gesture of swearing before the Bible, to show her compliance with the will of the Most High. More than the eloquent elements of the bed and the closed door (*porta clausa*), whose dogmatic meanings we have already explained in other studies, it is convenient to highlight again the shiny metallic vase that, standing out in the foreground, holds the stem of lilies upright.

It seems indisputable that the intellectual author of this painting includes this vase in such a prominent position as a symbol of Mary in her condition as virginal mother of God, and as the exalted holder of sublime virtues and supernatural privileges. For this reason, it is shocking that none of the commentators that we know of this *Clugny Annunciation* have documented the Mariological meanings of this vase. In this surprising silence fall, among others, Max Julius [Friedländer \(1967\)](#), Martin [Davies \(1973, pp. 271–72\)](#), Odile [Delenda \(1987, pp. 54–57\)](#), [De Vos \(1994\)](#), [Dhanens and Dijkstra \(1999, p. 47\)](#), [Châtelet \(1999a, p. 124\)](#), and Alfred [Michiels \(2007\)](#).

Dirk Bouts (1410–1475) poses *The Annunciation*, c. 1475–1487, from the Muzeum Czartoryskich in Krakowie (Poland) (Figure 12), with a certain originality regarding conventional models. He places the Virgin sitting on the floor, instead of kneeling on a prie-dieu or sitting on a seat, which are the most common positions for her in representations of the Annunciation. In addition, he reverses the usual position of both protagonists, now placing the Virgin on the left of the scene, and on the right the angel, who carries the herald’s staff in his left hand. Dirk Bouts repeats here the attitude of Mary placing her right hand on the prayer book, as if in an attitude of confirming the will to tell the truth in an act of official oath through the gesture of pronouncing the oath after placing the right hand on the Gospel.



Figure 11. Hans Memling or Rogier van der Weyden's workshop, *The Clugny Annunciation*, c. 1465–1470. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

However, now ignoring this and other significant details in this painting, we are interested in highlighting the vase carrying a large stem of lilies that, located at the back of the scene on a piece of furniture between two cushions, constitutes the visual center and axis around which the figures of Gabriel and Mary counterbalance. By placing this vase in such a relevant situation, it seems logical to think that the author of this painting wanted to emphasize its strong symbolic charge, in line with the already explained approaches of the Fathers, theologians and medieval liturgical hymnographers.

Aelbrecht (or Albert) Bouts (c. 1452–1549), son of the painter Dirk Bouts, stages *The Annunciation*, c. 1480, from the Cleveland Museum of Art (Figure 13) within an elegant Gothic chapel or small private temple, as revealed by its tracery windows and ribbed vault. In this regard, the artist represented here the humble house of Mary in Nazareth shaped like a splendid temple to illustrate certain Mariological and Christological symbolisms that we cannot explain in this article, since we have already explained them in other works (Salvador-González 2017, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2021b).



Figure 12. Dirk Bouts, *The Annunciation*, c. 1475–1487. The Muzeum Czartoryskich, Krakowie.

In this ambiance of ecclesial intimacy, the angel Gabriel, covered with a luxurious embroidered cope, and carrying the herald's sceptre, points his right hand at the Virgin indicating that she has been designated by the Most High to become the virginal mother of his divine Son. Mary manifests her unrestricted obedience to the will of God the Father by holding the book of hours in her left hand and raising her right hand over it, as if to take an oath on the Bible.

Now, among the various objects of this refined furniture, it is convenient to emphasize the transparent glass vase that in the foreground in the lower right corner holds a pair of lily stems. In this regard, the hypothesis sounds reasonable that the author of this *Annunciation* has considered the underlying Mariological meanings under this gleaming glass vase, according to the already explained interpretations of the Fathers and theologians, and the acclamations of the liturgical hymns on the Mariological metaphor of “vase” or vessel.



Figure 13. Aelbrecht Bouts, *The Annunciation*, c. 1480. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

Hans Memling brings in *The Annunciation with angelic attendants*, 1482, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 14), a quite original approach. He continues to introduce here the usual conventions of the 15th century Flemish painters. For this reason, he stages the Marian episode in a luxurious bourgeois residence with precious furniture and fine utensils, among which a clean marriage bed stands out in the middle of the living room, and dresses the Archangel Gabriel with a sumptuous cope, making him also wear the herald's staff in his left hand.

Aside from these predictable elements in the 15th century Flemish iconography, Memling presents two major novelties in the treatment of the Virgin Mary: first, because, while standing, she begins to bend her knees and fall backwards, as if she were fainting; second, because at her side are two angels, companions of Gabriel, one of whom holds her by the arm to prevent her from collapsing, while the other grabs the lower end of her long tunic, as in the gesture of a page or as a bridesmaid lifting the long train of a queen or a bride at the marriage ceremony. In addition, Memling represents the Virgin with a swollen belly, as a sign of advanced pregnancy (which is in accordance with her fainting), as if to illustrate that at the concluding moment of the Annunciation—when Mary declared her unrestricted obedience to the plan of the Most High—the immediate human conception/incarnation of God the Son occurs in the virginal womb of Mary.



Figure 14. Hans Memling, *The Annunciation with angelic attendants*, 1482. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

However, we will not dwell now on the undoubted symbolism that the marriage bed, the closed door on the left edge of the painting, and the fainting and pregnancy of the Virgin have in reference to the virginal divine motherhood of Mary.

Instead, we are interested in stressing the polyvalent Mariological symbolisms offered by the two vessels that appear in this painting: the ceramic vase with the stem of lilies placed on the floor in the foreground, and the glass vase or bottle with water placed on the sideboard attached to the back wall. Memling thus adopts a duplication of vessels like the one used by Rogier van der Weyden in his already analyzed Louvre *Annunciation*, with the difference that the latter put a glass vessel and a metallic jug in the Paris one, while Memling puts a bottle or glass vessel in that of the Metropolitan. In any case, with these two very different vases—a ceramic vessel with the stem of a lily, and a glass vessel with water—Memling illustrates the already explained Mariological meanings of the “vase” as a simultaneous symbol of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary, and the fullness of her sublime virtues and exclusive privileges, as manifested in full agreement by innumerable Fathers, theologians, and liturgical hymnographers for more than a millennium.

Therefore, it is surprising to note that the commentators we know of this *Annunciation* by Memling, including Barbara G. Lane (1984, p. 75), Dirk De Vos (1994, pp. 304–6) and Charlotte Wytema (2016), have not documented in primary sources the profound theological meanings of the “vase” symbol. In contrast, Shirley Neilsen Blum (1992, pp. 44–48, 46) refers to a phrase of St. Amadeus of Lausanne to explain only one of the various Mariological symbolisms inherent in the metaphor of the “vase”, in addition to the fact that this holy bishop of Lausanne refers to the ray of light that passes through the glass without breaking it.

Pedro Berruguete (c. 1450–1503) stages *The Annunciation*, c. 1496–1500, from the Miraflores Charterhouse in Burgos (Figure 15) in a palace, framed by a doorway on whose jambs two of its sculptures represent Adam and Eve, alluding to the Original Sin that God the Son—whom Mary is conceiving as a man at that instant—comes to redeem. The angel Gabriel, clad in a luxurious cope, begins his announcement with the salutation inscribed on the phylactery that floats in front of him. Kneeling before a large prayer book, the Virgin, turning slightly towards the angel, expresses her unreserved obedience to the will of the Most High, opening her hands in a gesture similar to that of a priest officiating at Mass.



Figure 15. Pedro Berruguete, *The Annunciation*, c. 1496–1500. Miraflores Charterhouse, Burgos.

Now ignoring the meanings of several objects and characters—the prophets and the First Fathers sculpted on the jambs of the portal—, we are now interested in stressing the transparent glass vase that, with its lily stem, stands out prominently in the intermediate plane in the center of the scene. It seems reasonable to suppose that Berruguete has focused on this resplendent vase here for its essential Mariological meanings, in accordance with the patristic, theological, and liturgical testimonies on the metaphor of the “vase” as a symbol of the virginal mother of God, and in addition a sublime model to all virtues. Furthermore, it is strange that the commentators we know on this painting by Berruguete (García Felguera 1985; Nieto Alcaide and de Ayala 1990) say nothing about the doctrinal symbolism of that vase.

4. Conclusions

From the triple series of comparative, intertextual, inter-iconic and textual-iconic analyses, that we have done so far, we can infer the following conclusions:

1. For more than a millennium, many medieval Fathers and theologians of the Eastern and Western Churches agreed to interpret the metaphor of the “vessel” or “vase” (*vas*) as a symbol of the Virgin Mary in her virginal divine motherhood, and the exalted sublimity of her virtues and supernatural attributes. For all these writers, just as the sacred “vessels” or “vases” in the Bible—the vessel of manna, the Ark of the Covenant (containing the tables of Ten Commandments, the Aaron’s rod and the vessel of manna) or the golden candelabrum—contained something directly linked to God/Yahweh, so too Mary was, with even more reason, the sacred “vase” par excellence. In fact, while the biblical vases contained physical objects related to the deity (the tables of the law, the manna, the flowered rod of Aaron), the Virgin, on the other hand, contained in her womb (by conceiving, gestating, and giving birth to) God the Son himself when incarnating as a man.
2. Because of the virginal divine motherhood symbolized in the vase that contained and brought the flesh (*caro*) and the human nature to God the Son, many Fathers and theologians expanded the Mariological projection of this symbol, considering Mary as the “vase” that contains all virtues to the highest degree, especially chastity (virginity), and some exclusive supernatural privileges, such as her power of help and intercession in favor of Humanity.
3. Inspired by the unanimous patristic and theological tradition on the Mariological metaphor of the vase, countless medieval liturgical prayers and hymns repeatedly adopted the idea of Mary as a vase, in the double projection designed by the Fathers and theologians: as a vessel containing and giving flesh to the Son of God in his supernatural human conception/incarnation; and as a vessel that contains and preserves all virtues to the highest degree.
4. In addition, due to the imaginative freedom that poetic licenses allow, these liturgical hymns—following, moreover, the trajectory marked out by the Fathers and theologians—expanded the panoply of those metaphorical “vessels” or receptacles of the sacred, by adding other variably large containers, such as “ark of the covenant”, “golden vessel of manna”, “golden urn”, “golden candelabrum”, “ointment knob”, “box (or cell) of aromas”, “temple”, “king’s room”, “throne room”, or “triclinium of the Trinity”.
5. Based then on the firm tradition—consolidated by many Fathers and theologians, and by an innumerable *corpus* of liturgical hymns—that considered the Virgin Mary as a sacred “vase”, many artists who in the 14th and 15th centuries represented the episode of the Annunciation included almost always a “vase” or vessel in a prominent place of the scene.
6. In this regard, it is important to point out that those vases painted in the *Annunciations* bring together two very significant details. First, they almost always contain the usual stem of lilies, except in a few cases, such as in the analyzed *Annunciation Martelli* by Fra Filippo Lippi. And, since the flower of the lily (as we have shown in other articles) is a symbol of God the Son incarnate, while its stem is a symbol of Mary conceiving God the Son as a man, it seems evident that this “vase” assumes the same Mariological and Christological signs of the lily stem placed on it. For this reason, such vase also symbolizes the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and the supernatural human conception/incarnation of God the Son in the Virgin’s womb. The second noteworthy detail is that these painted “vases” in the *Annunciations* are almost always bulbous in shape, with a spheroidal belly and a long, narrow neck. To put it another way, they resemble an inverted human uterus, which reinforces the idea that they are symbols of Mary virginally conceiving the incarnate Son of God. Thus, the vase (the uterus), the stem (the Virgin conceiving and giving birth) and the flower of the lily (Christ) constitute, as a splendid poetic ensemble, a perfect metaphorical sequence of the virginal divine motherhood of Mary and the supernatural human conception/incarnation of God the Son.

7. We do not pretend to say that all medieval and Renaissance artists who represented these *Annunciations* had the necessary theological culture to be fully aware of the Christological and Mariological meanings inherent in the “vase” they were painting. As artists, they were required to know in depth the secrets of their job, without needing to be—except for some painters of high religious and humanistic culture, such as Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, Fra Carnevale, Fra Bartolomeo, and Lorenzo Monaco—experts on doctrinal issues or even classical culture. Faced with this clear aporia, two possible explanations stand out. In the best case, the artist (especially in commissions of great relevance and social prestige) could have had at his side a mentor, an intellectual author or iconographic programmer who dictated the guidelines for the characters, scenes, attitudes, attributes, objects (natural and symbolic) that the artist should include in the scene to be painted. The second possible explanation—perhaps the most common—is the fact that, when representing the theme of the Annunciation, the artist “copied”—in the sense of imitating with greater or lesser originality—the compositional-narrative structure consolidated as a model of this iconographic theme thanks to the solutions provided by some influential great artists. Naturally, the common artist could always “dress up” this conventional prototype by adding some variations or details of his own invention.
8. Whatever the doctrinal and humanistic culture of the different painters, it seems evident, in any case, that the masterminds of these *Annunciations* prominently placed a “vase”, or vessel (almost always with a stem of lilies on their scene) as a *visual metaphor* capable of fully illustrating the *textual metaphor* of the sacred “vase” with which many Church Fathers and theologians and innumerable medieval hymns symbolically designated Mary as the virginal mother of the incarnate Son of God, and as the exalted holder of the most sublime virtues and exclusive supernatural privileges.

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Notes

- ¹ Athanasius Alexandrinus. *Sermo de descriptione Deiparae*. PG 28, 955–58. PG refers to the collection of Greek Patrology [Migne \(1857–1867\)](#).
- ² Epiphanius Constantiensis. *Adversus Haereses, Liber III, Tomus II. Haeres 38*. PG 42, 707–8.
- ³ Epiphanius Constantiensis. *Adversus Haereses, Liber III, Tom. II. Haeres 38*. PG 42, 714–15.
- ⁴ Greek anonymous writer or St. Gregory Thaumaturgus. *Homilia II. In Annuntiationem sanctae Virginis Mariae*. PG 10, 1155–56.
- ⁵ Germanus Constantinopolitanus. *In Praesentationem SS. Deiparae. Sermo I*. PG 98, 307.
- ⁶ Germanus Constantinopolitanus. *In Annuntiationem SS. Deiparae*. PG 98, 322.
- ⁷ Joannis Damascenus. *Homilia II In Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*. PG 96, 690.
- ⁸ Joannis Damascenus. *Homilia I In Dormitionem B.V. Mariae*. PG 96, 695.
- ⁹ Josephus Hymnographus. *Mariale. Theotocia Ex Paracletica Graecorum*. PG 105, 1287.
- ¹⁰ “Figmentum figuli, super omnia vasa decorum, Atque creaturae fulgida massa novae. Candelabrum pulchrum, verbi capiendo lucernam, Quam formam sculpsit tam super astra faber, Ornans Jerusalem sanctam, speciosa venustas, A facie templi vas in honore Dei.” (Venantius Fortunatus. *Miscelanea. Liber VIII. Caput VII. In laudem sanctae Mariae Virginis et matris Domini*. PL 88, 281). PL refers to the collection of Latin Patrology [Migne \(1844–1864\)](#).
- ¹¹ “Et hujus certe virginitas semper incorrupta, semper integra, semper illaesa, semper inviolata. [...] Haec femina sanctificationis vas est, aeternitas virginitatis est, mater Dei est, sacrarium sancti Spiritus est, templum singulariter unicum factoris sui est.” (Ildefonsus Toletanus. *Liber de virginitate perpetua S. Mariae adversus tres infideles. Caput X*. PL 96, 95).
- ¹² “Tu aula universalis propitiationis, causa generalis reconciliationis, vas et templum vitae et salutis universorum, nimirum contraho merita tua, cum in me homunculo vili singulariter recenseo beneficia tua, quae mundus amans gaudet, gaudens clamat esse sua.” (Anselmus Cantuariensis. *Oratio LII Ad Sanctam Virginem Mariam. Cum meditatione et laude meritorum ejus*. PL 158, 954).
- ¹³ “Coelum coeli, domus Dei Vas misericordiae. Pronum vero tibi constat, Et omnino facile.” (Anselmus Cantuariensis. *Hymni et Psalterium de Sancta Virgine Maria. Hymnus I in laudem S. Deiparae*. PL 158, 1047).

- 14 “Libet, charissimi, in sancta solemnitate gaudiorum adhuc paulisper immorari, et de praefata conceptione aliquid quaerere; libet ipsum divinum agalma ipsum pretiosissimum, et sanctissimum vas, in quo Dei Verbum conceptum est, apostrophando interrogare.” (Amedeus Lausannensis. *Homilia III. De incarnatione Christi et Virginis conceptione de Spiritu Sancto*. PL 188, 1318).
- 15 Anthonius Patavinus. *Sermone per l’Annunciazione della Beata Vergine Maria*, I, 109–14. In (Nocilli 1995, p. 157).
- 16 “Hoc autem bene figuratum fuit Exodi ultimo in isto tabernaculo figurati, ubi dicitur Moysi: *Unges tabernaculum cum suis vasis*; et post hoc sequitur: *Postquam autem omni perfecta sunt, operuit nubes tabernaculum testimonii, et gloria Domini implevit illud*. Tabernaculum istud est Virgo Maria; vasa sunt receptacula virtutum; haec omnia Dei Filius unxit, quando eam sanctificans, implevit gratia; post etiam sanctificationem ipse eam operuit, qui eam obumbravit et adimplevit gloria, ut nihil remaneret, nec in anima, nec in carne, quod non esset Divinitatis gratia plenum.” (Bonaventura de Balneoregio. *Sermones de B. Virgine Maria*. *Sermo IV*, 1: Q 9, 672a).
- 17 “Ideo enim caro Virginis *vas purissimum* nuncupatur, quia in carne eius nec peccatum regnavit, nec caro spiritui rebellavit, nec caro spiritum retardavit; et ideo non tantum fuit pura, sed purissima.” (Bonaventura de Balneoregio. *Sermones de B. Virgine Maria*. *Sermo V*, 1: Q 9, 654a).
- 18 “Fuit autem puella regia *vas admirabile* ratione *materiae*, ratione *formae*, ratione *rei contentae*. Ratione *materiae* fuit vas mirabiliter *pretiosum*; ratione *formae* fuit vas mirabiliter *speciosum*; sed ratione *rei contentae* fuit vas mirabiliter *copiosum*.” (Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *Sermones de B. Virgine Maria*. *Sermo IV*, 1: Q 9, 714a).
- 19 This hymn is also included, with the title *Hymnus 8. Serum beatae Mariae V.*, in AHMA, 36, Blume, Dreves 19, 242.
- 20 This hymn is also included, with the title *Hymnus 524. Prosa de Beata Virgine*, in Mone, 1854, 309.
- 21 This hymn is also included, with the title *Hymnus 605, De sancta Maria*, in Mone, 1854, 424.
- 22 This hymn is also included in AHMA 10, 106.

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