

Face to Face with Mystery: Theological Perspectives behind the Painting of the Annunciation in the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Mdina; A Mystagogical Approach¹

The Masterpiece

Standing before the *Annunciation of the Virgin* (see illustration), titular Altarpiece of the Carmelite Church in Mdina (Malta), one could not help noticing that “the elements of *chiaroscuro* provide a three-dimensional perspective to the painting, inviting the person looking at it to participate in its contemplative dimension.”² The Carmelites friars commissioned this altarpiece, an outstanding work of “the finest and most talented Maltese painter of the late seventeenth century,”³ in 1677 for their newly built church and friary.⁴ Art critics agree in judging this huge canvas (316 x 266cm) as a “compositionally

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² Charlò Camilleri, *An Artistic Appraisal of the “Annunziata” Altarpieces in the Carmelite Churches of Rabat and Mdina*, unpublished MS in the author’s possession, 8.

³ Keith Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta* (Malta: Midsea, 2009), 207.

⁴ Archive of Carmelite Priory, Mdina, *Esito della fabbrica, 1674-1697*, fol. 39v.



well-devised”⁵ painting where the Late Baroque Maltese artist Stefano Erardi (1630-1716) showed “his ability in the organization of a large space.”⁶ Admiring a painting considered locally to be “one of the most powerful representations of the Annunciation scene,”⁷ one could not help posing the question: Is there something more to the painting than “painterly mastery ... solid brushwork ... outstanding freshness,”⁸ and the logical division into two tiers?⁹

In his *Letter to Artists* (1999), Pope John Paul II affirms the classical and biblical understanding of the nexus between the beautiful and the good. While keeping the moral and the artistic values as clearly distinct, he writes:

Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece. It is important to recognize the distinction, but also the connection, between these two aspects of human activity. The distinction is clear. It is one thing for human beings to be the authors of their own acts, with responsibility for their moral value; it is another to be an artist, able, that is, to respond to the demands of art and faithfully to accept art’s specific dictates. This is what makes the artist capable of producing objects, but it says nothing as yet of his moral character. We are speaking not of moulding oneself, of forming one’s own personality, but simply of actualizing one’s productive capacities, giving aesthetic form to ideas conceived in the mind. The distinction between the moral and artistic aspects is fundamental; but no less important is the connection between them. Each conditions the other in a profound way. In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are, and of how they are what they are. And there are endless examples of this in human history. In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also in some way reveals his own personality by means of it. For him art offers both a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for his spiritual growth. Through his works, the artist speaks to others and communicates with them. The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture.¹⁰

⁵ Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta*, 214.

⁶ Mario Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands 1400-1900* (Malta: Progress Press, 1987), 115.

⁷ Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta*, 218.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹ Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands*, 115.

¹⁰ “Lettre du Pape Jean-Paul II aux artistes,” *Acta Apostolice Sedis (AAS)* 91 (1999), 1157:2.

In admiring this painting we are stimulated to assimilate ourselves with the scene depicted, allowing it to speak to our minds and hearts enabling us to experience the mystery. The one who admires, unlike the activist whose aggressive action imposes itself upon others, gazes at somebody or something with appreciation, respect and openness.¹¹

This painting is not only the masterpiece of an artist. It is also a masterpiece in sacred art. So much so, that it comes very easy to refer to it, really and truly as an *icon* whose purpose is not simply to depict the story of the Annunciation as related by St Luke (Lk 1:26-38), but also to fulfill a liturgical function. Without necessarily going into detail, we can say that liturgy is that cultic space that penetrates the distance established by the passage of time, in such a way as to make actual to the present time the mysteries of salvation; even more so, those mysteries laid bare before us some two thousand years ago during the lifetime of Jesus Christ. And because Jesus Christ is true God, his life on earth and, consequently, his incarnation (what Erardi in fact depicts in this picture), have left an indelible mark in the history of humanity: God who enters history, to allow humanity to enter into God's life. "The Church's great liturgical tradition teaches us that fruitful participation in the liturgy requires that one be personally conformed to the mystery being celebrated, offering one's life to God in unity with the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the whole world."¹² Liturgy allows this mystery to occur throughout history. In this way, liturgical spaces, actions and the works reflecting the ability of the great masters, all satisfy this function. This is the very same function which Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI - who is concerned about the liturgical banality which has unfortunately been allowed to seep in and which is reflected in *kitsch* celebrations and paraphernalia - defines as the reality of cosmological transformation.¹³

¹¹ Benedict XVI, "La nobile forma," in *La nobile forma: Chiesa e artisti sulla via della bellezza*, ed. Pasquale Iacobone and Elio Guerriero (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana: 2009), 113-117.

¹² Benedict XVI, "Adhortatio Apostolica Postsynodalis 'Sacramentum caritatis,'" no.64, *AAS* 99 (2007): 152-153.

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000). Cardinal Ratzinger was himself influenced by Romano Guardini's vision as revealed in his actions and book *Vom Geist der Liturgie*, published in 1918, and which immediately became a bestseller both in Germany and worldwide (Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Crossroad, 1935). "He [Guardini] was a person who by his words and actions drew us into a world where the sacred became convincingly and literally tangible. His mere appearance radiated something for which I have no better word than *luminous*; in his presence one fell silent and became all attention. With him on the altar, the sacred table became the centre of the universe. And yet for us, we found the foothold that gave us the strength and courage to face, to endure and to resist a world in which the forces of evil, Satan and his demons,

The Approach

Intellectuals, academics and critics, are insistently telling us that “Christians have jettisoned basic, historic Christian beliefs. Not only does Christianity-lite fail to advance Christian beliefs and practices, but it has forgotten what they are!”¹⁴ Apart from faith illiteracy and an inability to appreciate basic Christian signs and symbols, contemporary Christianity risks becoming isolated, losing its capacity to be a catalyst of transformation.¹⁵ This present state of affairs provides an opportunity to reconsider the ancient pedagogical practice of mystagogy, concerned with presenting the meaning of the signs and their significance.¹⁶

It is within this context of a mystagogical contact with the sacred that enables the transformation of the heart, that I propose to approach Erardi’s *Annunciation* which forms part of the beautiful architectural ensemble of the Mdina Carmelite church. Ultimately, creating space for the process of interior transformation to occur, will help trigger a reform and renewal of the structures - communitarian, social and ecclesial - surrounding us.

were running rampant, in that small chapel in the presence of a man whose words and actions made truth appear to us as a physical presence.... The presence of Guardini at the altar and his words brought light even into the darkest moments of hopelessness and despair to all of them,” Heinz R. Kuehn, *The Essential Guardini: An Anthology of the Writings of Romano Guardini* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997), 8-9.

¹⁴ Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian: A Manifesto for Deepening Faith and Enriching Popular Culture in an Age of Christian-Lite* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2007), 42.

¹⁵ For a study on Christianity’s call to create and transform culture, see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008).

¹⁶ *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no.64. Mystagogy was traditionally and historically a formal period of great catechesis during paschaltide, wherein neophytes had to undergo the “mystagogical catechesis” that enabled them to embrace more fully the Christian way of life. Unfortunately, mystagogy seems to be the “weakest aspect of the present RCIA,” see United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States* (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), 57. *Sacramentum Caritatis* reappraises this ancient practice and after its publication various contributions on mystagogy in the context of spiritual theology have included: Hein Blommestijn, “Aspiring as a Mystagogic Journey of Prayer,” in *Seeing the Seeker: Explorations in the Discipline of Spirituality*, Studies in Spirituality Suppl. 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 449-561; Kick Bras, “The Minister as Mystagogue: A Contribution in a Recent Debate in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands,” in *ibid.*, 563-575; Fernando Millán Romeral, “Anámnesis y mistagogía sacramental: Una reflexión,” in *ibid.*, 621-635; Regina Bäumer and Michael Plattig, “Wachsamkeit und Aufmerksamkeit als mystagogische Grundhaltungen,” in *ibid.*, 673-680. In a way spiritual growth and maturity depend also on a mystagogical approach to faith and its symbols.

The Mystery of the Sphinx

Perhaps, a seemingly insignificant detail in the painting, will help us meander into a deep appreciation of the canvas itself and of the mystery portrayed therein. In the painting the Blessed Virgin kneels at a prie-dieu decorated with the mythological figure of the Sphinx. In the sixteenth century, Mannerism (it is worth remembering that Stefano Erardi started his career as a Mannerist artist) had created a renewed interest in this mythological figure, after many images of the Sphinx had been discovered, quite by accident, in the heart of Rome, precisely in Emperor Nero's *Domus Aurea*. Originally, the Sphinx, a creature that was half-woman and half-lioness, was represented as wearing a veil upon an uplifted head and with its body at rest, displaying a certain air of solemnity and calm. Famous examples are the Sphinxes painted by Raffaello between 1515-1520, for the portico of the Vatican palaces. It can be stated that this mysterious figure remained popular till the end of the nineteenth century. Here one can easily make the connection with the Sphinx at Giza, Egypt, going back around 5,000 years. In classical Greek mythology, the same mythological figure protected the city of Thebes. This particular Sphinx however had also the wings of an eagle.

A superficial glance at Erardi's work might lead us to conclude that the artist added this figure simply to adorn the prie-dieu. However, considering the way Erardi depicted the Sphinx, it seems that he wanted to convey a message related to the whole of the mystery that the painting evokes. That which cannot be visibly shown to us because of the physical limitations of the canvas, is brought together by Erardi, in the figure of the Sphinx. This allows us to make several analogies with Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Experts are of the idea that when a particular culture does not understand the meaning of the Sphinx, this probably means that that very same culture is going through some cultural crisis, and even more so, a crisis of thought, which ultimately leads to a state of decline or even worse to the threshold of a world-wide depression.¹⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that a handful of thinkers, great minds and critics still issue "alarming worst-case scenarios based on contemporary trends."¹⁸

As such, in order to understand what Erardi wishes to communicate to us, we need to let the Sphinx reveal the enigma surrounding its mysterious identity. Allowing it to be, for a moment, our mystagogue, the Sphinx will enable us to appreciate the mystery laid bare before us by Erardi. Actually, to take the Sphinx

¹⁷ For a detailed study on the Sphinx in history, see Romeo De Maio, *Cristo e la sfinge: La storia di un enigma* (Milano: Mondadori, 2001).

¹⁸ Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian*, xv.

as a mystagogue is not something new. In the apocryphal and gnostic writings known as *The Acts of Andrew and Matthew*, Jesus asks the Sphinx to bear witness before the high priests and the apostles that He is truly God.¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria (150-215) too, encourages Christians to understand the mystery of Christ through the figure of the Sphinx.²⁰ He writes that since “the doctrine respecting God is enigmatical and obscure ... we ought both to love and fear the

¹⁹ “It came to pass as we, the twelve disciples were going with our Lord into a temple of the gentiles, that He might make known to us the ignorance of the devil, that the chief priests, having beheld us following Jesus, said to us, ‘O wretches, why do you walk with him who says, I am the Son of God? Do you mean to say that God has a son? Which of you has ever at any time seen God associating with a woman? Is not this the son of Joseph the carpenter, and his mother is Mary, and his brothers James and Simon?’ And when we heard these words, our hearts were turned into weakness. And Jesus, having known that our hearts were giving way, took us into a desert place, and did great miracles before us, and displayed to us all His Godhead. And we spoke to the chief priests, saying, ‘Come ye also, and see for, behold, He has persuaded us.’ And the chief priests having come, went with us; and when we had gone into the temple of the gentiles, Jesus showed us the heaven, that we might know whether the things were true or not. And there went in along with us thirty men of the people, and four chief priests. And Jesus, having looked on the right hand and on the left of the temple, saw two sculptured sphinxes, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus having turned to us said, ‘Behold the sign of the cross; for these are like the cherubim and the seraphim which are in heaven.’ Then Jesus, having looked to the right, where the sphinx was, said to it, ‘I say unto thee, thou image of that which is in heaven, which the hands of craftsmen have sculptured, be separated from thy place, and come down, and answer and convince the chief priests, and show them whether I am God or man.’ And immediately at that very time the sphinx removed from its place, and having assumed a human voice, said, ‘O foolish sons of Israel, not only has the blinding of their own hearts not been enough for them, but they also wish others to be blind like themselves, saying that God is man, who in the beginning fashioned man, and put His breath into all, who gave motion to those things which moved not; He it is who called Abraham, who loved his son Isaac, who brought back his beloved Jacob into his land; He is the Judge of living and dead; He it is who prepareth great benefits for those who obey Him, and prepareth punishment for those who believe Him not. Heed not that I am an idol that can be handled; for I say unto you, that the sacred places of your synagogue are more excellent. For though we are stones, the priests have given us only the name of a god; and those priests who serve the temple purify themselves, being afraid of the demons: for if they have had intercourse with women, they purify themselves seven days, because of their fear; so that they do not come into the temple because of us, because of the name which they have given us, that we are a god. But you, if you have committed fornication, take up the law of God, and go into the synagogue of Cool, and purify, and read, and do not reverence the glorious words of God. Because of this, I say unto you, that the holy things purify your synagogues, so that they also become churches of His only begotten Son.’ The sphinx having said this, ceased speaking,” *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. and annotated by Montagu Rhoads James (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 520-521.

²⁰ De Maio, *Cristo e la sfinge*, 3-4.

Divine Being: to love Him as gentle and benign to the pious; to fear Him as inexorably just to the impious; for the Sphinx shows the image of a wild beast and of a man together.”²¹ As such, we can understand that for quite some time, this mythological figure has acted as guardian to the symbols representing Christ, to the extent that it even changed its body from that of a lioness to that of a fish,²² a Christian symbol associated with Christ and his identity in the acrostic: ἰχθύς (Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ - Iêsous Christos, Theou Huios, Sõtēr - Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour). This change is also rendered present to us by Erardi. It is as if the painter himself placed the figure of the Sphinx on the prie-dieu (conducive to prayerful admiration of the mysteries) so that it may help uncover the mystery.

First and foremost, the name Sphinx, derives from the Greek Σφιγξ which in its turn is derived from the verb σφιγγω which means “to choke” or “to suffocate,” inasmuch as this creature gobbles up whosoever fails to solve the enigma or riddle posed before entering the city of Thebes. In the Gospels, we often come across Jesus speaking to those around him in *riddles* or parables which are not immediately understood. Whosoever understands them is allowed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ Himself is an enigma. Before him, we have to decide whether to choose death or life: from the outset Mary herself was confused at the greeting of the archangel. St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) expounds this element in an extremely poetic and beautiful way in one of his homilies. Bernard reflects that humanity’s destiny hinges upon the Blessed Virgin’s decision on whether to give her consent. Erardi’s painting seems to portray this awaiting of expectation for Mary’s consent.

The movement portrayed in Erardi’s painting, together with the pathos exhibited in the facial expression of the figures indicate amazement and urgency as the whole of creation awaits for Mary’s decision.²³ Joseph too, confused as he would be by his wife presenting herself to him in a state of expectation, through no workings of his own, would have to decide whether to accept Mary’s pregnancy as the result of divine intervention, or whether to consider it as resulting of an act of adultery. His reputation would depend very much on the decision he takes, and this decision would also impact on the life of his wife and that of the new life she was carrying in her womb. Simeon’s declaration in the temple comes as no surprise: “This Child is set for the rise and the fall of many ... and to be a sign

²¹ Clement of Alexandria, “Stromata 5:5,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts et al., (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 2:452.

²² De Maio, *Cristo e la sfinge*, 3-4.

²³ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermones de tempore: De laudibus Virginis Matris,” in Jacques Paul Migne ed., *Patrologia Latina (PL)* (Paris: Garnier, 1862), 183: 75-76.

of contradiction ... and ... your own soul a sword shall pierce so as to uncover the hidden thoughts of many” (Lk 2:34-35). Jesus speaks of Himself as the stone that has been put aside by the builders only to become, in Paul’s words “the stumbling block” (1 Cor 1:23; 1 Pt 2:7-8). Finally, Jesus suffocated and choked in a whirlpool of fire the wily one who instigates us not to enter into the Kingdom of God.

In Egypt, during the New Kingdom (1570-1070 BC), the mythological figure of the Sphinx was known by the name of *Hor-em-akhet* meaning “The Dawn Horus.” Christ is the “dawn,” “the sun rising from upon high,” the East towards which we look and towards which we are moving. Facing *ad orientem* occurred mostly in the Liturgy, during the Eucharistic prayer, when the priest and the congregation would turn their faces towards Christ coming from on high.

Among other things, it is said that Horus, the god protector of Egypt, was born of the female deity Isis when the latter became pregnant through the workings of the Divine Fire. When Isis became pregnant, she escaped to the fringes of the Nile, in that part which flowed into the Mediterranean basin, in order to escape from her brother Set who wanted to get hold of the child and kill it. We come across a similar story in the Book of Revelation, where the pregnant woman flees into the desert to escape from the dragon who wanted to get hold of her child and kill it as soon as it was born. The earth comes to the woman’s aid by swallowing up the river of water that the dragon spewed out of its mouth in the desert, and thus hindered the dragon from destroying the woman and her child. The woman in Revelation is an image of the Church which begets and gives birth to several children for God in Christ, in the midst of so much devastation caused by the enemy. Later the same text was given a Marian interpretation: the Virgin Mary gives birth to the Son of God who destroys Evil.

Finally, in mythology, Oedipus is the only one to defeat the Sphinx which, in defeat, falls down and is smashed to pieces. Consequently, Oedipus becomes the archetype of transition that sees the old traditions and beliefs giving way to the new. Jesus too brought about that type of change: “The old has passed because the new has taken its place” (2 Cor 5:17).

The Temple Curtain and the Holy of Holies

The Protoevangelium of James contributes further flavour to the Annunciation event by means of diverse literary symbols which have influenced popular Christian art and imagination. Although first impressions seem to indicate that Erardi did not include any elements from the Protoevangelium, it should not be too difficult to become aware that he gave a theological interpretation to a symbolic detail mentioned by James.

In the Protoevangelium, it is related that Mary went to fetch water from the spring, and this is where the Archangel Gabriel goes to meet her. She is afraid. In fact, James relates that she gave her back to the angel and ran off back home. From the fifteenth century onwards, the scene narrating the Annunciation presents Mary in the act of receiving the angel's message at home. During that century, we find such works as the *De Incarnatione Verbi Sermo* and the *Vida de Cristo*, both by Fra Eximenis, which speak of the room in which the Annunciation of the Lord took place.²⁴ In that room, Mary is seated and carries on "weaving the temple curtain" referred to by James as the "the true purple."²⁵ Just before this, the Protoevangelium specifies that the High Priest had chosen a number of virgins to weave the various parts of the Temple curtain which, as determined in the Book of Exodus, was composed of golden, scarlet, blue and violet (purple/crimson) coloured material. The part which was assigned by lot to the Virgin Mary was the weaving of the scarlet and purple sections. The Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37-100), indicates that this curtain measured sixty by twenty cubits.²⁶ It is said

²⁴ Mary Faith Mitchel Grizzard, *Bernardo Martorell: Fifteenth-Century Catalan Artist* (New York: Garland, 1978), 15.

²⁵ "And there was a council of the priests, saying: Let us make a veil for the temple of the Lord. And the priest said: 'Call to me the undefiled virgins of the family of David.' And the officers went away, and sought, and found seven virgins. And the priest remembered the child Mary, that she was of the family of David, and undefiled before God. And the officers went away and brought her. And they brought them into the temple of the Lord. And the priest said: 'Choose for me by lot who shall spin the gold, and the white, and the fine linen, and the silk, and the blue, and the scarlet, and the true purple.' And the true purple and the scarlet fell to the lot of Mary, and she took them, and went away to her house. And at that time Zacharias was dumb, and Samuel was in his place until the time that Zacharias spake. And Mary took the scarlet, and span it. And she took the pitcher, and went out to fill it with water. And, behold, a voice saying: 'Hail, thou who hast received grace; the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women!' And she looked round, on the right hand and on the left, to see whence this voice came. And she went away, trembling, to her house, and put down the pitcher; and taking the purple, she sat down on her seat, and drew it out. And, behold, an angel of the Lord stood before her, saying, 'Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all, and thou shalt conceive, according to His word.' And she hearing, reasoned with herself, saying, 'Shall I conceive by the Lord, the living God? and shall I bring forth as every woman brings forth?' And the angel of the Lord said, 'Not so, Mary; for the power of the Lord shall overshadow thee: wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Most High. And thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.' And Mary said, 'Behold, the servant of the Lord before His face: let it be unto me according to thy word.'" "Protoevangelium," 10:1-11.2, in *I vangeli apocrifi*, trans. and ed. Armand Puig i Tàrrach and Claudio Gianotto (Cinisello Balsamo, Milano: San Paolo, 2010), 1:165-166.

²⁶ Flavius Josephus, "Antiquitates Iudaicae," 15:11,3; "Bellum Iudaicarum," 5:5, 4-5, in *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 492-524, 843-880.

that it was so heavy that even when pulled by a team of horses it could not be drawn open; a detail which recalls the words of the Psalmist as he intones the exodus of Israel from the bondage of Egypt: “Some trust in chariots and some in horses: but we will trust in the glory of the Lord” (Ps 20:8). Significantly, it is this power or glory of God that draws open this curtain, which is depicted by Erardi in the main altar piece of the Carmelite friary church at Mdina.

In the Bible, the curtain or veil separated the Holy of Holies (the dwelling place of God upon this earth) from the rest of the temple where people congregated in prayer. Its purpose was to show that God the Holy One, three times holy, who before the weighty presence of his glory, the cherubim and seraphim sing forever: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, the Heavens and the earth are full of your Glory,” does not mingle with humankind “dust of the earth,” full of weakness, sin and misery.²⁷ It was exclusively the High Priest who, once a year entered the Holy of Holies and placed himself before God’s presence so as to offer sacrifice for the remission of his sins and of those of his people (Ex 30:10; Lv 16). The Letter to the Hebrews states that Christ is truly the high priest who entered, once and for all, inside the sanctuary, not the one built by human hands, in order to offer himself to God for us and for our salvation (Heb 9:7).

Contemplating Erardi’s painting, one can entertain the following theological and liturgical thought: Mary inside her home, is not seated weaving the curtain of the Temple of Jerusalem, but is kneeling at the prie-dieu with the curtain behind her separating her from the rest of the scenario, and which from up on high is rent wide open by the glory of God, because the high priest of the faith we profess has entered inside; Our Lord Jesus Christ, who through the Incarnation, humbled himself totally, becoming one of us; the sole mediator between us and the Father. Stefano Erardi clearly portrays this in the painting foreboding the tearing of the temple veil on the day Jesus died (Mt 27:50-51).

This painting also depicts Mary as the Temple of God. In the Book of Revelation, we read: “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people” (Rev 21:3). This implicitly connects the mystery of the Incarnation with the sacrifice on Mount Calvary which is celebrated upon the altar underneath the Erardi painting. By his incarnation and death, Christ brought down the wall which separated us from God. Erardi, thus, places before us the mystery of God’s glory, which irrupts into the history of a humanity thirsting for freedom: “Heavens, pour out from upon high without delay, so the clouds may sprinkle justice” (Is 45:8). This is what Isaiah,

²⁷ Cf. Is 59:1-2.

the prophet of Messianic hope, sings, as the Church also does during Advent using those very same words.²⁸

The Garden Enclosed

The theme of Mary as Holy of Holies, namely, the dwelling place of the Lord among humankind, and in which no one save the high priest entered, is emphasized, in the first place, by the balustrade in the background of the painting and which causes the onlooker to cast a glance on the landscape beyond, replete with gardens, with a church at the far back to one side, and a tower or fortress towards the middle. Secondly, it is emphasized by the dark surroundings, created by a tenebrous cloud, that fills the room and covers the Blessed Virgin. One is led to imagine oneself as being inside a womb which expectantly awaits fecundation in order to give life. At this stage the famous painting *El Entierro del Conde de Orgaz* (*The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*) comes to mind, wherein the artist El Greco (1541-1614) fashions a womb made out of clouds from which the soul of the count is born to Heaven. Here, standing in front of the Annunciation painting, we are drawn by the clouds into the womb within which a new life has started.

In the context of the oval interior of the Carmelite church within a square-shape building, that geometrically harkens to both the divine and the human realms - to eternity without beginning nor end irrupting in time - we are invited to carry within ourselves the very same God, like Mary.²⁹ Whoever enters here imagines to be entering Mary's womb, which in the painting before us opens up where God is irrupting into human history. Whosoever enters in the church turns into a womb which receives the life of God. Is not this what happens during the Eucharistic liturgy? Like Mary, we receive Christ within us through the words of scripture and we allow Him to be enfleshed within us upon receiving Holy Communion. This sign is further pronounced when the Eucharist is celebrated upon the old original altar of this church, with everybody, priest included, facing God *ad orientem*. The *ad orientem* position detaches us from focusing and glaring at each other's faces, to make us aware that we are a people exposed to a God who is eager to penetrate into our lives.

Within this scenario, it would seem that Erardi goes on to represent Mary as the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden referred to in the Song of Songs. As the bridegroom revels at the sight of his bride, he is lost in her beauty and

²⁸ The Carmelites used to proclaim this verse in their Annunciation liturgy.

²⁹ Cf. Krystle Farrugia, *The Carmelite Church, Mdina: History, Architecture and Works of Art* (BA (Hons.) diss. University of Malta, 2008), 28.

compares her to a “well-enclosed garden” (Sg 4:12). In the Christian tradition, the bridegroom is Christ, and Mary, the archetype of the Church and of every soul, is his bride. As we read in the Song of Solomon, the bridegroom and the bride are eager to consummate their love. So too, in Mary, by means of a mystical marriage, the union of love between God and humanity is consummated. In this mystical marriage, the nature of God becomes one with the nature of humankind within the womb of Mary, in such a way that a new life is created in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God enfleshed in Mary. Mary is the enclosed garden wherein nobody is allowed save the King of Glory. In days of yore, gardens were enclosed spaces protected by a boundary wall allowing nobody in, save the king, or the owner. In Genesis, we read that God planted a garden in Eden so as to go there and enjoy “the cool of the day” (Gn 2:8; 3:8). Only after the fall was this garden closed to humanity to preserve it from destruction. The image of the Virgin Mary as an enclosed garden is a portrayal of her being preserved by God from the corruption of sin

The practical and protective aim of the boundary wall has also been given a symbolic meaning. In Jewish tradition, the garden represents Israel, separated from the rest of the nations to be the people chosen by God. In Christian tradition, the garden represents the Church, and every single soul enamoured with God. It also represents and symbolizes the Virgin Mary who alone is in a position to proclaim that she belongs entirely to God. No one has ever penetrated the walls of this garden except God. Mary’s virginity, which in the painting is represented by the lily in the angel’s hand, actually implies this theological reality, which is Mary’s belonging completely to God. It must be said that virginity, in Christian thought is not so much opposed to marriage. Indeed, it is to be considered as the condition *par excellence*, that actually leads to it. St Fulbert of Chartres (ob.1028), to quote one example, says that Mary as virgin is “a lily among thorns, protected from all blotches of the body and soul, because she had to be the one to carry inside of her the Knowledge of God.”³⁰

Rupert of Deutz (1075-1129) in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, states the following regarding Mary as the new garden of God, compared to the Garden of Eden:

Gaze upon the new garden, the new plants sowed by the hand of God, who planted the garden of old. Sacred Scriptures read as follows: “The Lord our God planted a wonderful garden from the very beginning, and placed Man, His own

³⁰ Mirella Levi D’Ancona, *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (New York: College Art Association of America in conjunction with The Art Bulletin, 1957), 54.

creation, inside it. And the Lord caused every tree to grow from the soil, and they were beautiful to behold and sweet to the taste; and in the middle of the garden He placed the tree of life and the tree of knowledge that helped distinguish right from wrong. And from the place of sweetness, there sprung a fountain of water, which was divided into four sources, which irrigated the garden.” This is the garden of old, the heaven of the skies. Both were planted by the same Lord our God, the only One. In the garden of old, He placed man, His own creation, and in this one he fashioned Man, who at the beginning, was God alongside Him.³¹

Mary is this garden which God has fashioned and with which God is extremely pleased. In this, his piece of work, so to say, God outdoes himself. The power of the Most High comes upon this Virgin from Nazareth so that the Incarnation may take place. The glory of God, bursting with light from heaven envelops Mary and casts its shadow upon her. In a piece of writing dating back to the third or fourth century, and entitled *The Gospel of the Birth of Mary*, we read the following; “As the angel entered, he filled the room, where Mary was, with a bright light,” and hailed her with the words from the Gospel. “The Virgin,” this apocryphal writer continues, “who was already accustomed to the faces of angels, and who was also used to this bright light from up above, was neither afraid nor terrified at the appearance of the angel, and was not in awe of the bright rays of light. She was, however, confused by what he told her.”³²

It is not easy to decide upon which moment of the story as recounted by Luke, Erardi decided to immortalize in his painting. It seems that his great talent allowed the artist to include in his mystical and theological rendering, all of this mystery in its entire dimensions. Really and truly, this is not surprising, because prior to the reforms of Vatican Council II, the Carmelite liturgy for the 25 March, used to celebrate the entirety of the mystery in all its nuances. In this liturgy, we find references to fruitfulness, the garden and Mary’s perpetual virginity in the responses and the nocturnes taken from Isaiah and St Ambrose,

³¹ “Ecce novus paradisis, novæ plantationes, quas plantavit unus idemque antiqui paradisi plantator Dominus Deus. ‘Plantaverat autem Dominus Deus,’ ait Scriptura, ‘paradisum voluptatis a principio, in quo posuit hominem quem formaverat. Produxitque Dominus Deus de homo omne lignum pulchrum visu, et ad vescendum suave: lignum etiam vitæ in medio paradisi, lignumque scientiæ boni et mali. Et fluvius egrediebatur de loco voluptatis ad irrigandum paradisis, qui inde dividitur in quatuor capita (Gn 11).’ Ille est paradisis antiquus, paradisis terrenus; iste est paradisis novus, paradisis coelestis. Utriusque plantator est unus idemque Dominus Deus. In illu posuit ‘hominem quem formaverat,’ in isto formavit hominem qui apud ipsum in principio erat.” Rupert of Deutz, “In Cantica Cantorum: De incarnatione Domini commentariorum,” in *PL* 168:895.

³² “The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, 9, 8:386-387.

together with the antiphons taken from or inspired by the Song of Songs and the Gospels.³³

Erardi's painting of the Annunciation is in line with an Italian artistic tradition, which originated from a devotional book of miniatures entitled *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, attributed to St Bonaventure, where the Angel Gabriel is represented for the first time as kneeling on the left hand side of the beholder in front of Our Lady as he conveys God's message.³⁴ It is worth noting here, that the tendency to paint Gabriel to the left of the picture (from the point of view of the beholder) started in the sixth and seventh centuries. There have been those who have speculated that this mode of representation derived from the European manner of leafing through a book when it is being read: that is to say, from right to left. In the case of the above mentioned miniatures, the decision to place Gabriel there, was mainly the result of an attempt to produce a more harmonious perspective.³⁵ Whatever the case, Gabriel adores the mystery unfolding in Mary's womb, while he points towards the Holy Spirit and the glory of God: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Lk 1:35).

Mary is also on her knees at the prie-dieu with the open book in her hands; she, who is acknowledged by the Protoevangelium of James as the daughter of Kings, is the wise woman who builds her house on rock because she listens and ponders upon the Word of God (see: Lk 1:45; Lk 2:19; Lk 2:51). In her innermost being, she ponders about what she has just heard and accepts that this Word be made flesh inside of her. Mary is God's temple which is built upon his immovable word. Erardi refrains from presenting us with a passive Mary. On the contrary, he depicts for us a woman in her prime, who decides in favour of receiving God's proposition as presented by the Angel. From a woman who gives her back to this stranger who approached her, as recorded in the Protoevangelium of James, Mary becomes the person who determinedly turns towards the angel, faces him and pronounces the long-awaited words: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, if only what you tell me could be fulfilled in me" (see Lk 1:37).

³³ "Die xxv Martii: Annuntiationis B.M.V.," in Psalterium, 590, see the *capitulum* of the first vespers, the third and eighth nocturnes, the *capitulum* of None, and the Magnificat antiphon in the second vespers.

³⁴ Émile Mâle, *Religious Art: From the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 102.

³⁵ Don Denny, *The Annunciation from the Right from Early Christian Times to the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1977), 1, 8-15.

In the scenes of the Annunciation going back to the ninth century, Mary is depicted as holding the scriptures. This shows that she was to be counted among the wise rather than among the foolish. Although the pages which are portrayed in the painting do not show any written text upon them, one recalls Isaiah's prophecy: "Behold, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel, which in our language means God is with us" (Is 7:14). This detail is included in art from the thirteenth century onwards.³⁶ For the Carmelite friars, who regularly assemble inside the choir with sacred texts in hand to praise God with his own word, while meditating upon it, this detail depicting Mary holding the book, adds wealth to the overall meaning: As Christ entered Mary and filled her with life, may He come into us too, and take us out of the deserts we find ourselves in to lead us to a new life.

Stefano Erardi invites the beholder to interact with this painting: primarily, to admire a masterpiece that says much about the artistic skills of its painter, and also to discover a whole world of signs and symbols that awaken in us a deep spiritual longing, so long as we let the painting speak to our hearts to lead us "out of shadows and symbols unto Truth."³⁷

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³⁶ Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 16.

³⁷ "Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem," epitaph on Cardinal John Henry Newman's memorial stone.