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The Priesthood of the Virgin Mary as an Image-Paradigm of Christian Visual Culture

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The paper discusses the crucial significance of the theme of the Priesthood of the Virgin Mary for the development of Byzantine iconography, and the Christian visual culture in general. The Priesthood of the Virgin Mary has, since the late Middle Ages, become a very popular topic in Roman Catholic theology, with influence also on the iconography of the Latin West. In Byzantine theology this theme has never been articulated as doctrine, whether positively or negatively. However, in Eastern Christian homiletics and hymnography the notion and metaphor of the Virgin's priesthood is easily perceived. Some church fathers compared the Virgin with the Priest and at the same time with the Altar Table, on which "she has offered to us Christ as Heavenly Bread for the redemption of sins". In the author's view, through the notion of the Priesthood of the Virgin only, as present in the minds of iconographers, we are able to understand the symbolic meaning of several pictorial motifs which have remained unexplained.

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The theme of the Priesthood of the Virgin Mary is simultaneously both obvious and unexpected.¹ It is obvious because the connection between the Virgin, the Church and liturgy requires no particular proof, it has been addressed in scholarly literature for a long time. It is unexpected because in Orthodox theology there is no formally accepted theme of the priesthood of the Virgin, this subject is not analyzed at all - neither in a positive, nor in a critical way. For instance, it is not mentioned in any polemics against Catholic theology where the theme of the Priesthood of the Virgin is clearly articulated. They have been working it out in a detailed way since the 11th century; it was of special importance in the 17th century and it is still the subject of active discussion nowadays; this situation is (stands) in strict contrast to the Orthodox tradition.² In an article focused primarily on Byzantine iconography, there is no chance of any special attention being paid to Catholic views on the priesthood of the Virgin. There is a significant volume of literature on this theme: suffice it to recall the fundamental works by Rene Laurentin.³ Latin theological ideas can be illustrated with some visual examples.

An image of the Virgin Orans created in 1112 (fig. 1) for the altar apse of the main cathedral in Ravenna is characteristic (it was taken from the wall during the reconstruction of the basilica, and is now in the Archiepiscopal Museum). The most interesting iconographic detail of this image is the presence of two bands: one is short, white and fringed, the other is golden with precious stones, long and narrow, coming down almost to the hem, like an *orarion*. It is on the left shoulder, under the *maphorion*. Nikodim P. Kondakov long ago emphasized the liturgical sense of the two bands, clearly associated with a number of well-known liturgical vestments (*epitrachilion, orarion, epigonation*), but not coinciding with any of them exactly.⁴ Based on this detail, Kondakov classified that image as the type of the Virgin Deaconess (a variant of the Orans). The presence of the special type of deaconess was not accepted by other scholars, however, an idea of the priesthood of the Virgin is quite clearly represented in the Ravenna mosaic.

Moreover, it was not specifically a Western one. There are some early Byzantine examples of the same motifs, for instance, in the 6th-century mosaics of the basilica of Euphrasius in Poreč, in the images of the Virgin in the altar apse (fig. 2) and in the scene *The Meeting of Mary and Elisabeth*, where white bands with a cross and fringe may be seen under the coats.⁵

The liturgical bands are added to the gesture of Orans, which is interpreted in iconographic studies as a liturgical one. It received its main symbolic meaning before the epoch of Constantine the Great. It can be traced back to an important Judaic service - the daily offering of the *Evening Sacrifice* in the Jerusalem Temple, the Old Testament prototype of the Eucharist. The church fathers established a symbolical link to the gestures of clergymen. John Chrysostom says in the homily on Psalm 140: "My prayer is rising up as incense before You; I am raising my hands as the Evening Sacrifice".⁶ This gesture of the Virgin could provide liturgical associations and be compared with the gesture of intense prayer in important moments of the service.

The iconographic context is quite important for a proper understanding of an image. In the iconographic program of Ravenna Cathedral, before its rebuilding in the eighteenth century, there was another image paired with that of the Virgin Orans - the one of St John the Baptist, which was located on the other side of the central window of the apse. According to an early Christian ecclesiological conception, St John the Baptist represented the Old Testament Church, whereas the Virgin Orans symbolized the New Testament Church. The liturgical bands, indicating the priesthood of the Virgin, were added to the more important image of the Virgin Ecclesia. This iconographic detail fits well into the early theological tradition (up to the 12th century) which interpreted the priesthood of the Virgin in a metaphorical and rhetorical way rather than in a descriptive or dogmatic one. The situation changed by the 15th century, when a special concept of the "Virgin as Priest" developed in French theology; it made possible the appearance of paintings such as a work by the Master of Amiens (1437) with the characteristic name of *Le Sacerdoce de la Vierge* (the Priesthood of the Virgin), now in the Louvre (fig. 3).⁷ In the sanctuary before the altar table the bare-headed Virgin is represented in the garments of the Old Testament high priest, with a typical breast-plate lying over the *ephod* and decorated with twelve precious stones with the names of the Twelve tribes of Israel. Below, one may see the Christ Child, also in ecclesiastical vestments. He is putting one hand into Mary's palm and pulling her vestment with the other hand, as if asking his Mother to take off the high priest's robe and give it to Him. Behind Christ there are two angels holding the pope's tiara and a pastor's golden cross-staff - the insignia of the high priest. The theological essence of the scene is the idea of the Transition of the Old Testament Priesthood, inherited through the Virgin, to Christ who - as the High Priest of the New Church - began a new and supreme service. The theme of the priesthood of the Virgin is embodied with documentary obviousness and painted in many details.⁸ We should note that such concreteness confused some Catholic theologians who opposed so literal an interpretation of the concept of the "Virgin as Priest", leading to an irresolvable contradiction to the exclusively male right to the priesthood. Discussions were so fierce, that in 1916, the Vatican published a special decree prohibiting images of the Virgin in liturgical vestments.

If the Catholic tradition is soundly articulated, Byzantine ideas of the priesthood of the Theotokos were never the focus of particular research. We do not know of any example of a systematic theological exposition of the theme. In the works of the Church fathers it is dissolved into more general considerations of the Virgin as the Church. But in homiletics and hymnography, especially in the post-iconoclastic period, there are unambiguous statements on the priesthood of the Virgin. The most significant text is in a homily by St Epiphany of Cyprus (died 680): "Oh, the Virgin, awe-inspiring basement of the Church, great mystery; they call the Virgin priest and at the same time altar, meal-bearing (literally *Trapezoforosa*), who has brought us Christ - heavenly bread for the expiation of our sins"⁹. This text, known in several manuscripts of the 8th-11th centuries, keeps in all variants the definition of the Virgin: "priest and at the same time altar", providing a meaning of great importance in the Byzantine tradition. In some texts the Virgin is unambiguously honoured as the High Priest. So, Patriarch Tarasius (died 806) called the Virgin "the greatest minister among high priests".¹⁰ Such examples may be multiplied. References to

the theme of the priesthood of the Virgin may be found in the works of St Andrew of Crete, St John Damascene and St Theodore the Studite, George of Nicomedia (died 860) and James Kokkinobaphos (11th century).¹¹

It is significant that this theme is developing at the time when there was a special rank of deaconesses.¹² According to the Rule, at the moment of ordination of a deaconess, a deacon's *orarion* is placed on her shoulders. The rite included communion at the altar and the setting of a chalice on the altar-table by the hands of the newly consecrated woman,¹³ signifying the admission of selected women to the highest sacraments.¹⁴ In this ecclesiastical and liturgical context the theme of the priesthood of the Virgin was especially significant, because it apparently consecrated existing practice.¹⁵ An additional connection between the priesthood of the Virgin and the rank of deaconesses was a well-known story of the Virgin Mary who served in the Old Testament Temple in her childhood. The presence of the young Virgin at the altar, and the mystical feeding of her by an angel there, were recalled by numerous images of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. In early Byzantine theology, the Presentation of the Virgin Mary was interpreted as a prologue to the Presentation of Christ in the Temple - the bringing of the Christ Child to the Temple as the future Sacrifice and, at the same time, as High Priest. Through the comparison of two subjects, both in written texts and in iconography, the idea of the succession of services of the Virgin and Christ is emphasized.

The theme of the priesthood of the Virgin is articulated not only in high rhetoric but also in widespread *Lives of saints*. So, in the Tale of the wonder-working icon of Our Lady in the Athonite monastery of Zograf there is a story about a vision of Cosmas of Zograf, dating, according to tradition, to the end of the 13th century. The monk Cosmas saw in the monastery church "a wife of royal beauty and majesty, who makes all the arrangements by herself at the church service".¹⁶ In this image of the officiating wife he recognized the Virgin who, in this fashion, established her supreme rights even in the liturgical sphere over Mount Athos which did not accept any females at all. How widespread such ideas were is indicated by the 17th-century Russian Tale of the icon of the Hodegetria Paletskaya. A certain Catherine also in a vision saw "a woman decorated with light, and a great light was shining from her robes. And her vestments were purple and golden and covered with crosses everywhere, and there was a certain virgin by her in a robe like a deacon's alb".¹⁷ Thus, the Virgin appeared as an archpriest accompanied by a deacon. These examples reveal that the theme of the priesthood of the Virgin Mary in the Eastern Christian world was not merely known, but was an important and deeply rooted part of the spiritual tradition, although it was not formally recognized.

The Virgin in the Deesis

A discussion of the Priesthood of the Virgin in Byzantine iconography might begin with the most general theme of the Deesis. There is a significant amount of scholarly literature on the symbolism of the Deesis.¹⁸ Beside the core idea of the prayer for Salvation, there were theophanic, eschatological and liturgical aspects. Christ in the centre of the composition is conceived simultaneously as the image of the Heavenly Ruler and the Redemptive Sacrifice, the source of which may be found in the intercession prayer of the Eucharistic canon and in the rite of the preparation of the holy gifts linked to it.

There is, however, another important symbolical aspect of the Deesis theme - the idea of the priesthood of Christ Himself, as well as the related liturgical meaning of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist co-officiating with Him. The origin of the theme may be traced back to quite early monuments. Let's turn to a unique Deesis from the church of Panagia Drosiani on Naxos Island, which has not been yet considered in the history of the Deesis¹⁹ (figs. 4, 5). These wall-paintings provide us with an iconographic program of the period before the Iconoclasm, unique in its completeness, of provincial production but, obviously, linked to prototypes of the capital. According to epigraphic studies of the donor's inscription, the wall-painting may be dated to the first reign of Justinian II (685-695), which accords perfectly to the style of the frescoes, their iconography and other data.²⁰

The Deesis is located in the lower register of the northern apse of the church which has three apses. In the center there is a standing Christ with a special hairstyle (crown-shaped) and a short beard, in the Christ the Priest type.²¹ To the right of Christ there is the Virgin (*HAGIA MARIA*) bowing in a gesture of prayer to Christ and behind her there is King Solomon (*O AGIOS SOLOMON*) with a halo, holding a cross in his right hand. The images to the left of Christ are even more unusual. The first is the Personification of Ecclesia, according to iconographic tradition, with a halo, in a crown and in precious royal vestments. Behind her, copying the gesture both of the Virgin and Ecclesia exactly, there is John the Baptist (*IOANNIS*). Such a declarative comparison of the Virgin and the Church (*Ecclesia*) beside Christ the Priest evidently reveals the theme of the priesthood and liturgical celebration. The Virgin and the Ecclesia offer Christ as Sacrifice and, at the same time, they are co-officiating with the supreme high-priest in His timeless, heavenly, liturgical celebration. The location just behind Ecclesia emphasizes the priestly meaning of the image of St John the Baptist, which was described in early Byzantine theology in a detailed way: John, son of the Jerusalem priest Zechariah, finished the tradition of the Old Testament priesthood and passed it to the new high-priest at the moment of Epiphany.²²

The Virgin and St John the Baptist personify the New Testament and the Old Testament clergy, together with Christ they construct an image of the timeless liturgical celebration and the Universal Church. The image of Ecclesia was of principal significance because it represented the theme of the priesthood initially included in the Deesis. A rejection of that image in the post-iconoclastic tradition made the understanding this symbolic aspect of the Deesis iconography difficult for scholars. The very gesture of outstretched and lowered arms can be interpreted both as a gesture of prayer or as a gesture of offering, which unites the Virgin, Ecclesia and St John the Baptist. Conversely, King Solomon, who doesn't take part in the liturgical celebration, is depicted strictly frontally. The meaning of the creation of such an image of the Virgin may also be interpreted drawing on early Byzantine homiletics, where the words by Solomon about "Wisdom who had built her House", were connected to the Virgin. No less important was the next verse of the same chapter (Prov 9:1-2) on Wisdom: "she hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table" - those words were interpreted as a symbolical notion of the sacrifice and the priesthood of the Virgin.

The sources of the theme of the priesthood of the Virgin in the Deesis may be found in the text of the liturgy, it seems, or more precisely in the prayer of the Proskomidia (the rite of the preparation of holy gifts) at the moment of setting the Virgin's bread next to the Lamb host on the paten. The text is known in ancient Byzantine ceremonials and has survived in modern service-books: "the Priest taking the second host says: in the honour and memory of the arch-blessed Our Lady and Eternally Virgin Mary, through Her prayers let You, Our Lord, accept this sacrifice to Your arch-heavenly altar". This liturgical text expresses rather clearly the symbolical meaning of the rite: the Virgin host is set on the paten because, thanks to the prayers of the Virgin, the earthly sacrifice becomes a reality of the heavenly service; in other words, they talk about the timeless officiating of the Virgin who united earthly and heavenly altars. In this context, the very gesture of the Deesis may be interpreted not just as a gesture of prayer, but as a liturgical gesture related to the Sacrifice. A similar meaning was embodied in the gesture of St John the Baptist, the host of whom was also set on the paten beside the Lamb (fig. 6). We have all grounds to consider that there was a symbolical tie between the liturgical arrangement of the particles on the paten and the iconography of the Deesis.²³

This tie has become obvious from the moment of creation of the iconographic variant of *At Thy right hand stood the Queen*, widespread in the East Christian world since the fourteenth century, where Christ is represented literally in the vestments of a Patriarch (fig. 7). From Byzantine times till nowadays, a priest setting the Virgin host near the Lamb, just after the mentioning of the heavenly altar, pronounces a paraphrase from Psalm 44:10 (45:10 in the Western tradition): "At Thy right hand stood the Queen in gold of Ophir".

That context appeared also in the iconography of Sophia the Wisdom of God, which took shape in the 15th century; in some variants we can see the Deesis type of the image of the Virgin with a sphere with the Child offered as Sacrifice in Her hands (fig. 8). There are some rare representations in which the concept of the priesthood

of the Virgin Mary was expressed without any ambiguity. In a scene from the Akathistos cycle on the margins of the early fifteenth century Russian icon, the Virgin appears behind the altar table with the image of the Christ Child on a paten, she acts like a priest celebrating the liturgy (fig. 9).

All these pictorial motifs suggest that the idea of the priesthood of the Virgin did exist in the minds of icon-painters determining or significantly amplifying the symbolic meaning of a number of iconographic patterns.

Let us observe some of them.

Vestments of the Officiating Virgin and Child

An important feature of numerous icons of Our Lady with the Child is the strange vestment of Christ. It differs radically from the traditional tunic and *himation*. The Child seems to be turned into a cloth or a piece of tissue, draping usually covered with golden lines of assist (fig. 10). Under this luxury cloth there is often seen a thin, white, sometimes half-transparent shirt, clearly contrasting with the upper robe. This motif has many symbolic aspects but we can find dominating meanings in it. The significant peculiarities of the depicted cloth seem to be its golden pattern and shapelessness, which is not similar to any known vestment.

The first peculiarity produces associations with the vestments of the Old Testament high priest. In Biblical exegesis, vestments compiled of four significant elements - upper robe, ephod, breast-plate and turban - were called "golden vestments" because every element had gold parts; this gold had different symbolical meanings for every element. Christ in a "golden robe" may be perceived as an image of the high priest. An additional element of that image was a motif of bands under the breast, as a belt, which was an important part of the rite of clothing of the Old Testament and Christian priests. As we tried to show in another work, similar bands passing round the back of the neck and over the breast were used in a special vestment of the Byzantine archpriest for the rite of consecration of a new church.²⁴ Of no lesser importance appears to be another aspect of symbolic meaning. The figure turned in a golden cloth could remind Byzantines of the rite of imperial funerals. From *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae* by Constantine Porphyrogenetos we know that at their funerals, Emperors were laid on a ceremonial couch and were dressed in golden *chlamys*.²⁵ A similar practice of the wrapping of the body in golden ceremonial tissue was known in royal rites of the Latin West. A golden "funeral" cloth in icons of the Virgin Mary brings to mind both the royal honour of the Christ Child and His sacrificial nature.

In some variants, under the golden cloth we can see the bare, sometimes crossed legs of the Child (fig. 11). According to C. Baltoyanni, who analyzed that motif in detail, it could go back not only to the image of Christ Crucified but also to Byzantine ideas of the sacrificial Lamb which was brought to the Old Testament Temple on the fortieth day after the delivery of the first-born son.²⁶ The scholar identifies the origin of the iconographic type of the Christ Child with bare legs in the scene of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. This explanation of the motif of the crossed bare legs of the Child, existing in a broader symbolic context, fits well into the proposed interpretation of the golden cloth.

At the same time, the contrasting juxtaposition of the upper and the under clothes of the Child needs explanation. In my view, this motif might be connected to Byzantine concept of the upper and the under altar cloths. Let us recall that the under cloth was made of simple white linen, as an image of the shroud of Christ at his burial, whereas the upper one was woven with golden thread and preciously decorated to symbolize the heavenly glory of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. According a Byzantine liturgical commentary: "The Table is both Tomb and Throne of Jesus Christ: that is why in the gown (*syndon*) we mean the shroud which was wrapped around His body; and in the upper cloth we mean the robes of His eternal glory; it is clear from the psalm on the clothing of the table at the consecration of church: The Lord reigneth, He is clothed with majesty... They put the gown (*syndon*) which signifies the shroud on the divine body dead for the sake of us. Then, they lay out the trapezophorum (*inditia*) which is lighter in colour and serves as an image of the Glory of God, because the altar table is the throne of God; and it recalls the clothes of Our Saviour shining like snow".²⁷ Altar cloths emphasized the



1 *Virgin Orans*, mosaic of the altar apse of the Ravenna cathedral, 1112, Archbishopric Museum, Ravenna



2 *Virgin with the Child enthroned*, mosaic, apse in Euphrasius basilica in Poreč, Croatia, 6th c.



3 Master of Amiens, *The Priesthood of the Virgin*, 1437, Louvre, Paris



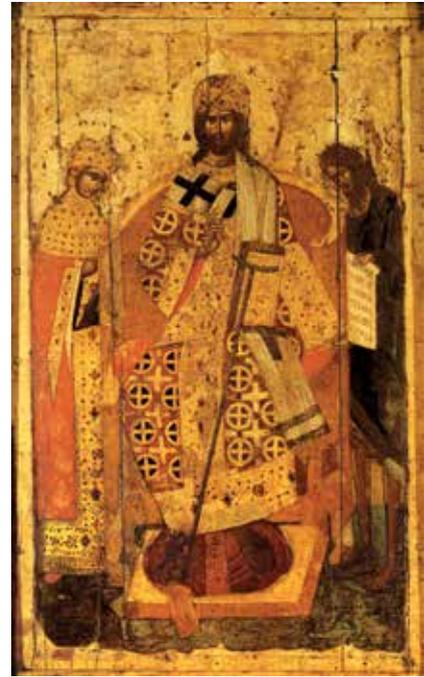
4 Murals of the north apse, Panagia Drosiani, Naxos, Greece, 7th-8th c.



5 *Deesis with Christ, the Virgin, Ecclesia, John the Baptist and the King Solomon*, murals of the north apse, Panagia Drosiani, Naxos, 7th-8th c.



6 One of the Byzantine arrangements of the particles on the paten, The ceremonial of Peter Mohila of Kiev, 1629



7 The icon with the Deesis (so called *At Thy Right Hand the Queen stood*), Museums of the Moscow Kremlin, late 14th c.



8 *Virgin offering Christ the Child*, icon, Saint Sophia cathedral, Novgorod, 15th c.



9 *Virgin celebrating at the altar-table*, scene from the *Akathistos* cycle, icon from Novgorod, St Nicholas Old Believers' monastery, Moscow, early 15th c.

meaning of the table as the Tomb of Lord and at the same time His Throne. According to this interpretation, the Christ Child in a golden robe and linen *syndon* becomes an image of the altar at which the Virgin is officiating.²⁸

In the context of our topic, the characteristic details of the robes of the Virgin herself are of particular interest. One of the strangest peculiarities is a depiction of a precious veil draped over the *maphorion* of the Virgin, apparently without any specific purpose or ethnographic explanation (fig.12). Traditionally scholars have interpreted this veil as evidence of influence from Italian Duecento painting. Thanks to the efforts by A. Weyl Carr and L. Hadermann-Misguich, this interpretation was disproved.²⁹ They have shown convincingly that the veil appeared earlier in Byzantine painting than in Italian painting, not later than the 12th century, and was widespread at the beginning of the 13th century. A. Weyl Carr supposes the motif appeared in the famous icon of the Virgin Kykkotissa from Cyprus, according to tradition, glorified in the 11th century. From ancient times up until today, that icon has not been accessible for observation. However, a red veil with gold was reproduced in an early copy of the Kykkotissa - an icon-fresco dating to the turn of the 11th to 12th century in a church of the Virgin Mary in Lisi, Cyprus. It was Cyprus from where Italians could adopt the motif in the 13th century, and then it became widespread in the West together with other Byzantine subjects. L. Hadermann-Misguich agreed with A. Weyl Carr and tried to explain the reason for the assimilation of such an exotic motif. She offered two versions: an economic and a legendary one. Cyprus was the largest centre of production of objects woven from golden thread, which were called "the gold of Cyprus". Golden-weave veils on the *maphorion* in icons indicated the island and acted as a kind of trademark. Hadermann-Misguich also recalled ancient legend: the Virgin once saved the islanders from Arabian invaders by covering them with a veil of fog.

While agreeing completely with the Byzantine provenance of the veil, we cannot consent to its strict linking exclusively to Cyprus. From our point of view, the motif in question has a symbolic meaning rooted in a circle of ideas about the Virgin which we discuss here. A starting point for the interpretation was the very shape of the golden-weave veil, which looked like liturgical veils. The relevance of such an interpretation is supported by Byzantine homiletics. In the Second Sermon of St Theodore the Studite on the Nativity, he directly compares the Virgin to a veil over the Holy Host, literally "covering the bread of life as on the altar".³⁰ Let us recall that in the above-mentioned sermon by Epiphany of Cyprus, the Virgin was called "the priest and at the same time the altar".³¹ Understanding the motif of the veil over the *maphorion* may become easier thanks to the liturgical practice of the wearing of veils (so called "airs") on the heads, for instance, in the rite of the Great Entrance depicted in many Byzantine frescoes of the 14th century, or in the rite of ordination, when a newly ordained cleric wore an "air" on his head as a special sign of his priesthood. In this context, a precious veil over an ordinary *maphorion* may be interpreted as a clear, visually exact and common metaphor of the priesthood of the Virgin.

Another priestly motif of the vestments of the Virgin, in my view, is in the golden tassels often depicted on the edge of her *maphorion* (fig. 13). It is noteworthy that this detail was a distinguishing feature of the vestments of the Virgin in some scenes, for instance, in the Crucifixion, where the figure of the Virgin is distinguished among other holy women by those tassels. The meaning of this motif, which I have analyzed elsewhere,³² relates to the vestments of the Old Testament high priest received as a revelation from God and described in detail in Exodus (Ex 28:31-35): the upper robe should be decorated at the lower edge with small gold bells and pomegranates of wool of different colours. It was done to make the sound of a sacred robe heard when the high priest "goeth in unto the holy place before the Lord".³³ Probably, the iconographic meaning of the golden tasseled fringe of the Virgin's *maphorion* is an allusion to the high priestly dignity of the Virgin, who united the Old Testament and the New Testament Churches in herself, according to the concept of Byzantine theologians. In this context it is noteworthy that the golden tassels of the *maphorion* were often combined in the vestments of the Virgin with such elements of Christian liturgical vestments as *epimanikia*, or cuffs, often decorated with parallel golden stripes and crosses, according to Orthodox liturgical tradition.

The Eucharistic handkerchief of the Virgin

The most impressive and yet the least understandable detail, however, is the Virgin's narrow white handkerchief, which appears in a great number of representations including the most ancient images (fig. 14). This bright detail attracts attention, but there are no special studies of this significant motif. Scholarly comments are usually short and reserved. A very simple explanation can be found in the 19th century literature, for example, in a popular book by E. Poselyanin in connection with the mosaic in the apse of St Sophia of Kiev: "on her belt there is a lention with which she wipes away so many tears".³⁴ G. Babić thought that the handkerchief was a detail of the dress of a Byzantine aristocratic lady.³⁵ A similar position was expressed by C. Jolivet Levy, who considered the long white handkerchief "an honorable attribute emphasizing the dignity of the Virgin".³⁶ E.S. Smirnova carefully called the handkerchief "an undeciphered depiction of a certain tissue (may be an object of liturgical meaning)".³⁷ It seems clear that the motif was of symbolical nature and ritual provenance. The specific shape of the long and narrow white handkerchief, often fringed and decorated with parallel stripes and crosses, had direct analogues in band-type liturgical vestments (fig. 15).

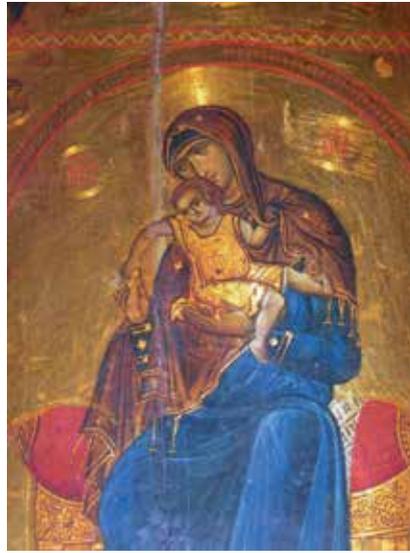
In Christian iconography, both in the East and in the West, the handkerchief appeared no later than the 5th century. It was widespread and could be found not only in images of the Virgin. The handkerchief appeared in the 5th-century mosaic of Santa Sabina in Rome, represented in the hand of the Personification of the Ecclesia of the gentiles (*Ecclesia ex Gentibus*; fig. 16); it is depicted in the hand holding an opened book and distinguishes the image from a parallel one - the Ecclesia of the Jews (*Ecclesia ex Circumcisione*), possibly, emphasizing by this detail the higher position of the Ecclesia of the gentiles (Gal 2:7). In portraits of holy women, for instance, in the eighth century Sinai icon of St Irene, the saint is holding the handkerchief in her left hand which is combined with a depiction of her martyr cross³⁸ (fig. 17). One could find such a handkerchief in the figures of the court ladies in the famous 6th-century mosaic of San Vitale in Ravenna (fig. 18). Some ladies accompanying Empress Theodora are wearing the handkerchiefs at their girdles, and one of them is demonstratively holding this object in front of her breast. However, let me remind those who are convinced of the lay provenance of the handkerchief that Theodora with her retinue, as well as Justinian, are presented in San Vitale in a liturgical procession in the sanctuary, both holding liturgical vessels – the Chalice and Paten. Most probably, this is the rite of the Little Entrance.

Turning to the liturgical practice of the 6th-century, we can find an explanation of the female handkerchief. At the church council in Auxerre (a. 578) they discussed a problem of the communion of women and the usage by them of a special handkerchief called a *dominicale*. Rule 36 of that council says: "Women must not accept the Holy Host on a bare hand" and rule 46 added: "All women should have a *dominicale* to go for communion".³⁹ These ecclesiastical regulations fixed an ancient and, evidently, widespread practice. One may find indirect indications of this liturgical practice in a sermon by St Augustine, and in the seventh century St Maximus the Confessor noted that women were to "bring clean cloths when they receive the Holy Host, with clean mind and clean heart". So, these are all reasons to identify the white handkerchief at a girdle, or in hands, with that ancient communion handkerchief. Probably, the handkerchief was perceived as a sign of one's participation in the liturgy, and as a link with the highest sacraments – such a handkerchief demonstrated the particular piety of women. The origin of the handkerchief was determined by the liturgical practice of the early Church, when the practice of taking communion in the hands was widespread among lay people, including females.⁴⁰

By the 9th century the situation has radically changed; such a mode of communion became an important privilege of the clergy. At that time, a permanent element of the liturgical vestments of Latin bishops was a maniple (*manipula*) - a narrow white handkerchief, which a bishop was holding during the service, as can be seen in the 11th-century fresco with *The Liturgy of St Clement* (The Wonder with Sissinius) in the underground church of San Clemente in Rome (fig. 19). The origin of the maniple was connected with the communion handkerchief, which became a sign of the bishop's rank.⁴¹



10 *Christ the Child in the golden shroud*, mosaic icon, St Catherine monastery, Sinai, 12th c.



11 *Christ the Child in syndon and colobium*, icon of the Virgin with the prophets, St Catherine monastery, Sinai, 12th c.



12 *The precious cover over the Virgin's maphorion*, icon, Levant, St Catherine monastery, Sinai, 13th c.



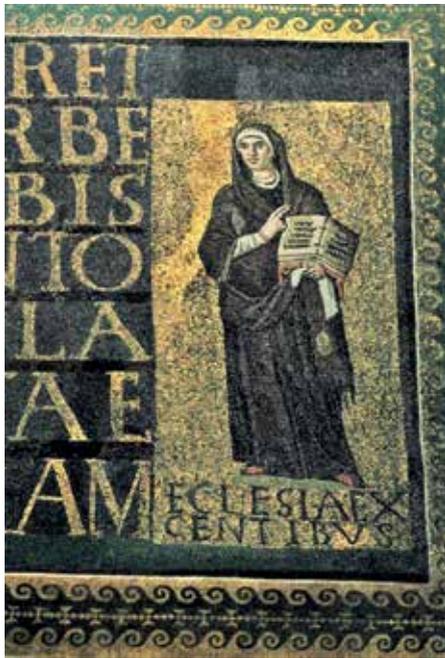
13 *The golden tassels fringe of the Virgin's maphorion*, mosaic, Nea Moni, Chios, mid-11th c.



14 *The Virgin Orans with a handkerchief in her belt*, mosaic, Saint Sophia cathedral, Kiev, mid-11th c.



15 *The gesture of the Virgin's hand holding a handkerchief*, mosaic, Saint Sophia cathedral, Thessaloniki, 11th c.



16 *Ecclesia ex Gentibus*, mosaic, Santa Sabina, Rome, 5th c.



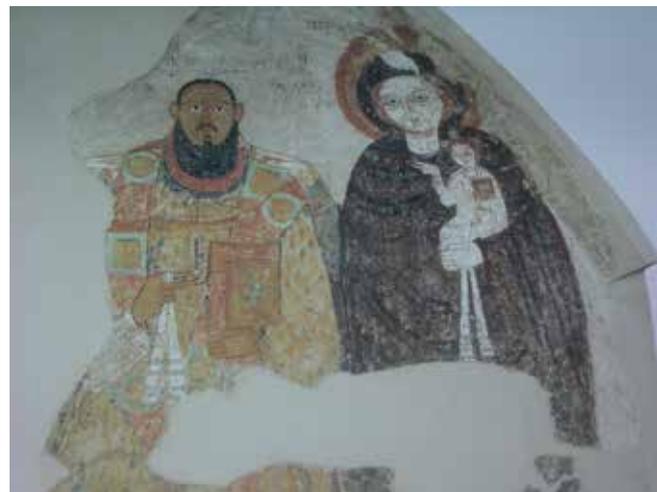
17 The icon of St Irina holding a handkerchief, St Catherine monastery, Sinai, 8th c.



18 The court ladies with handkerchiefs, mosaic, San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th c.



19 St Clement celebrating the liturgy with a handkerchief (manipula) in his hand, *The Miracle with Sissinius*, detail, San Clemente church, Rome, 11th c.



20 The Bishop Marianos and the Virgin with Child holding the liturgical handkerchiefs, Faras cathedral, Nubia, 1003-1036, Warsaw Museum

The limited number of sources doesn't give us a chance to say for sure, but we may suppose that a similar process took place in the Christian East. In the fresco of the 11th-century from Faras, Nubia, a local bishop Marianos is represented beside the Virgin with the Child (fig. 20).⁴² Both reproduce the same gesture with white handkerchiefs hanging on their right thumbs. Probably, the significantly repeated detail of images of the Virgin and the archpriest was designed to emphasize the common nature of their officiating in the earthly and heavenly service.

How did the Byzantines perceive that handkerchief? Unfortunately, the written sources provide no evidence for this. According to rather late testimonies, receiving communion in the hand was widespread in the early Byzantine period. Before the Council of Trullo (692), communion was received with covered hands but there was no strict unification of the rite.⁴³ An analogue of the western maniple was the so-called *enchirion* (literally "handy") - a white handkerchief hanging at the girdle of an archpriest, later called *epigonation* and given new symbolical meaning. In the Byzantine tradition, an *enchirion* was of special significance, and did not function as a towel for hands. Patriarch Nicephor of Constantinople (806-815) sent liturgical vestments to Pope Leo III, among which there was an *enchirion-manipula* decorated with gold - testimony to its symbolic, rather than practical function.⁴⁴ In the earliest example of the iconography of the *Three Church Fathers*, in the manuscript of the Psalter of Theodore of 1066 (British Museum, Add.19352, fol. 35v), frontal images of hierarchs are holding their Gospels on narrow white handkerchiefs.⁴⁵

The written sources do not provide any information on the usage of that handkerchief in the Byzantine rite of communion. There are, however, iconographic testimonies, which compensate for this lack in the history of the liturgy. In a miniature of the manuscript of the Homilies by St John Chrysostom of the end of the 9th century from the Athens National Library (Cod. 211, fol. 110v) the handkerchief in question is depicted in the hands of Christ in the scene of the Communion of the Apostles.⁴⁶ An even more eloquent example is the 11th-century Sinai icon with the Communion of the Apostles and the Feet Washing⁴⁷ (fig. 21). In this representation Christ, officiating as the archpriest, gives communion to St Peter and St Paul separately at the altar, holding a chalice and a paten with a special handkerchief. In the scene of the Communion of the Apostles in the early 12th-century fresco of Asinou on Cyprus, a thin white handkerchief is represented on the altar table among the objects for the Eucharistic sacrament (fig. 22). The iconography therefore offers clear indications of the Byzantine practice of the liturgical usage of the handkerchief, which is not described or mentioned in written sources.

It is noteworthy that white handkerchiefs may be found also in images of the symbolic prototypes of the Eucharist. In a fresco of the 11th century in the crypt of the catholicon of Hosios Loukas, for instance, there is a long white handkerchief near an apostle in a composition of the Last Supper (fig. 23). In the Old Testament prototype of the Eucharist - The Hospitality of Abraham from the Theotokos chapel on Patmos (c. 1200) - near all three angels there are handkerchiefs laid out in a special way alongside Eucharistic bread in the form of Hosts (fig. 24). Obviously, they were intended to remind the viewer of the liturgical meaning of the depicted scene. Independently of the identity of that piece of cloth, preserving the memory of communion in covered hands and the principal possibility of usage of the Eucharist the handkerchief nonetheless seems most important.

In this liturgical and iconographic context, let us consider that the handkerchief at a girdle or in the hands of the Virgin was intended to remind one of the Eucharistic handkerchief, and of communion which only the clergy and the Emperor could receive in their hands. The white fringed handkerchief with liturgical stripes and crosses was associated with the archpriest's *enchirion* and the potential possibility not only of receiving but also of offering the Holy Host. The white handkerchief, not identified directly with a specific liturgical object, carefully introduced the theme of the participation of the Virgin in the Eucharistic sacrifice and of Her priesthood.

In the most vivid form this symbolism is embodied in the Crucifixion scenes, where the handkerchief is raised to the Virgin's face, as for instance, in the famous mosaic of Dafni near Athens, c. 1100 (fig. 25). Since the 11th century, above the Virgin there has been sometimes presented the Personification of Ecclesia in the shape of a crowned female figure holding out the Eucharistic chalice to jets of blood (fig. 26). The early Byzantine topic of parallelism of the Virgin and officiating Church appeared there with new vigor. The Virgin with the Eucharistic handkerchief in her hand gave a clear liturgical meaning to the composition.



21 Christ giving the communion with a handkerchief in his hand, icon with the Communion of the Apostles, St Catherine monastery, Sinai, 12th c.



22 A handkerchief on the altar-table in the Communion of the Apostles, altar fresco, Asinou, Cyprus, early 12th c.



23 A handkerchief on the table of the Last Supper, crypt of the monastery of Hosios Loukas, Greece, 11th c.



24 The Angels with handkerchiefs on the table, *The Hospitality of Abraham*, fresco, Church of the Virgin, St John the Divine monastery, Patmos, 1200



25 The Virgin with a handkerchief from the Crucifixion, Dafni, Greece, 1100



26 The Virgin and the personification of the Church, Studenica monastery, Serbia, early 13th c.

* All images are from: A. LIDOV, *Ierotopia. Prostranstvennye ikony i obrazy-paradigmy v vizantijskoi kulture*, Moscow, 2009.

In connection with the theme of the Priesthood of the Virgin the white handkerchief becomes the most important Eucharistic symbol and a key to the liturgical reading of any image of the Virgin. At the same time, it was not an illustration or a direct reference to a specific rite (for instance, the ancient practice of receiving communion in the hands). It belongs to that layer of Byzantine iconographic motifs which did not preserve specific information and were not semantically fixed. As with many images in homiletics and hymnography, it did not express doctrinal ideas or strictly articulated knowledge but introduced a symbolic and metaphoric context, building a series of associations for a deeper and meditative perception of the image.

As I have argued in the present paper, this characteristic is true for the entire theme of the Priesthood of the Virgin in Byzantine iconography. It existed but was not deliberately articulated, because an attempt at rational formalization would inevitably lead to over-simplifying and even distorting of the very sense of the idea. It offered information about a world where such mystical realities as “inconfusedly and indivisibly” existed, and “the one who offers and is offered, who receives and is distributed” were one and the same Christ. In the Byzantine tradition the Priesthood of the Virgin has been never interpreted as an illustration to a particular text or a theological concept; it could be understood only as an image-idea or, in our terms, an image-paradigm, which existed both in the minds of iconographers and in the milieu accepting their creativity.

An image-paradigm appeared as a visual phenomenon, sometimes with an amazing amount of details (beside the iconographic examples analyzed here, we might recall Greek and Russian medieval texts of visions where the officiating Virgin was mentioned). However, an image-paradigm was principally beyond any established formalization as a visual scheme. As with other related images, for instance, the image of Heavenly Jerusalem, iconographic motifs were easily changed because of a particular context, but this fact didn't prevent the main idea or paradigm from being recognized, visible through the whole specter of depicted motifs and their related symbolical meanings.⁴⁸

The modern methodology of iconographic studies is still considerably dependent on the dominating textual approach to representations. An image receives meaning when a researcher succeeds in finding a text which could be illustrated by this image. In general, the very process of studying an image is mainly reduced to the search for a corresponding text which defines the sense of a particular picture and inspired the artist to create the particular details of the image in question. There are artistic phenomena, however, where an image does not principally correspond with any specific text. These are not merely exotic exceptions but a whole category of images widespread in Byzantine art, where metaphorical and iconic aspects were always more important than illustrative and narrative ones. In this context the new concept of the “image-paradigm” principally differs from the common concept of “image-illustration”.⁴⁹ In this article we have addressed the theme of the Priesthood of the Virgin, which, in our opinion, can only be revealed and interpreted adequately in the context of the concept of the image-paradigm.

It should be noted that we are discussing a specific type of Byzantine spiritual creativity which was significantly emasculated in post-Byzantine tradition. The popularity of icon-painters' pattern-books (a collection of schemes) and the official codification of the entire icon-painting sphere in the sixteenth century led to the appearance of a visually similar but, in essence, foreign form of image-creation which was mistakenly accepted as “Byzantine tradition” by the broader public and even by the majority of modern icon-painters and art specialists. In this new system, the icon was transformed from a principally moving and live image to a colored scheme, a decorative composition on a flat surface usually linked to a particular literary text or theological argument.

In this aspect, we should note that the new type of image was in tune with a “flatter” theology, for instance, interpreting the theme of the Priesthood of the Virgin only in the context of actual, contemporary discussion of female priesthood. I would like to state, especially to those who support such an attitude, that the deeply rooted in tradition and symbolically capacious concept of the Priesthood of the Virgin has nothing in common with a flat and illustrative opinion on “the Virgin-presbyter”. The difference between these ideas is the same as that between the extremely famous metaphor of “the Virgin as Unbreakable Wall” and the phrase that “the Virgin is a wall which

cannot be broken".⁵⁰ In such an apparently direct exposition a great iconic metaphor is transformed into almost senseless reasoning.

From our point of view, this very sphere of metaphoric meanings, not dogmatic theology, had a determining influence on the creative search for new forms and on the development of Byzantine iconography as a whole, which was closer in nature to hymnography and homiletics than many people are inclined to think. It also operated with figurative motifs of a metaphorical nature, which could be combined with great diversity, sharing every time recognizable images-paradigms.

In conclusion, let me add that a historical reconstruction of Byzantine ideas on the Priesthood of the Virgin as an image-paradigm is of principal importance for an understanding of the visual concept of many Eastern Christian icons and their iconographic details.

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- 1 The article is based on the paper of the Rijeka conference in 2016, and some other papers read at other conferences since the Congress of Byzantine Studies in Paris: A. LIDOV, "The Priesthood of the Virgin in Byzantine Iconography", *XX Congrès international des études byzantines. Pré-actes. III. Communications libres*, Paris, 2001, p. 427. A Russian discussion of this problematic one may find in a chapter of my book: A. LIDOV, *Ierotopia. Prostranstvennye ikony i obrazy-paradigmy v vizantijskoj culture (Hierotopy. Spatial Icons and Image-Paradigms in Byzantine Culture)*, Moscow, Theoria, 2009.
 - 2 O. VAN DEN BERGHE, *Marie et la Sacerdoce*, Paris, Louis Vivès, 1875, pp. 87-112; P. POURRAT, "Marie et la Sacerdoce", in: *Maria. Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge. Tome 1*, H. DU MANOIR (ed.), Paris, Beauchesne editeur, 1949, pp. 803-822.
 - 3 R. LAURENTIN, *Maria. Ecclesia. Sacerdotium. Essai sur le développement d'une idée religieuse*, Paris, Nouvelles éditions latines, 1953.
 - 4 N.P. KONDAKOV, *Ikonoġrafiya Bogomateri*, vol. 2, Saint Petersburg, Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1913, pp. 77-78, 378-380. Kondakov's ideas were recently re-considered in the paper: I. FOLLETTI, "Des femmes a l'autel? Jamais! Les diaconesses et l'icōnographie byzantine de la Theotokos", in: *Féminité et masculinité altérées: transgression et inversion des genres au Moyen Age*, E. Pibiri-F. Abbott (éds.), Firenze, Micrologus Library, 77, 2017, pp. 51-92.
 - 5 M. PRELOG, *The Basilica of Euphrasius in Poreč*, Zagreb, Associated Publishers, 1986, p. 21, pl. 26, 38; M. VICELJA MATIJAŠIĆ, *Istra i Bizant*, Rijeka, Matica hrvatska – Ogranak u Rijeci, 2007, pp. 132-133, figs. 100, 120-121.
 - 6 JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on the Psalms*, Commented Psalter by Euthymius Zigabenus, Kiev, 1882, pp. 372-373 (in Russian).
 - 7 J. DUPONT, "Le Sacerdoce de la Vierge: Le Puy d'Amien en 1437", in: *Gazette des beaux arts*, ser. 6, VIII, Paris, 1932, pp. 265-274.
 - 8 In a less demonstrative form the theme of the priesthood of the Virgin was represented in other works by Netherlandish painting of the 15th century, often making influence on the interpretation of the scene of *The Presentation of Christ to the Temple*; B. LANE, *The Altar and the Altarpiece. Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting*, New York, Harper & Row, 1984, pp. 70-72.
 - 9 PG, XLIII, col. 497 A; R. LAURENTIN, *op.cit.*, 1953, pp. 26-29.
 - 10 PG, XCVIII, col.1500 B.
 - 11 R. LAURENTIN, *op.cit.*, 1953, p. 50.
 - 12 A.G. MORTIMORT, *Les Diaconesses. Essai historique*, Roma, C.L.V.-Ed. Liturgiche, 1982. A new research of this rank and of the role of women in Byzantine church service in the whole see: V. KARRES, *The Liturgical Participation of Women in the Byzantine Church*, PhD Thesis, The Catholic University of America, Washington, 2003, pp. 164-235.
 - 13 E.D. THEODOROU, *Hè „cheirotonia," hē „cheirothesia" tōn diakonissōn* (Cheirotonia and Cheirothesia of Deaconesses), PhD Thesis, University of Athens, 1954; C. VAGAGGINI, "L'ordinazione della diaconessa nella tradizione greca e bizantina", in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, vol. 40, 1974, pp. 145-189; L. BYRNE, *Woman at the Altar. The Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church*, Collegeville, A&C Black, 1994.
 - 14 The images of holy deaconesses, St Basilissa of Nicomedia (+309, September) or St Melanya of Rome (5th c., December 31), for instance, were represented in the Vatican Menologion of Basil II.

- 15 R.F. TAFT, „Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When, and Why?“, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 52, 1998, pp. 27-87, 63-64.
- 16 *The Supreme Cover over Athos*, Moscow, 1999, p. 89 (in Russ.).
- 17 See the manuscript in Russian National Library f. 310, 405. On the Narration known in its initial version see: D.M. BULANIN, „Narration of the Virgin of Passions“, in: *Slovar' knizhnikov i knizhnosti Drevnei Rusi (XVII vek)*, part 4. D. M. BULANIN (ed.), Saint Petersburg, 2004, pp. 593-595 (in Russian, with detailed bibliography).
- 18 See a cycle of articles by C. WALTER, „Two Notes on the Deësis“, in: *Revue des études byzantines*, no. 26, 1968, pp. 311-336; Idem, „Further Notes on the Deësis (planches)“, in: *Revue des études byzantines*, no. 28, 1970, pp. 161-187; Idem, „An Iconographical Note“, in: *Revue des études byzantines*, no. 38, 1980, pp. 261-269; A. CUTLER, „Under the Sign of the Deesis: On the Question of Representativeness in Medieval Art and Literature“, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 41, 1987, pp. 145-154; I. ZERVOU TOGNAZZI, „Deesis. Interpretazione del termine e sua presenza nell'iconografia bizantina“, in: *Constantinopoli e l'arte della province orientali*, A.G. GUIDOBALDI-C. BARSANTI-F. DE MAFFEI (eds.), Roma, Edizioni Rari Nantes, 1990, pp. 394-395.
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- 22 For the theological grounds for the connection of the Virgin, the Church and John the Baptist see: M.-L. THEREL, *La Triomphe de la Vierge-Eglise*, Paris, C.N.R.S., 1984, pp. 89-90.
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- 27 I. DMITREVSKY, „Symeon of Thessaloniki, The Book on the Temple“, in: *Historical, dogmatic and mystical interpretation of the Heavenly Liturgy*, Moscow, 1894, reprinted 1993, pp. 385-386 (in Russian).
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- 35 G. BABIĆ, *Kraljeva crkva u Studenici*, Beograd, Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 1987, pp. 114-115.
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Marijino svećenstvo kao paradigmatički prikaz kršćanske vizualne kulture

Još od kasnog srednjeg vijeka Marijino je svećenstvo vrlo popularna tema rimokatoličke teologije, koja utječe i na ikonografske prikaze latinskog Zapada. U bizantskoj teologiji ova tema nikad nije bila artikulirana kao doktrina, pozitivna ili negativna, ali se ideja i metafora Marijinog svećenstva zapaža u homileti i himnografiji istočnog kršćanstva. Pojedini crkveni oci Djevicu Mariju istovremeno uspoređuju sa svećenikom i s oltarom, jer ona je ta koja „(nam) daruje Krista kao Nebeski Kruh za otkupljenje grijeha“. U ovome radu autor raspravlja o ključnoj ulozi navedene teme za razvoj bizantske ikonografije i kršćanske vizualne kulture u cjelosti te iznosi mišljenje da nam ideja Marijina svećenstva, prisutna u svijesti ikonografa (tvoraca konvencionalnih likova ili prikaza), pomaže razumjeti simboličko značenje nekoliko slikovnih motiva, koji su ostali nerazjašnjeni. Jedna od značajnih i učestalih tema, u čijoj se ikonografiji može prepoznati simbolika svećenstva, jest *Deisis*. U njoj Bogorodica i Ivan Krstitelj, kao predstavnici novozavjetnog i starozavjetnog svećenstva, zajedno slave Krista poistovjećeno s vrhovnim svećenikom. Porijeklo ovoga prikaza nalazi se u ranobizantskom razdoblju, a među najranijim primjerima koji to dokazuju su zidne slike iz 7. stoljeća u crkvi Panagia Drossiani na otoku Naxosu, gdje su jednostavnom kompozicijom *Deisisa* obuhvaćeni prikazi Krista kao velikog svećenika, Djevice Marije, personifikacije Crkve, Ivana Krstitelja i kralja Solomona. Vrhunac razvoja ove ikonografske teme nastupio je u razdoblju Paleologa, kad se Krist u sceni *Deisisa* prikazuje s insignijama patrijarha. Kontekst ideje Marijina svećenstva mogao bi objasniti neke neobične detalje Bogorodičina ruha, kao i odjeće Djeteta Isusa na prikazima nastalim prije Efeškog sabora (iz vremena kada se Bogorodica još nije prikazivala). Autor navodi nekoliko znakovitih detalja: Kristov zlatni plašt u kombinaciji s prozirnom košuljom, svećeničke narukvice, prikazivanje neobičnog vela povrh tradicionalnog Bogorodičinog maforija i zlatne rese na krajevima njenih halja. Najupečatljiviji detalj je Marijin rupčić koji se pojavljuje u velikom broju prikaza od 4. stoljeća. On može biti prikazan u njevoj lijevoj ruci, zataknut za pojas ili ga, kao u sceni *Raspeća*, Bogorodica podiže do svog obraza. Moguće porijeklo ovog motiva nude neki pisani izvori, koji navode da su u ranom kršćanstvu žene ponekad primale Svetu pričest u sličnim rupčićima. S vermenom je rubac (*gremiale*) postao sastavni dio liturgijskoga ruha visokih svećenika na Zapadu i na Istoku. Neki primjeri bizantskih ikonografskih prikaza *Pričesti* apostola i *Posljednje večere* daju naslutiti da su slični rupci korišteni u liturgiji. Marijin bi rubac u bizantskoj ikonografiji mogao biti percipiran kao očitovanje njena svećenstva i duboke povezanosti s Euharistijskom žrtvom. U raspravi se postavlja teorijsko pitanje bizantskoga pristupa slikovnim motivima koji nisu artikulirani specifičnim doktrinalnim idejama i koji nisu izravno povezani s određenim narativnim predlošcima. Autor smatra da Marijino svećenstvo pripada posebnoj kategoriji slikovnih prikaza, takozvanih „paradigmatičkih slika“, koje promatrači uočavaju, ali ih ne prepoznaju kao ikonografski alat ili specifičnu ilustraciju nekog teksta. Stoga se za njih uzvišena ideja Marijina svećenstva nikada ne poklapa s upitnim pojmom Djevice kao svećenice.

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