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## PRIESTLY ORNAMENTS AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

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RAFCA YOUSSEF NASR<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

There are many exegetical and liturgical sources comparing the Virgin to the officiating priest. During the mass, he raises the Eucharistic bread and wine whose purpose is to offer to the faithful the only Son of Mary. It is in this perspective that the Virgin displays, in certain number of examples, the attributes of the priest giving her a sacerdotal meaning. She presents herself as the eminent model of the priest. However, this idea can not be applied systematically to all Marian images. These must include specific indications going in this direction.

As a symbol of the Incarnation and of the Church, the image of the *Theotokos* has often been interpreted in exegetical, liturgical and hymnographic traditions as the prominent model of the officiating priest. Given that, the Virgin had the privilege, as Mother, to hold the body of Christ, the Host of the Mass. Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403) expressly praises Mary's priesthood by saying: "Oh, Virgin, [...] called the priest and at the same time the altar, who brought Christ to us — the bread of heaven — for the forgiveness of sins". In the same vein, John Chrysostom (born c. 407), in his commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, draws a comparison between the Virgin Mary holding the Child and the priest holding the Host, the body of Christ: "You do not see him in a crib but on the altar; it is not

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the woman that holds him but the standing priest”<sup>2</sup>. This idea, which is attributed to the *Theotokos* in patristic tradition, is transmitted in numerous liturgical formulas and hymns. But to be able to show that this very specific idea was conveyed in image, it must provide convincing visual elements.

The priestly meaning of the images of the *Theotokos* seems to be understudied in historiography. In his study of the ministry of the Virgin, Alexei Lidov gave the Virgin a sacerdotal dimension, based on convincing textual and visual arguments. However, the author considers the priesthood of Mary evident in the Western world from the fifteenth century onwards, but less clear in the Byzantine world, where the idea was often represented in a symbolic or metaphorical way (Lidov 2009). Marcello Angeben’s study of the images of the Virgin in Romanesque paintings in the Pyrenees and Maderuelo shows, in a particularly eloquent way, that the Mother of God was depicted as a priest well before the fifteenth century. In this Romanesque corpus, Mary, instead of holding the Child, displays the chalice in the image of the celebrant priest; this is especially important since she is wearing a priest’s chasuble (Angeben 2012: 29-74). Analyzing paintings in Macedonia dating back to the 14th century, Sashka Bogevska-Capuano also points out, (Bogevska-Capuana 2011)<sup>3</sup>, that Mary is wearing a bishop’s *Sakkos*, which is crucial to our study. For his part, Matthew Milliner supports the Eucharistic sense of the Virgin of the Passion (twelfth century), which would associate a priestly aspect to Mary (Milliner 2011). Likewise, I have been able to point out in two previous research studies that, in a number of examples, the image of the Virgin appears as the exemplary model of the altar or priest displaying the body of Christ. I have consolidated this hypothesis with textual, iconographic, epigraphic, syntactic and topographical arguments (Nasr 2018: 102-107; Nasr 2020). I did not however address the priestly ornaments that sometimes accompany the Marian figure. These sartorial details are among the most fitting clues to a liturgical and priestly reading of *Theotokos*.

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom (tr. fr. Angeben M. : 2012 : 29–74, sp. 33). The priestly function of Mary is also mentioned by, inter alia, Tarasios of Constantinople (784–806), Andrew of Crete (660–740), Theodore the Studite (759–826), Georges of Nicomedia, John Kokkinobaphos (11th century). See also Laurentin 1952 : 50.

<sup>3</sup> Available online at: <http://hicsa.univ-paris1.fr/page.php?r=18&id=500&lang=fr>, January 2019.

The priesthood of the Mother of God has rarely been defined through her garments. Only in the late Byzantine period did the Virgin clearly wear sacerdotal garments. Early Christian and Medio-Byzantine images usually opted for metaphorical and symbolic representations to give the figures a certain dignity.

A significant example can be seen in the apsidal conch of the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč, where the garments of the Virgin with Child enthroned in the center of the composition stand out, as she is dressed in a white stole with a cross (6<sup>th</sup> century, Fig. 1) (Prelog1986). This stole, which appears under the mantle of the Theotokos and goes down to her feet, is similar to those worn by priests. If we consider this a sacerdotal stole, we can assume that the intent was to compare the Virgin to a priest of the Early Christian era. However, this hypothesis is uncertain (Terry and H. Maguire 2007: 103–104; Heilbronner 2007-2008: 41; Angheben 2012: 68).



Fig. 1: Poreč, Euphrasian Basilica, the mosaic of the apsidal conch, the Virgin and Child (V. Sarabianov)

The figure of the Virgin in the orant position in a very byzantinised mosaic in the apsidal arch of the Ravenna cathedral (12<sup>th</sup> century), now held in the Museum of the Archbishopric of Ravenna, shows similar

attributes to those of a priest (Fig. 2) (Кондаков 1915: 77–78, 378–380). Two elements decorate the garments of the Mother of God. They are similar to an *epitrachelion* (ἐπιτραχήλιον), a type of stole, without which no celebration can be held, and a *zone* (ζώνη), a belt to hold the *epitrachelion* (Brightman 1908: 261-263; Bornert 1966: 79, 251-253; Bernardakis 1902: 129-139; Thierry 1966: 308-315; Innemée 1992; Woodfin 2012). The resemblance between these items of clothing and the liturgical attributes of priests would give the image of Mary a priestly dimension. In addition, the figure of the Virgin of Ravenna, in an orant position, similar to an officiant, may support this hypothesis (Lidov 2009; Nasr 2018 and 2020).



Fig. 2: Ravenna, Cathedral, mosaic of the apsidal arch, the Virgin with an orant gesture (R. Y. Nasr)

The image of the Virgin in the iconographic representations of Saint Nicholas may also emphasize the priestly side of the Virgin. In fact, after striking Arius at the Council of Nicaea, the patriarchs confiscated Nicholas' episcopal insignia and sent him to prison. Christ and the Virgin appeared to Nicholas, presented him with the *pallium*, the Gospel, and opened the doors of his prison. This is why Nicholas is often represented as a bishop flanked by the Virgin and Christ. The Lord offers him a book — perhaps the Word of God — while the Virgin hands him the main symbol of episcopal dignity, the *omophorion* (ομόφοριον) — priesthood (Fig. 3). This is illustrated by an icon from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Santa Margherita Church in Bisceglie (Corrie 1997: 484-485). We may infer that the example of Saint Nicholas, presenting the idea of the divine origin of his election, also

shows the priestly aspect of the Virgin, who could transmit priesthood to the bishops. Is it from this same perspective that she sometimes occupies the centre of the theory of bishops on apsidal walls, as she does in Mar Moussa al-Ḥabachi in Syria?

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Virgin is clearly clothed in episcopal garments, for example in Macedonia in the Church of the Virgin in Treskaveč (c.1340) and at the monastery of Marko near Skopje (1376–1377) (Grozdanov 1990: 132-149; Gavrilović 1991; Bogevska-Capuana 2011). A bust image of Jesus Christ, “the King of Kings”, appears in the center of the cupola of a western compartment of the Treskaveč Church (Fig. 16). Around this central image of Christ, the Prophet David and the Virgin stand on both sides of a vacant seat. This throne is supported by celestial militias carrying a book lying on the tablecloth, of which only a small piece remains visible. The Virgin is wearing a chasuble decorated with a cross that closely resembles the *sakkos* (σάκκος) of the bishops, as Sashka Bogevska Capuana has clearly identified, thus confirming the priestly function of the Mother of God (Fig. 4, 5) (Bogevska-Capuana 2011:5-6). Mary and David are followed by a cherub and a seraphim, each holding two banners marked by the triple *hagios*, confirming their quality as cantors of the *trisagion*. Also, celestial creatures — angels, archangels, thrones, and powers carrying spears and medallions bearing the sign of the cross — appear standing behind the cherub and the seraphim.



Fig. 3: Bisceglie, Santa Margherita Church, icon of Saint Nicholas  
(Photo after Corrie 1997)

The researchers studying this composition, called the “royal court” or the “royal deisis”<sup>4</sup>, considered this type of image to have appeared for the first time in Treskaveč (Radojčić 1956: 224; Grigoriadou 1971: 51-52; Grozdanov 1980: 134 and 1998-1999: 151; Bogevska-Capuana 2011: 6), though this theme in fact certainly belongs to an earlier period. It had already been found in countless medieval Byzantine churches, notably in Cyprus, since the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, including the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Lysi Church, which is very similar to the Treskaveč scene (Fig. 6). In Lysi, Saint John the Baptist is the Virgin’s counterpart, while they stand on both sides of the vacant throne bearing the cross, the book and the dove.

I suggest that this theme refers not the “royal court” or the “royal deisis” but to the procession of the Little Entrance. At this stage of the mass, the bishop’s solemn entry takes place as he comes to occupy his cathedra, as does the transfer of the Gospel to the main altar, often with the cross and the liturgical instruments that bring the Passion of Christ to mind.



Fig. 4: Treskaveč, Monastery of the Virgin, the painting on the cupola, the procession of the Little Entrance  
(Photo after V. Sarabianov)



Fig. 5: Treskaveč, the Virgin Monastery, the cupola painting, the procession of the Little Entrance, the Virgin as bishop  
(Photo after V. Sarabian)

<sup>4</sup> On the name of the image, see, for example, Millet 1908 : 180-181; Grigoriadou 1971 : 47-52 ; Garidis 1971 : 563-569 ; Georgitsoyanni 1993 : 272.

During this procession, the celebrant recites the *Trisagion* prayer, which offers a glorious image of Christ interceded by the Virgin and saints, “praised by the Seraphim with Thrice-Holy Voice”, “glorified by the cherubim and adored by all celestial powers” (Mercenier and François Paris 1937: 236; Salaville 1942: 75-76). This *Trisagion* is directly related to the rite of the Blessing of the Throne, in which the celebrant invokes the One seated on the throne of the cherubim (Mercenier and François Paris 1937: 237; Salaville 1942: 77-78). In this particular case, liturgists see a symbolic representation of the throne of God receiving the triple *hagios* (Salaville 1942: 78). It also seems that this prayer refers to the solemn entry of the bishop, who comes to occupy his cathedra after receiving the acclamation of the *trisagion* (Salaville 1942: 78). The bishop is the vicar of Christ in his earthly Temple. In our image, it is the Virgin who would perform the function of the bishop, as she is clearly shown wearing a *sakkos*. It would thus seem that to a certain extent, the presence of the vacant altar<sup>5</sup> in images that relate directly to the Eucharistic liturgy, such as the scene of the procession of Officiating Bishops (Rapti 2009: 794; Nasr 2020) seem to refer to certain specific church rituals, notably the Little Entrance (Nasr 2020).

We can assume that the image present in Treskaveč and elsewhere reflects the procession of the Little Entrance, in particular the “Trisagion” and the “Blessing of the Throne”. It is thus possible to understand the reasoning behind this image being placed in the western part of the church (narthex) in Treskaveč, as this ceremony is related to the “liturgy of the catechumens”, who formerly resided in the narthex. Could this be a reference to a much earlier period in Church history, since there would presumably no longer be adult catechumens attending church in 1340? In any case, there is no doubt that the image of the Little Entrance of Treskaveč shows Mary as a bishop. This suggests that, in previous works



Fig. 6: Lysi, Church of Panaghia, the cupola painting, the procession of the Little Entrance (V. Sarabianov)

<sup>5</sup> This term was first used by Marcello Angheben, as the throne does not appear to be empty (Angheben 2011: 113-142).

of art related to this same theme, the Virgin held the role of a bishop, even if she did not have any attributes confirming this role.

These priestly attributes confirm the sacerdotal significance of the Virgin's image and show that the notion given by liturgists was applied to it. However, as noted, concrete representations of Mary in priestly garments and ornaments seem to be extremely rare in Byzantine and Oriental art. Only in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was the Mother of God clothed in priestly garments, such as in Marko's Monastery and Treskaveč Church, in Macedonia.

The handkerchief is an item of clothing or ornament that often accompanies the Virgin; this is of great importance to our study. It is usually found either in her hand, as in the case of the images in the Hagia Sophia Church in Constantinople (second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>6</sup> and in Thessalonica (9<sup>th</sup> century) (Kalavrezou 1990: 170-171), or placed in her belt, as in the Nea Moni Monastery in Chios (mid-11<sup>th</sup> century) and in the Hagia Sophia in Kiev (Popova and Sarabianov 2007: 148-149). This handkerchief is usually white, sometimes striped with a few lines, most often red or gold in color.

Researchers have attributed various meanings to the Virgin's handkerchief. In his analysis of the image of Mary found at Saint Sophia Church in Kiev, Evghenii Posselianiin suggested that the handkerchief is wiping away the Virgin's tears (Posselianiin 1993: 329). Gordana Babić took it as a sign of nobility among women from the higher spheres of Byzantine society (Babić 1987: 114-115). Catherine Jolivet-Levy regarded it as a sign of honor emphasizing the Mother of God's dignity (Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 55). Henri Maguire considered it to be a symbol of Mary's suffering during her Son's Passion (Maguire 1977: 170-171). Engelina Simirnova attributed a liturgical meaning to the handkerchief, without providing further details (Smirnova 1993: 79). Alexei Lidov, though, defended the liturgical hypothesis concerning Mary's handkerchief, confirming its ritual utility and its close relationship with Eucharistic liturgy (Lidov 2009: 225-255).

Attested since the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps even earlier, the handkerchief became widespread throughout both in the East and the West. It was included not only in various depictions of Mary, but also in other representations: it is seen, for example, carried by one of Theodora's

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<sup>6</sup> For the mosaics of Saint Sophia, see Mango and Hawkins 1972: 113-151; Kalavrezou 1990: 170-171).

court ladies, accompanying the Empress in an image showing the liturgical procession of the offertory at the Church of Saint Vitale in Ravenna (6<sup>th</sup> century). Saint Irene with a handkerchief carries the cross of the martyrs on an icon preserved in the Saint Catherine Monastery in Sinai (8<sup>th</sup> century) (Weitzmann 1982: 179–203, 1966: 49–83, 1976). Holy women accompanying the Virgin in scenes of the Crucifixion sometimes hold the same cloth, and there are many other such examples<sup>7</sup>.

Canon 36 of the Council of Auxerre (c. 578) noted that women must not hold the Host directly in their bare hands (Hefele 1973: 214–221, 220; Lidov 2009). Saint Augustine and Maximus the Confessor indicated that women must cover their hands with a clean veil when they are preparing themselves to receive the Body of Christ (Nussbaum 1969: 25; Lidov 2009). From this perspective, we could associate the handkerchief with female representations in contact with the Great Mystery (Lidov 2009: 248); however, nothing seems to confirm this hypothesis.

The Council in Trullo (Constantinople, 692), like the prescriptions of Cyril of Jerusalem, also indicated that people tended to receive the Holy Communion with their hands covered, but there was no written rule or law to this effect<sup>8</sup>. What we know is limited to the fact that the handkerchief of communion was the origin of the *manipulum* or *mappula*, which later became a sign of an archbishop's rank in the West. This particular handkerchief is found, for example, in the hand of Saint Clement in the church bearing his name in Rome (11<sup>th</sup> century) (Romano and Riccioni 2006: 66–67).

The maniple of a Latin bishop corresponds to the eastern *enchirion* or *epigonation* (Pavan 1983: 2530–2538, esp. 2535). It is a piece of white fabric, most often decorated, held in the bishop's hand (the *enchirion*) or suspended from his belt (the *epigonation*). Patriarch Nicephorus (806–815) sent a gold-decorated *enchirion* as a gift to Pope Leo III, along with other liturgical garments (Patriarch Nikephoros PG 100: 200 C; Lidov 2009). Unfortunately, textual tradition provides no evidence as to the ritual utility of this object in the Byzantine world, this gap can be filled by relying on iconographic evidence.

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<sup>7</sup> See the examples provided in Lidov 2009: 247–248.

<sup>8</sup> In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Theodore Balsamon of Constantinople emphasized that certain churches had given up the ancient tradition of accepting communion with the hands as commented in Canon 101 of the Council *in Trullo*. See Taft 1996: 228; Cyrille de Jérusalem 1966: 171–173.

This kind of cloth is widespread in liturgical banquet scenes, such as the Last Supper and the Hospitality of Abraham. Some of these examples include a long white cloth placed on the table of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Supper at Hosios Loukas in Greece, as well as three handkerchiefs lying on the table in front of the three heavenly guests in the scene of the Hospitality of Abraham at the Church of the Virgin at Saint John Monastery on the island of Patmos (c. 1200). This kind of handkerchief is also found in liturgical scenes, such as the Communion of the Apostles. This is the case of a handkerchief held by the Christ of the Communion in the liturgical phylactery of Athens toward the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (National Library of Athens, cod. 211, fol. 110v) (Marava–Chatzinicolaou and Toufexi–Paschou 1997: 37–38 and fig. 23). In a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Sinai icon, the Lord offers Communion to the Apostles wearing a similar kind of cloth. In the Cypriot painting of Asinu (12<sup>th</sup> century), a handkerchief appears on the altar of the Communion of the Apostles with other objects related to the liturgy of the altar. In the same painting, we can see Christ holding a chalice and a paten with a cloth<sup>9</sup>.

In banquet scenes, such as the Last Supper and the Hospitality of Abraham, the handkerchief could have been used as a napkin to wipe mouths or hands, even though these images refer to the Eucharist. However, its presence in scenes of the Communion of the Apostles creates the idea that there is a link between the handkerchief and the daily practice of the liturgy, even though we do not know its exact use. This piece of material is certainly placed here in direct contact with the Great Mysteries. The most significant example of this is the handkerchief used to wrap the Eucharistic parcel held by the archangels flanking the *Blachernitissa* on the paten of Xeropotamou (fig. 7) (Kondakov 1902: 225–227, fig. 30; Diehl 1926: 673, fig. 335; Ștefănescu 1936: 72–73; Kalavrezou 2004: 185–193, sp. 190; Nasr 2020). This example seems to provide information about the maniple's function and how it was used.

There is no doubt that the handkerchief held by the Virgin is similar to the above-mentioned cloths. We can suppose that Mary's handkerchief may also have served a practical function, like a towel or napkin, or else it could have had a liturgical meaning.

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<sup>9</sup> See these examples and others provided in Lidov 2009.



Fig. 7: Mount Athos, Monastery of Xeropotamou, ivory paten  
(Photo after Durand, 1999)

One of the most remarkable and striking examples of the liturgical meaning attached to Mary's handkerchief can be seen in a painting in the Cathedral of Faras (1003–1036) in Nubia, held at the National Museum of Warsaw (Thomas 1997: 368-370). The Virgin, carrying the Child in her left hand, stands facing forward, alongside Bishop Marianos holding a book with his left hand (Fig. 8). Mary and the prelate are holding a similar form of the maniple in the same way, hanging from the finger of their right hands. The Virgin carries her Child directly on this maniple. The iconographic feature that brings together the bishop and the Mother of God in Faras could reflect the common nature of Mary's priesthood and that of the prelate (Lidov 2009: 249). Moreover, by carrying the Child directly on the maniple, the Virgin makes a meaningful reference to the Host held by priests using a similar piece of cloth, that is, the way Christ the priest distributes Communion to the Apostles. Thus, the Theotokos of Faras is depicted in a manner reminiscent of a priest holding the Host of the Mass.

While the handkerchief may bear a liturgical meaning in some examples, this would give the image of the Theotokos a Eucharistic or sacerdotal connotation. However, this reading cannot be automatically applied to all the images of the Madonna with a handkerchief; such a hypothesis must be based on compelling iconographic and syntactic indicators. When the Virgin carries the Child directly on the handkerchief, when her image is represented with one or more themes referring to the Eucharist, and when the whole is anchored in the liturgical space, only then can a liturgical reading of the image be projected. However, in the absence of this type of (iconographic and syntactic) indicator, the presence of the handkerchief with the Virgin is insufficient to give the image a liturgical or sacerdotal meaning, although it may be an argument in this direction. For example, this type of cloth could serve either to wipe away Mary's tears as she suffers the Passion of her Son or to symbolize her suffering, as in scenes of the Crucifixion.

To conclude, in some examples, the Virgin seems to hold vestments giving her liturgical meaning, revealing her quality of a celebrating priest. However, this sacerdotal dimension may or may not coexist with other levels of meaning. It may, for example, coexist with dogmatic, devotional, cultic, apotropaic and other functions.



Fig. 8: Nubia, Cathedral of Faras, the National Museum of Warsaw, Bishop Marianos with the Virgin holding the Child (R. Y. Nasr)

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