

# THE HERMENEUTICS OF VAN EYCK'S GHENT ALTARPIECE

## The Kenotic Message of *The Annunciation* Panels

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### *Abstract*

The abundant literature on the Ghent Altarpiece, one of the most important artworks of the Northern Renaissance, completed in 1432 by Van Eyck, often claims that the Annunciation scene on that altarpiece is simply an illustration of the text Lk 1:26–38, followed faithfully by Van Eyck. Although it is beyond doubt that Van Eyck drew inspiration from that text, this paper attempts to establish and explore a different hypothesis, namely that Van Eyck intentionally moved away from Luke's text of the Annunciation, and for a very good reason, which is related to the composition and the message of the *Ghent Altarpiece* as a whole. The paper approaches this 'unconventional' hypothesis primarily by analyzing two possible approaches to the text of the Annunciation; the idyllic and the kenotic one. In this context, Van Eyck's way of presenting the Annunciation is observed from the perspective of the theoretical contributions to the hermeneutics of Luke's text, primarily in the work of Søren Kierkegaard and Joseph Ratzinger, in line with the kenotic (or existential) interpretation.

KEYWORDS: *Annunciation*, Van Eyck, hermeneutics, kenosis, Ratzinger, Kierkegaard

### *Introduction*

The hermeneutics of the *Ghent Altarpiece*<sup>1</sup> is particularly challenging for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is a polyptych consisting of as many as twenty panels. If these panels are viewed as a whole, there is no doubt that they

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1 *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432, 3,5 x 4,6 m, oil on wood, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.

form a coherent image of the Biblical world. Moreover, they cover the full scope of its history — starting with Adam and Eve in the first book of the Bible, all the way to the Mystic Lamb in the Revelation, the last book of the Bible. In addition, judging by the inscriptions on his clothes and the texts surrounding his throne, at the top of the open *Ghent Altarpiece* is the red-clad ruler of the world who is also the initiator of the world history. With this in mind, it could be argued that the *Ghent Altarpiece* is a painted Christian analogue of Plato's *Timaeus*. Just like the famous Plato's dialogue, the *Ghent Altarpiece* presents a series of symbols, many of which are very complex. Consequently, the main task of the “general hermeneutics” of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is the recognition and contextualization of these symbols, as well as the questioning of numerous and often conflicting hypotheses about their mutual relationship.

Secondly, the hermeneutics of the individual scenes of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is also very challenging, albeit for a slightly different reason. Although the Van Eyck brothers make sure they remain faithful to the biblical texts, at the same time, by intertwining countless details and symbols, they actually offer valuable and lucid *interpretations* of these scenes. For this reason, the relationship between the underlying text and its painted interpretation is another great challenge to any thorough, “specific hermeneutics” of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

This paper addresses one such challenge that the *Ghent Altarpiece* poses to “specific hermeneutics”. It analyzes the relationship between the biblical text of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel and its interpretation on the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The following hypothesis is being analyzed and verified: *the correct hermeneutic key for understanding the Annunciation is primarily kenotic, and this is because the structure of the Ghent Altarpiece as a whole requires this primacy.*

Following this train of thought, the concept of *kenosis* comes to the fore. This Greek word, κένωσις, actually means *emptiness*, as it is derived from the verb κενώω which means to *empty*. It is well known that the Christological meaning of that term is derived primarily from Phil 2:7. This line emphasizes that Christ “made Himself of no reputation” (ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν) by becoming obedient to the Father until death, death on the cross. Kenosis therefore means a kind of renunciation, Christ's self-emptying or self-expropriation which is a consequence of his readiness to experience human existence “from the inside.” (Koester 2001, 241) He did this by taking upon himself human transience and mortality, living in a situation deprived of the glory which he, as a Divine Being, has possessed from eternity. Kenosis therefore primarily appears as “a bridge between the Word and the world.” (Dawe 2011, 86) In this context, kenosis means that God, by entering human existence actually enters the hiddenness of his divinity, whereby Christ

*does not renounce his connection with the Father*, but his own omnipotence (Falque 2019, 52–53).

In the analysis of this hypothesis, the main point of reference for the hermeneutics of the biblical text will be the important commentary on *the Annunciation* by Joseph Ratzinger in his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, as well as the relevant parts of the diary entries of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Such an analysis of this hypothesis seems important because the very rich theoretical and critical literature on the *Ghent Altarpiece* oftentimes overlooks not only the possibility of such an “unconventional” interpretation of the *Annunciation* from the *Ghent Altarpiece*, but also the theological discourse that enables such an interpretation.

Although there are two New Testament accounts of the Annunciation (Mt 1:18–24 and Lk 1: 26–38), it is clear that the *Annunciation* on the *Ghent Altarpiece* relies on the one given by Luke. However, the fact that this is beyond doubt does not solve the problem of understanding Van Eyck’s intentions, but rather makes it even more complex. Namely the message of Lk 1:38 is reflected in the final part of that verse. Its meaning is truly enigmatic, so it is not surprising that in the long and rich history of its interpretation, two currents can be discerned. The first of them is completely conventional and clearly prevailing. We could call it *idyllic*. The second one is regularly in the shadow of the first one, and to a certain extent in a dialectical relationship with it. We could call it *kenotic*. Now we have to consider a complicated question: which of these currents is Van Eyck’s brush closer to? We approach this question by realizing that the answer to it could depend primarily on the way in which the last line of Luke’s account should be understood, i.e., Lk 1:38. Placing the hermeneutic focus on the first sentence of that line will entail an idyllic understanding, while placing it on the second will entail a kenotic understanding of the line. To which of these two possible interpretations is Van Eyck more inclined, and can it be discerned? Admittedly, the mentioned hypothesis already and quite obviously contains a preliminary anticipation of the answer to that question. That anticipation should now be subjected to serious questioning.

### 1. *The two-part line Lk 1:38 as a hermeneutic key of Van Eyck’s Annunciation scene*

Here is the text of Luke’s Annunciation scene, Lk 1:26–38.

<sup>26</sup>Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!” <sup>29</sup>But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and

considered what manner of greeting this was. <sup>30</sup>Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. <sup>33</sup>And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” <sup>34</sup>Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” <sup>35</sup>And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup>For with God nothing will be impossible.” <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1. Idyllic hypothesis

The announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary ends with the following line: “Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her.” (Lk 1:38) In many analyzes of that verse, the conventional idyllic approach can be observed. Although some of the commentators who apply this approach also spot a certain dialectical tension within that line (Johnson 1991, 39), they still agree that Mary’s words “Behold the maidservant of the Lord!” are certainly more important than the sentence that follows. Consequently, those who follow that path tend to conclude: “in her simplicity, Mary saw only one thing, the grace of the Lord.” (Rienecker 1959, 24) Such an approach is somewhat expected, since it can be solidly based on at least two convergent elements which precede that line, and on one element which immediately follows:

1. Gabriel greets Mary with a direct mention of joy (Luke 1:28), i.e., the Greek word Χαῖρε, connected with the noun χαρά, which means *joy*. Admittedly, it is an ordinary greeting, so it should not be interpreted as Gabriel’s attempt to emphasize some special solemnity with it. Nevertheless, it should probably be understood in its full meaning, i.e., in the sense of ‘*rejoice!*’ (Zerwick and Grosvenor 2019,171).

2. Two verses earlier, in Lk 1:30, Gabriel causally connects the promise of the manifestation of God’s extraordinary power with grace. The mention of joy is there once again, in the root of the word χάριν. As a result, the mentioned well-established belief that Mary sees nothing but God’s benevolence

2 All citations from the Bible are from the standard English edition of NKJV: *The Holy Bible. New King James Version*, ed. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1982.

in that encounter, can be directly traced back to that line. We should bear in mind, however, that these words are pronounced by Gabriel, not Mary.

3. The underlying tone of the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46–55) can be seen as a confirmation of Mary's joyful gratitude in Lk 1:38. Alfred Plummer, however, refutes such an interpretation, pointing out that Mary's words in the Greek original are not an expression of joy but primarily of submission (Plummer 1960, 16). Nevertheless, the meaning of Lk 1:38 is frequently interpreted in light of Mary's upcoming eulogy.

These three elements (especially the third one), leave room for a pleasant, sentimentalized and almost idyllic image of the Annunciation. Leon Morris, in his comments on Mary's obedience, writes about her "quiet submission." (Morris 1988, 82) Raymond Brown takes it one step further and highlights Mary's joyful, even enthusiastic acceptance (Brown 1993, 319). Along the same lines, and with some sentimentality, he concludes that with Mary's words of obedience "Behold the maidservant of the Lord...", Luke actually closes the scene of the Annunciation, and reminds the reader that the next scene of his Gospel will be the *Magnificat* (Brown 1993, 319). Read in this way, Mary's words are actually a recognition that she does not possess the truth, but that the truth she just heard possesses her.

Such comments on the Annunciation are certainly not entirely wrong; however, they do not exhaust all the credible interpretative possibilities, and the approaches mentioned so far could therefore be hiding a reductionist error. Thus, for example, Joseph Fitzmyer's commentary differs from Morris's, Brown's or Green's, in that he does note that Mary's words in Lk 1:38 are not the last words of Luke's account, but he considers what follows to be only a "refrain" characteristic of the composition of Luke's text (Fitzmyer 2009, 352).

These are the words that follow Mary's act of obedience: *καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτῆς ὁ ἄγγελος*, i.e., "... and the angel departed from her". A similar "refrain" can indeed be found at the end of the following paragraph. The end of the line Lk 1:56 is in a way structurally identical to the end of Lk 1:38, since the narrative about Mary's visit to Elizabeth concludes in a stylistically very similar way: "...and [Mary] returned to her house". The same could apply to Lk 1:23 — after completing his service, Zacharias "departed to his own house". But does this parallel prove that the second part of Lk 1:38, whose significance is thus diminished, is really just a tool of the text composition? Is it a mere rhetorical tool with which Luke closes the narrative of the Annunciation, or do these words also have their content value? We should pause over this dilemma and call into question Fitzmyer's solution, which actually reduces that second part of Lk 1:38 to a mere tool of expression. François Bovon holds a similar view and considers the words about the angel's departure as evidence of a smooth and predictable diplomatic protocol:

“The message has been conveyed. The addressee not only received it, but also accepted it. Now the angel can leave.” (Bovon 1989, 78) Hans Klein likewise views those words as having no particular substance: “Thus the messenger of God fulfilled his task.” (Klein 2006, 104)

It seems nevertheless that the meaning of the message about the angel's departure carries much more substance. The paragraph about the Annunciation begins with the words “in the sixth month.” (Lk 1:26) This means that the timing of the announcement of the birth of Jesus is connected to the context of the previous passage, i.e., the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, since in Lk 1:24 it is mentioned that Elizabeth hid her pregnancy for five months. This makes the transition from the narrative about Elizabeth's hidden pregnancy to the Annunciation scene particularly smooth, as the two paragraphs merge into one another. This is surely a testament to Luke's refined sense of style. With this in mind, the absence of such subtlety between the end of the Annunciation scene and the passage about Mary's visit to Elizabeth is even more noticeable. In contrast to the previously seen gentle transition (which could have been expected here as well, since Lk 1:39–56 actually continues the same theme), the transition between the words of Mary's obedience from Lk 1:38 (“Behold the maidservant of the Lord”) and the beginning of the next passage about Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Lk 1:39–56) is much more abrupt. Only one sentence separates the Annunciation scene that takes place in Mary's home from Mary's visit to Elizabeth. It is the sentence about Gabriel's departure.

Those who subscribe to the idyllic interpretation of the Annunciation see this sentence as a mere stylistic tool that bridges the two scenes. But what kind of gap is it, and what does it mean? Or more precisely, what is gaping out of it? Is it the mere absence of Luke's stylistic excellence? Or is something important being revealed in that perceived void? Unlike the authors mentioned above, two commentators, C. Kavin Rowe and Joseph Ratzinger, agree on an affirmative answer to the last of these questions. Both of them conclude that the sentence about Gabriel's departure is essentially *a message*, and not a mere formal stylistic device. However, they are not in complete agreement, as they differ in their interpretation of why this sentence is important. Perhaps a key element of the hermeneutics of Van Eyck's Annunciation could be discerned from this difference between them. For this reason, we should now focus on the interpretation of that sentence, i.e., on another approach to understanding Lk 1:38.

## 1.2. Kenotic hypothesis

### 1.2.1. *Ratzinger's and Kierkegaard's twist: Existential meaning of Lk 1:38*

In Joseph Ratzinger's work, there are several commentaries on the Annunciation that can undoubtedly be classified as belonging to the previously sketched idyllic hypothesis. One commentary on the Annunciation and especially on Lk 1:38 is different, however — the one in the *Infancy Narratives*, which is chronologically the last, but in fact the first book of Ratzinger's trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth*. Its tone is largely different from his previous texts addressing the same topic. This difference is all the more important as it appears in Ratzinger's last work. When asked if he intended to write something else, he resolutely answered: "No! No, no, I knew after Christmas [i.e., *Infancy Narratives*] this is *Nunc dimittis*; I have done my work." (Ratzinger 2016, 26) So, on the pages he knows will be the last ones of his written works, Ratzinger, commenting on the Annunciation, writes: "I think it is important to also hear the last sentence of Luke's narrative about the Annunciation: 'And the angel departed from her.' (Lk 1:38) The glorious moment of meeting God's messenger, in which her whole life is turned upside down, is now gone, and Mary is left alone with the task that actually surpasses all human skill. There are no angels around her." (Ratzinger 2012, 47) It is thus obvious that his approach to Lk 1:38, compared to the prevailing approach mentioned earlier, opens up a completely different horizon of understanding the Annunciation.

The gap between Mary's words and the angel's departure in Lk 1:38 is still there, however, joy or mystery are no longer highlighted as a key consequence of Gabriel's hermeneutic action. The focus is rather on *Mary's existential situation* brought about by the Annunciation. With this shift, the soothing, contemplative aspect disappears. Something different emerges — a movement, a departure from the unquestionably beneficial space of a mystery, which is an incomprehensible but nevertheless a pleasant secret.

This interpretive turn seems to put an end to the intimacy that comes from the realization that one is privileged by being close to the Holy, which until now seemed to only reveal its unsuspected intimate face. Ratzinger removed the charm that the well-established habit conferred to the image of the Annunciation. The Annunciation which thus appears before our eyes is comparable in one detail to Schelling's *Erlangen lectures*. He highlights, albeit in a different context, something that can shed light on Mary's existential situation precisely in the sense of Ratzinger's comment. In the spirit of romanticism, Schelling remarks: "only he has realized the full depth of

life who has once abandoned everything [...] and who has reflected on the infinite alone (*mit unendlicher allein*).” (Schelling 1968, 18)<sup>3</sup>

This reveals the first and most fundamental determinant of such an understanding of the Annunciation. The departure of the angel in Lk 1:39 and the void he leaves behind reflect on Mary's situation. She remains alone with the Infinite. In that solitude, she can only remember Gabriel. He slipped away. In this regard, it is worth asking: did this departure add anything to the understanding of the meaning of Gabriel's initial greeting to Mary (“Ave Maria...”), which Van Eyck inscribed on the panel of the Ghent *Annunciation*? If we were to ask the Jewish poet Edmond Jabès for his opinion, his answer to that question would certainly be affirmative. Analyzing the Old Testament epiphanies, he resolutely claims that the very act of writing down contains the melancholy of a lost closeness to the Holy. As he writes in his *Book of Questions*, the Holy One laid the foundations for the history by breaking his silence (Jabès 1984, 15). However, the fact that he returns to silence again and again remains a problem. In his work *Writing and Difference*, Jacques Derrida analyzed such claims within Jabès's poetics and commented on them: “Writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation.” (Derrida 2005, 83) If we look at Gabriel's greeting inscribed on the *Ghent Altarpiece* in light of his departure, it may seem that Derrida's quote also applies to him. The essence of writing is indeed melancholy, because, especially in this context, writing preserves the memory of what is irrevocably gone. So, what is the meaning of the written heavenly greeting which in the meantime has been shattered by the awareness of the departure and withdrawal of Heaven into “unapproachable light”? In relation to that departure, could the written greeting be not only the preservation of a precious memory but also something like — consolation? Perhaps the core of melancholy itself shines from the depths of that realization. After Gabriel's departure, Mary, in her isolation, is facing the task of fulfilling the words she has just received. These questions could indeed be seen as possible implications of Ratzinger's remark about the importance of the second part of Lk 1:38.

This cannot relativize the meaning of Mary's solitude as a consequence of the angelic departure. Without further assistance from the departed angel, she remains alone with the memory of the infinite Being and the infinity of his request. In the so-called idyllic commentaries on the Annunciation, the departure of the angel and the void created by that departure were directed primarily towards the opacity of the mystery. Now this void turns towards Mary. This means that the impenetrability of silence is no longer linked with some external intervention. It no longer has a direct connection with

3 Cit. according to: Damir Barbarić, ed., *Filozofija njemačkog idealizma. Hrestomatija filozofije*, Vol. 6 (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1998), pg. 562.

the angel, his message or the miracle that his words set in motion. Following Gabriel's departure, the silence of emptiness is completely internalized. As Rudolf Otto observed in his most influential book when analyzing the *mysterium tremendum*: This emptiness is connected to a phenomenon inherent to every contact with the Sacred in our world. It is the experience of the silence of the Sacred which, following its withdrawal, almost mercilessly leaves the soul in the profane (Otto 2006, 22). In his commentary of Otto, Simon D. Podmore connects the experience of the inevitable return to the profane with the original sense of *nostalgia*, because that term comes from Greek, and is composed of νόστος meaning *homecoming* and ἄλγος, i.e., suffering, pain (Podmore 2011, 69). Otto points out that this kind of suffering, caused by the ending of the closeness to the Holy and the Epiphany, stems from the radical opposition between the Holy as “completely different” and everything that is outside the Holy (Otto 2006, 23). This is why leaving the vicinity of the Holy, or the end of the Epiphany, is like exile, which is inherent to the experience of the Epiphany itself. Mary had to face the situation of being *beyond the Epiphany*, with the realization that she would no longer hear the voice and get answers from the angel. From now on she would experience the *no-response*.

The mention of no-response is not accidental. Emmanuel Levinas developed this term through rich reflection in his Sorbonne lectures on death. He points out that surrendering to the irrevocability of the *sans-réponse* (Levinas 1993, 17) is the very essence of the experience of the death of another human being. This no-response is one of the possible facets of Mary's solitude mentioned by Ratzinger in his commentary on Lk 1:38.

However, the key to Mary's solitude is not only the no-response, but also the impossibility to communicate to others the order she received. She is tasked with carrying out that request, even though the possibility to translate it into a language that the world would understand was ruled out in advance. If the scene of the Annunciation on the *Ghent Altarpiece* is observed from this perspective, it might seem that Van Eyck wants to especially emphasize this untranslatability. That abyss would certainly seem smaller, and even significantly bridged, if Van Eyck had placed the scene in a church, as he did in the painting *the Virgin in the Church* (1425),<sup>4</sup> or four years after the *Ghent Altarpiece*, in his second, *Washington Annunciation* (1436). In both of these paintings, the elements of Gothic architecture are visible, which, in accordance with the metaphysical ideas that underpin Gothic art, clearly suggests *isolation* from the world, and even, in accordance with the sublime nature of the scene, elevation *above the world*.

4 Jan Van Eyck: *The Virgin in the Church*, around 1425, oil on wood, 32 x 14 cm, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany.

Contrary to that, the scene of the Annunciation on the *Ghent Altarpiece* unfolds in the *midst of the world*. Through the openings in the walls, it is evident that the scene of the Ghent Annunciation is actually set in the Flanders of Van Eyck's time, regardless of whether the painted houses resemble Ghent or Bruges of that period. This geographical choice is, of course, a figment of the imagination of the Van Eyck brothers, as well as a sign of understandable local patriotism. In Luke's Gospel there is no information about the place in which the announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary took place. It is only stated that Gabriel "having come in..." (Lk 1:28) Even if this could be read as a gentle reference to Mary's home, it is more likely that Van Eyck's choice was based on an apocryphal text that had a significant influence on Christian tradition and art. The *Protoevangelium of James* can be considered the source of the tradition of depicting the "domestic" version of the Annunciation in art (Drummond 2018, 10), because in that text the Annunciation is placed in the context of Mary's home (Elliot 1993, 61; no. 10.2–11.2). Following this lead, Van Eyck's poignant depiction of the Ghent Annunciation could be likened to the imagined process of a contemporary painter who would place Gabriel in Mary's modest apartment, for example, between the refrigerator and the TV set (Schmidt 2021, 117), perhaps with a mobile phone in his hand. However, engaging in this thought experiment is less important than gaining another important insight: such a "homely" presentation of the Annunciation emphasizes the difference, i.e., the mutual distance between the "extraordinary" nature of Gabriel's message and the "regularity" of the world into which he brought that message.

This further exacerbates Mary's paradox. The untranslatability of the request she received creates a burden for her in the midst of the world, and this is where she needs to carry it. In other words, with the incommunicable nature of the request, she does not withdraw from the world, but undeniably remains in it. This, however, does not alleviate the paradox or heal it, since the world actually withdraws from her. In the twilight of her life, Hannah Arendt wrote about the unusual direction of the world's movement, reversed from what is expected, mentioning "gradual (rather sudden) transformation of a world with familiar faces (no matter, foe or friend) into a kind of desert, populated by strange faces. In other words, it is not me who withdraws but the world that dissolves." (Brightman 1995, 352) This interesting inversion, which in Arendt's original text is a clear consequence of her age, also happens to Mary, but for different reasons. The withdrawal of the world is a consequence of the incommunicability of the Annunciation.

#### 1.2.2.1. *Illegibility to the world*

There is a common interpretation of why Mary's consent in the Annunciation on the *Ghent Altarpiece* is written as a mirrored image. The justification

for this is regularly found in Van Eyck's need to emphasize that this consent is not intended for human eyes, or even Gabriel's, but only for God.

However, there is another, even more challenging possibility of interpreting Van Eyck's mirror writing of Mary's consent. This reader-unfriendly calligraphy can also be interpreted as a sign that Mary's words "Behold the maidservant of the Lord!" imply her voluntary withdrawal *into the illegibility to the world*. This illegibility is parallel to the obedience itself. Kierkegaard understands this very well, as shown in two of his works.

First of all, this illegibility to the world is a pronounced, or perhaps even a key feature of his Antigone in *Either-Or*. His Antigone remains in the same mood as the original one, Sophocles's: she is a "daughter of sorrow" [given] "a dowry of pain." (Kierkegaard 1987, 153) Her state is a consequence of her well-known dilemma — she resolves it by obeying her moral sense, which ultimately turns her into a tragic heroine. However, what's more important than Kierkegaard's obedience to the recognizable matrix from antiquity is certainly his view of Antigone's position in the world that surrounds her. He says that nothing makes a person as noble as keeping a secret and explains that Antigone does not belong to the world in which she lives, because her life, although rich and healthy, is completely hidden from the world and unfathomable to it. At the same time, Antigone's happiness, as well as her strength, lies precisely in the fact that she is not up to the standards of the world. The dictate of her secret means that she knows her place is *outside of the world*, and the more she is immersed in that secret, the more she becomes inaccessible to everything that surrounds her. The pinnacle of the separation of Antigone from the world is found in an unexpected metaphor, in which Kierkegaard, describing Antigone, chooses the words that strongly resemble the usual characteristics of the Virgin Mary: "Purely esthetically, she is *virgo mater* [virgin mother]; she carries her secret under her heart, concealed and hidden. Precisely because she is secretive, she is silence, but this turning back into oneself implicit in silence gives her a preternatural bearing" (Kierkegaard 1987, 158).

The text *Fear and Trembling* should be approached precisely within the echo of this quote, especially since that book was published in 1843, the same year that Kierkegaard made public the aforementioned reflections on Antigone in *Either-Or*. It is interesting to note that in some important parts of that text, Kierkegaard analyzes Abraham and Mary from the same perspective of illegibility to the world, just as he observed Antigone in *Either-Or*. In the book *Fear and Trembling*, he strongly emphasized the absence of any possibility of Abraham's relying on being understood by the world. In light of this, it is not surprising that afterwards he noted how Mary also expressed her consent in Lk 1:38 in spite of everything. According to Kierkegaard's text, what does fear and trembling refer to in Mary's case? Or rather, what is

actually contained in the words “Behold the maidservant of the Lord”? It is torment, anxiety and paradox, which have as a consequence Mary’s illegibility to the world. It is in this sense that we can interpret Kierkegaard’s remark that no one can understand Mary, taken aback as she is by the Annunciation and Gabriel’s departure (Kierkegaard 2000, 86). This is, therefore, another version of the typical Kierkegaardian “leap of faith”, so present and obvious especially in the interpretation of Abraham’s doubts in *Fear and Trembling*.

Starting from such an interpretation of Van Eyck’s calligraphic version of Mary’s response, let us return to Ratzinger’s commentary on Lk 1:38 in the *Infancy Narratives*. Continuing his analysis of the implications of Gabriel’s departure, Ratzinger connects the meaning of that line with Mary’s upcoming experience of Christ’s passion. “She must continue on the path that leads through many darknesses [...] even to the night of the cross.” (Ratzinger 2012, 47) Is this the actual content of her illegibility? If Kierkegaard’s Antigone is unreadable to the world because of the torment she is experiencing, if Abraham is equally unreadable because he cannot translate the content of God’s request into the language of the world, could it be that Mary’s unreadability arises not only from Gabriel’s words but also from the premonition of their underlying implication, the one that Ratzinger pointed out?

A significant emphasis should be placed on another Ratzinger’s earlier commentary on the Annunciation. It was written in *Christmas Blessing* in the 1980s and it is interesting because at first glance it gives the impression that nothing will shatter the idyllic image of the Annunciation. However, in the *Christmas Blessing* (Ratzinger 2005, 37–38), he also writes about “drama that returns again and again,” (Ratzinger 2005, 84) by which he refers to the “deep connection between Christmas and Easter, the nativity scene and the cross.” (Ratzinger 2005, 85) In a note to that text, he refers to the “amazing interpretation” (Ratzinger 2005, 104) of the theology of the Christmas icon which he had found in the book of the Russian Orthodox theologian Pavel Nikolayevich Evdokimov.

If we follow that lead and reach for Evdokimov’s essay that Ratzinger admires on those pages of the *Christmas Blessing*, it is easy to see that Evdokimov shares Ratzinger’s tendency to see the birth of Christ (and thus the Annunciation) primarily as the beginning of Christ’s kenosis. Evdokimov emphasizes this point of view even more strongly than Ratzinger. Analyzing the icon of the birth of Christ created by the Novgorod school in the sixteenth century, Evdokimov observes right at the beginning of his text that the Christian West, especially under the influence of Franciscan spirituality, is focused on the human side of the Christmas mystery, and thus sees in the newborn Jesus more of a “man–God than God–man.” (Evdokimov 1991, 271) In contrast, as Evdokimov highlights, the Orthodox East under the influ-

ence of its tradition in the development of dogmatics, “drastically cleanses [Christmas] of all sentimentality.” (Evdokimov 1991, 272)

In this context, it is particularly interesting to note Evdokimov’s clarification of the dogmatic content of Christmas, in which a very precise hierarchy of values has been established. This hierarchy, as Evdokimov writes, looks like this: “Above all, 1) God’s downward movement; 2) then the miracle of maternal virginity, the divine response to the Virgin’s “fiat” which is the human condition of the Incarnation and is unprecedented correlative: the human being gives birth to its own Creator, and finally, 3) the goal of Divine philanthropy, the deification of man.” (Evdokimov 1991, 273)

Of the three levels, “God’s downward movement” is, according to Evdokimov, “above all”. He expressed this statement primarily on the basis of the above-mentioned difference in the Christological emphasis between the Christian East and the West. Nevertheless, perhaps we should adhere to the decisive statement of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who disputes the uniqueness of the East in this sense, since “there is certainly no theological expression in which the East would be as unanimous with the West as in the assertion that the incarnation took place for the purpose of redeeming people on the cross.” (von Balthasar 1990, 24) Evdokimov’s primacy of God’s downward movement can therefore also be seen as a derivative of that fundamental agreement. Leonid Uspenski’s interpretation of the Nativity of Christ icon of Novgorod differs from Evdokimov’s. It is interesting to note that Uspenski connects this motif of “God’s downward movement” with the distinct symbolism of the place of Christ’s birth. Namely, the icon depicts the newborn Jesus in a cave from which a completely opaque darkness emerges, which is a clear symbol of his descent into the shadow of human death (Uspenski and Loski 2008, 157).<sup>5</sup> Having all of these elements in mind, we can say that the notion of incarnation as understood by Evdokimov can undoubtedly be called *kenotic*.

At this point it is not necessary to go into the details of a very interesting discussion about kenosis whose beginnings can be traced back to the period of the early Church Fathers. At the time, these thoughts were developed in the face of the challenges posed by the Greek philosophical thought and its understanding of transcendence, especially in the tradition of (neo)platonistic metaphysics. It should only be noted that, if the text by Pavel Evdokimov about the Christmas icon is viewed from the kenotic point of view, then its pinnacle is unquestionably in the following thoughts:

The icon now appears in all its messianic and eschatological meaning: 1) Birth in which everything is already completed and fulfilled; 2) the terrible secret of

5 Nevertheless, the hermeneutics of that icon in this book does not have such a pronounced kenotic emphasis, which is difficult to overlook in Evdokimov’s text.

God becoming man. This has now been revealed with all of its implications. Eternity and time embrace each other. In fact, the proskomidia service at the beginning of the Orthodox liturgy represents the 'Lamb sacrificed before the creation of the world'. It is the sacrifice of divine love in eternity. The Eucharistic Lamb is placed on a plate or paten. After that rite of pre-eternal sacrifice, the priest places a star, the star of Bethlehem, over the Lamb, saying: 'the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and 'stood over where the young Child was' (Mt 2:9). This is the beginning of the liturgy in which the sacrifice is rooted in the present moment. *The Bethlehem Lamb is already the Eucharistic Lamb.* (Evdokimov 1993, 283)<sup>6</sup>

This important thought makes it easier to understand Evdokimov's fundamental effort to move the manifestation of Christ's kenosis backwards. This shift is clearly based on the statement that Christ's self-emptying did not start on the Golgotha cross, with Christ's cry over being abandoned by the Father (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34), or with his experience of human death on Good Friday and on Holy Saturday.<sup>7</sup> This happened long before, as early as at the very beginning, with the birth of Christ. In other words, it follows from Evdokimov's point of view that this complete immersion in the fragility of mortal humanity should be discerned already in Bethlehem. This means that Bethlehem is a fundamental manifestation of Christ's kenosis, and the cross is only its unquestionable pinnacle. In this sense, it can indeed be asserted that Christ's humility is not just one of his attributes but also an expression of his very being (Šaško 2019, 2 and 5). Evdokimov is by no means alone in developing this thought and returning to it again and again. The support for this kenotic thought, as Hans Urs von Balthasar convincingly demonstrated, can easily be found, not only in all the Gospels, but also, quite abundantly, in the early tradition (von Balthasar 1990, 19–27).

If we compare Evdokimov's kenotic understanding of the Incarnation with Ratzinger's interpretation of the Annunciation (indirectly in the *Christmas Blessing* and directly in the *Infancy Narratives*), two conclusions seem obvious:

1. Ratzinger's interpretation of the Annunciation is so comparable to Evdokimov's approach to the Incarnation that it can also be called *kenotic*.

2. While Evdokimov places the beginning of kenosis in the birth of Christ, Ratzinger moves it *further back* and recognizes its beginning already in the Annunciation. This is actually completely in line with the church tradition, since Leo the Great already asserted that Christ's incarnation took place because of his cross (Leo the Great: *Sermo* 71.2; PL 54, 387; Ide 2013, 36).

6 *My italics.*

7 Probably no one in Western art has painted this submersion more impressively than Hans Holbein in the painting *Dead Christ in the Tomb*; Hans Holbein the Younger: *Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521–1522), oil and tempera on linden wood, 30.5x200 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland.

### 1.3. The kenotic center of Van Eyck's *Annunciation*

Where should Van Eyck's Ghent *Annunciation* be positioned, considering these orientation points? Let us answer that question hypothetically by proposing a position close to the existential, Kierkegaardian Mary as opposed to a glorified, idealized Mary. Such an attempt should be divided into two steps: on the *Ghent Altarpiece* one should first recognize the elements of both the existential and the idyllic, and then, continuing the analysis, put them in a mutual relationship.

When analyzing this problem, it is necessary to get closer to Van Eyck's Gabriel and focus on his face. That face, mild and solemn, seems to be an illustration of the name of the holiday that he is just establishing — he knows that he is announcing good news. It is quite easy to connect such a message carried by his facial expression with the key insight that undoubtedly opens the horizon of the glorified, idealized Mary on the *Ghent Altarpiece*. This horizon can be opened quite simply, with one stroke, by interpreting the panels of the *Annunciation* in the light of the four semicircular lunettes that are placed directly above them. Above Gabriel is the prophet Zechariah, and on the scroll behind him there is a quote from the corresponding book: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you." (Zach 9:9) Above the figure of Mary in the scene of the *Annunciation*, in a similar semicircular lunette, is the prophet Micah, and above him there is a scroll with a text from his Book, announcing the arrival of the Lord. In the traditional typological reading of the Old Testament, these verses are typically considered prophecies of the coming of the Messiah.

Between those two prophets and their books are sibyls. These are prophetesses from the pagan world, who, as Schmidt (2021, 115) explains, found their place here because the *Sibylline Books*, a collection of prophecies of the Cumaean Sibyl written in ancient Greek in the form of hexameters, took on a Christian interpretation in terms of prophecies of the coming of Christ already in the second and third centuries. Thus, on the left side, in white clothes, there is the Eritraean Sibyl, and on the right, in green clothes, the Cumaean Sibyl. The presence of these pagan prophetesses on the *Ghent Altarpiece* and their participation in the interpretation of the *Annunciation* scene is connected with the belief that the pagan world is also included in God's plan of salvation. This message is also emphasized by the fact that one of the sibyls, the Cumaean (as well as the prophet Micah), with her eyes directed downwards, is actually looking at the prophecy, thus establishing a direct relationship with that scene. It is precisely in this context that the text appearing on the sibyls' scrolls should be understood. Thus, the scroll of the Eritrean sibyl contains a text taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI,50): "Nil mortale sonans afflata... es numine celso", i.e., "Her voice is not mortal, now

the divinity has breathed near her". The connection of this verse with the Annunciation is obvious. In this context, this verse refers to Mary's consent, i.e., the uttering of the words: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord!"

The inscription on the scroll of the Cumaean sibyl also emphasizes transcendence, i.e., an event which is beyond history. This text does not come from the *Sibylline book*, as is sometimes stated, but from a completely different source. Its author is pseudo-Augustine. The text reads: "Rex a (L...N) adveniet per secla futura scilicet in carne". It is an abbreviated version of the following text: "Iudicii signum, tellus sudore madescet/ E coelo Rex adveniet per secla futurus/ Scilicet in carne praesens ut iudicet orbem." It could be translated as follows: "[On] the sign of judgment, sweat will drip on/from the earth/ the eternal King will come from heavens/ present in the flesh to judge the world." (Schmidt 2021, 115) The choice of these quotes is interesting, although it remains uncertain why they were chosen, given that there is no shortage of quotes and prophecies that are more directly related to the incarnation of Christ. Thus, in contrast to what is actually written on the scroll, a completely natural choice of prophetic words would be, for example, Isaiah's "Ecce virgo concipet", i.e., "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7 ,14) However, aside from these speculations, it is more important to notice that these messages are still connected to the Annunciation, in such a way that they elevate its message and meaning *above* time, as they observe it, *sub specie aeternitatis*. From this point of view, the messages from the sibyls' scrolls are aligned with the inscriptions from the lunettes of the Old Testament prophets. Moreover, it should be noted that the message of all the figures in the lunettes placed above the Annunciation is actually uniform and can be formulated as follows: the entire history is converging towards the Annunciation because its content and implications represent the pinnacle of history. In this context, the messages of the prophets and the sibyls above the Annunciation are aligned with the sublime, glorified image of Mary. Crucial to this image is the emphasis of Mary's exceptionality, i.e., her heavenly dignity. Indeed, on the panel in the upper row of the open *Ghent Altarpiece*, Mary is undoubtedly crowned as the Queen of Heaven. As such, she is truly elevated above the world.

One should nevertheless ask: why, with what purpose does Van Eyck highlight this aspect? Why does he need it? The answer to that question could be: Van Eyck needs this interpretative emphasis of Mary's exaltation as a *link* with the crowned and glorified Virgin who sits together with John the Baptist in the immediate vicinity of God's throne in the highest, upper row of the panels of the open *Ghent altar*. This link is therefore directed *upwards*: it connects the Annunciation with the glorified Virgin Mary.

If this hypothesis is correct, it means that Van Eyck could not completely distance his scene of the Annunciation from the image of sublime Mary if he wished to preserve the coherence of the message of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. In other words, Mary of the Annunciation is connected to the representation of the Mother of God near God's throne precisely through the four lunettes above the scene of the Annunciation, since the message of those lunettes forms the hermeneutical key for a particularly sublime understanding of the scene of the Annunciation.

However, this sublimity should not obscure the realization that Van Eyck's Annunciation also has a different, "Kierkegaardian–Ratzingerian" component, i.e., an existential component. When invoking this, we should approach Gabriel once more. He wears a diadem around his head, on which, masterfully painted, semi-transparent, and surrounded by pearls, a sapphire appears. That stone is also a kind of pedestal for a large golden cross which rises from the top of the angel's forehead. This means that with Gabriel's diadem, Van Eyck actually depicted, made visible, that same shift of the Christological emphasis forward — from Golgotha to the announcement of Christ's birth. In other words, for Van Eyck, just like for the theologians mentioned in the previous discussion, Evdokimov and Ratzinger, kenosis cannot be postponed. It is not transferred to the yet-to-be reality of the one whose birth Gabriel came to announce. It is the other way around; the cross is in the scene of Van Eyck's Ghent Annunciation — *coinciding and communicated together* with the Annunciation. This means that by placing the cross on Gabriel's diadem, Van Eyck actually affirms the key thesis of the previous discussion: in Christ's earthly existence there is no "not-yet" when it comes to kenosis, instead, it always "already is" in incarnated Christ. The meaning of Van Eyck's Ghent Annunciation can only be fully understood in the light of this starting point.

Although it may not be obvious at first glance, Gabriel's cross is the real instrument of "de-idealization" of the Annunciation, as it makes his message to Mary more layered, but also sharper. This really seems like the end of a dream about an uplifting, idyllic Annunciation. Referring back to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, as well as his aforementioned diary entries, some parallels can be drawn between Abraham and Mary. In this context, the cross implies that Mary became a new "knight of faith" (Kierkegaard 2000, 71) comparable to Abraham, and by the same token she was too, just like him, banished into the "dark night". This is all the more paradoxical as it is clear that this exile, just like in Abraham's case, is actually a consequence of her newly manifested consent to God's plan, and not of the contestation or denial. This must be painful for the one who so wholeheartedly agreed. Because of this, Mary's existential situation is no less marked by exile than

Abraham's. Gabriel's cross is therefore a tool of paradox. It contrasts the announcement of God's light with the darkness that darkens that light.

It is precisely because she accepted her mission that, due to the inevitability of the angel's departure, Mary will suffer loneliness along with the awareness that she is delivering Jesus to the darkness of human death. In a way, this is Mary's part of Christ's kenosis.

Gabriel's greeting to Mary, the hermeneutics of his message, and the premonition of the cross in Van Eyck's painting are all a part of the same scene, which creates an interesting impression that they are actually completely simultaneous. This effectively annuls the before and after. With this in mind, it is necessary to deepen the previously asked question: would Gabriel have remained credible if he had excluded this knowledge from his appearance in Nazareth? In other words, if kenosis is the fundamental truth of Christ's incarnation (Kasper 1999, 284), then it cannot be omitted from the Annunciation of Christ's coming. This is why all hermeneutic lines of Van Eyck's Annunciation converge towards the cross on Gabriel's diadem. This cross clearly shows that he did not remain silent about the most important message to Mary. It is the same message that Luke will somewhat postpone, as in his text Mary will directly receive it later, i.e., during the Jesus's presentation in the Temple, when the old man Simeon will tell her: "sword will pierce through your own soul also." (Lk 2:35) Unlike in Luke's reports, Van Eyck's Virgin knows this from the very beginning, from the first moment of the Annunciation, or at least from the moment she saw the cross on Gabriel's diadem and understood its meaning.

In one of his diary entries, Kierkegaard understands this in a particularly dialectical way, and emphasizes the inevitable ambiguity of Mary's inner life at that moment. He first joins the expected predominant narrative by emphasizing Mary's gratitude to God for giving her this extraordinary historical role. This is why she will later say, in the text of the *Magnificat*: "henceforth all generations will call me blessed." (Lk 1:48) It is an expected thought. However, this conventional interpretation is not Kierkegaard's main emphasis in that text. He continues, perhaps surprisingly, by pointing out that Mary is "not happy," (Cappelørn 2014, 265) because she feels that this chosenness actually means that she will be sacrificed (Cappelørn 2014, 265).

This tension does not come from the outside as something that would be added to Van Eyck's Ghent vision of the angel's meeting with Mary. On the contrary, Gabriel's cross proves that this thought is already woven into the Ghent Annunciation. This actually sharpens the dialectic between Mary who is being touched by the Sacred and the prophecy of Simeon about the "sword" which is an inseparable part of that touch.

Another striking detail of Van Eyck's Ghent Annunciation leads to this same thought. Namely the book that Mary had been reading before Gabriel

arrived remained open. The visible page is written in “crypto-text”, i.e., letters that are not legible. Nevertheless, something can still be read on that page. The ninth line from the bottom, although hard to decipher, undoubtedly reads: *De visione Dei*. If this inscription is placed in the context of the cross from Gabriel’s diadem, the message seems very clear. From that perspective, it can be seen as another version of Van Eyck’s fundamental kenotic idea. With that message, already in the Annunciation, Mary became aware that to see God means to see his cross. Faced with this realization, Van Eyck could by no means honor Mary from the *Annunciation* with the same dignified serenity enjoyed by the glorified Mother of God. It is clear why this is so: Mary from the *Annunciation* is facing the cross from Gabriel’s diadem, while, on the other hand, the experience of the cross is already *behind the* glorified Mother of God. She is no longer burdened by the urgent present moment which bears the harsh implications of the angel’s Nazarene hermeneutics, but dwells on the other side of the Easter dawn. Consequently, she is glorified both for her dignity and for the resurrection of the one who was once crucified, and she can read much more calmly than she could at that decisive moment when Gabriel entered her home, bringing her the unconceivable news.

It is impossible to remove a deep inner tension from this news: on the one hand, Gabriel, as we have seen, truly brings the Good News, but on the other hand, he also announces its shadow — the cross of Christ. Thus, Christ’s incarnation becomes inseparable from his kenosis. As stated by Carol J. Purtle commenting on the Ghent Annunciation, the fundamental message of that scene is that Christ, when taking on a human body, was immediately (that means, from the very moment of his entry into the world) ready to offer himself as a sacrifice (Purtle 1982, 28). The theological foundation of such a position can undoubtedly be found, just as Purtle states, for example, in an important place in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come.’” (Heb 10: 6–7) This line, considering its previous context (Heb 7: 23–27), emphasizes what is also the key message of Van Eyck’s Ghent Annunciation: the sacrificial self-offering of the High Priest begins with his entry into the world.

It is necessary to return to Mary once again in view of the immediacy of Christ’s kenosis, because it is precisely in this light that another important, and usually completely hidden, element of understanding the Annunciation could be discerned. As we have already seen from the message on the cross on Gabriel’s diadem, it is quite clear that the fundamental point of that cross (just like the subsequent intervention of Simeon in the Temple) is actually the inclusion of Mary in the immediacy of Christ’s kenosis. Directly or not, both Gabriel and Simeon reveal the same thing to Mary — the knowledge

that she will see the death of her son. Just as it was written about Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Mary, from the moment she saw Gabriel's cross (Simeon only confirmed it), knew that she would outlive her newly announced son. Analogous to the aforementioned text from the Epistle to the Hebrews which refers to Christ, the fundamental effect of the cross on Gabriel's diadem is that it becomes operational as soon as she understands what she sees. This means that this cross does not foreshadow, but rather *marks* the beginning of "Mary's Golgotha", making that beginning irrevocable, and bringing it forward, long before she would actually stand on it. This knowledge subtly connects her to Abraham walking with Isaac towards Moriah.

This corresponds to a beautiful image by Rilke, according to which man does not actually go towards death, but always carries it inside his body, "... as the fruit contains its kernel. Children had a small one inside, and adults a large one. Women had it in their womb, and men in their chest. You had it, and it gave you a peculiar kind of dignity and a quiet pride." (Rilke 2016, 8)

### 3. *Why does Van Eyck need a kenotic emphasis of the Annunciation?*

To address this question, let us return to the cross on Gabriel's diadem. Now it is necessary to reconsider the possibility of adding another layer of meaning to the understanding of that cross. It is possible to assert that this cross does not only have a possibility of having the previously explained kenotic meaning, but that Van Eyck might also need it as a link between *the Annunciation* and the *Mystical Lamb*. This can be proven. The angel next to the altar of the Lamb is holding Christ's cross and his crown of thorns. It is a clear and direct reminder of Christ's kenosis. It is therefore not surprising that this angel also wears a diadem around his head, in the center of which is almost the same cross as on Gabriel's diadem in the scene of the Annunciation. This parallelism is not accidental, since such strongly emphasized crosses on diadems are worn only by those among the angels who surround the cross and the altar with the Lamb. This means that the cross on Gabriel's diadem irrefutably connects the future Lamb's wound with the present of the Annunciation. The angel with a diadem near the altar of the *Mystical Lamb* emphasizes the same message, only from the opposite direction: he actually highlights the unbroken thread between the "present" of the Lamb's altar which he is witnessing and the past of the Lamb's cross anticipated in the Annunciation. This is an implication of the similarity of those crosses. In this way, just like the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb 4:14–16), Van Eyck relativized or even erased the boundary between kenosis and

Eucharist. Two related elements show that Van Eyck painted precisely that erased border:

1. The Altar of the *Mystical Lamb*, and not the heavenly glory, is by far the largest scene on the entire polyptych: it extends over the entire lower part of the open *Ghent altar*. This is where one should look for its central message. The wounded Lamb is on the altar. That wound is the image of his kenosis.

2. The Lamb's blood is pouring down into the chalice. The chalice refers to liturgy. That emphasis by Van Eyck is completely logical, if we consider the history of the *Ghent Altarpiece* which was initially commissioned and used in the liturgical space and in the vicinity of the place where the mass was celebrated.

The connection between kenosis and liturgy is completely natural, since the Eucharist is by definition a “memorial of Christ's Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice.” (CCC 1362) This means that the Eucharist should be perceived as “the sacrificial memorial of Christ and his Body.” (CCC 1358) This supplements the meaning of the cross on Gabriel's diadem, which is much more than just a possible Van Eyck's hint about the content of the angel's kerygma on kenosis or his mere hermeneutic tool limited only to the Annunciation. Thus, by merging kenosis and the Eucharist, Gabriel's cross becomes the link that connects the scene of the Annunciation with the main panel of the *Ghent Altar*, i.e., the *Mystic Lamb*. On the altar of the Mystic Lamb, the kenosis of Christ is transformed into a liturgical act.

In this context, based on all the elements presented in this paper, we can conclude the following: although it could be argued that the message of Van Eyck's Annunciation should be placed in the middle between the triumphant Mother of God on one side, and Mary the Maidservant on the other, it is actually close to Kierkegaard's and Ratzinger's existential, kenotic mariological statements.

#### 4. *Conclusion*

Based on the argumentative material presented in this paper, it is possible to formulate the following three conclusions.

1. In order to understand Luke's account of the Annunciation (Lk 1: 26–38), the meaning of the last line of that account, Lk 1:38, is crucial. In this respect, there are two streams of thought. The first one, characterized by an idyllic understanding, considers the first part of that line, i.e., Mary's consent, as decisive. The second one emphasizes the second part of that line, i.e., the angel's departure, which shifts the understanding of that text

towards the foreshadowing of Christ's passion, i.e., towards the kenotic understanding.

2. In his book *The Infancy Narratives*, Joseph Ratzinger points to the importance of the second part of Lk 1:38, and directs the interpretation of Luke's report of the Annunciation in line with the kenotic understanding. In the context of some of his other works, it seems that Ratzinger and Kierkegaard have similar approaches to some aspects of theology, especially in the context of Kierkegaard's term "leap of faith".

3. In the depiction of the Annunciation on the *Ghent altarpiece*, the angel has a very prominent cross on his diadem. Judging by the other details of this scene, Van Eyck is certainly no stranger to the idyllic understanding of that text, but he also emphasizes the kenotic one. The fact that the angels surrounding the altar in the panel of the *Mystic Lamb* also wear a prominent cross around their heads, which is very similar to Gabriel's, is actually an indication that the kenotic emphasis in the understanding of the Annunciation has a clear purpose. With this kenotic understanding, Van Eyck connects the *Annunciation* and the *Mystical Lamb* and thus, indirectly, makes the overall message of the *Ghent Altarpiece* coherent.

The main goal of this paper was to propose an interpretation of the Ghent altarpiece that takes the panels of the Annunciation as a starting point and a key element for understanding the entire Ghent Altarpiece. Taking this into account, the main hypothesis of the paper — the correct hermeneutic key for understanding the Annunciation is primarily kenotic, because the structure of the Ghent Altarpiece as a whole requires this primacy — can be considered validated.

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### *Sažetak*

## HERMENEUTIKA VAN EYCKOVA GENTSKOG OLTARA: KENOTIČKA PORUKA PRIZORA NAVJEŠTENJA

DANIEL MIŠĆIN

U bogatoj literaturi o *Gentskom oltaru*, jednom od najvažnijih umjetničkih djela sjeverne renesanse što ga je 1432. dovršio Jan Van Eyck, često se tvrdi da je središnja scena zatvorenog *Gentskog oltara*, tj. *Navještenje*, jednostavno ilustracija teksta Lk 1, 26–38 kojega Van Eyck vjerno slijedi. Iako je Van Eyck nesumnjivo crpio nadahnuće iz tog teksta, ovaj rad nastoji uspostaviti i istražiti drukčiju hipotezu — da se Van Eyck namjerno udaljio od Lukinog teksta Navještenja, i to iz vrlo dobrog razloga koji je povezan s kompozicijom i porukom *Gentskog oltara* u cjelini. U radu se ovoj „nekonvencionalnoj“ hipotezi pristupa ponajprije analizom dvaju mogućih pristupa tekstu Navještenja: idiličnom i kenotičkom. U tom se kontekstu Van Eyckov način prikaza Navještenja promatra s motrišta teorijskih doprinosa hermeneutici Lukina teksta, osobito u djelima Sørenea Kierkegaarda i Josepha Ratzingera, tj. u skladu s kenotičkim (ili egzistencijalnim) tumačenjem.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *Navještenje*, Van Eyck, hermeneutika, kenoza, Ratzinger, Kierkegaard

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