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## IN SEARCH OF EXPRESSION OF FAITH

### Two complementary ways in the central Europe – art and mysticism

The essential tension during the Middle Ages was the tension between faith and its manifestation. Faith was recognized as a personal and existential choice. This manifestation constitutes an interpersonal relationship, transforms the shape of time and space and creates new ways of communication. In fact, the manifestation of faith searches for ways in which faith could be expressed and communicated. There were two privileged ways, in which faith found its expression – art and mysticism.

So we have to confront these two existing realities of medieval culture. As a result, we will look closely at both these realities if they are able to express faith. Some examples will help us to analyze the manner in which Christian faith was communicated.

#### INCARNATION: DESCENT OF THE DIVINITY

##### *Art*

The chart number 167v of the famous *Legenda de sancta Hedwigis* – (*Hedwig Codex*, Malibu, California, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 83. MN 126) represents a fascinating process, which we will discuss below<sup>1</sup>. (fig. 1) On the top of the chart God the Father dialogs with kneeling Gabriel the Archangel. God entrusts him with the mission. In doing so the envoy has to communicate to the Virgin Mary her maternity. Below, but at the left part of the chart, the same heavenly envoy announces to the future Mother of God the nativity of Jesus. We see two connected images and two events.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Der Hedwigs-Kodex von 1353*, ed. W. Braunfels, Berlin 1972, passim [facsimile].



1. *Legenda de sancta Hedwigis*, 167v, Malibu. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 83. MN 126.

Its meaning is clear. Especially the second event, which has been repeated and represented in numerous examples of medieval painting. Is there any hidden meaning and a profound message behind it? One element, not so much highlighted, guides our research. This is a small representation in the center of the chart. It represents God the Father who holds in both hands the Jesus-child and is putting him down. This gesture of God the Father is considerable. This is the kind of diminution and the way of Incarnation. The half figure reveals to us the mystery of Incarnation. The infant in the hands of God the Father is now connecting the union of two natures – human and divine. This representation located between two events is the symbolic image and the interpretative key, which reveals the

sense of two connected images – The Mission of Gabriel and The Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. This special, unexpected image expresses faith in the fundamental contents of Christianity. What is other way is there?

### *Mystics*

The cycle of four sermons of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux – *In laudibus virginis mariae* contains the commentaries about the narration of Annunciation described in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1, 26–27). It is amazing that the representation in the Hedwigs Codex follows the text of the first homily. This is commentary about the first sentence of the Lucan narration of Annunciation:

Missus est angelus Gabriel a Deo in civitatem Galilaeae, cui nomen Nazareth, ad virginem desponsatam Viro, cui nomen erat Joseph de domo David et nomen virginis Maria (Lk 1, 26–27)<sup>2</sup>

Bernard mentions this sentence in sermon of which can be divided into eight parts. Each part is marked by a key word: I Deus; II. Gabriel; III. Nazareth; IV. Christus; V. Virgo; VI. Ancilla; VII. Virginitas; VIII. Humilitas; IX. Virginitas et humilitas.

The sermon turns out to be an interpretation of the gospel sentence and a description of the mysterious process of Incarnation. This description is organized in a descending order. *Deus* is at the top and at the beginning, *Virginitas et humilitas* are at the bottom and at the end. This disposition reveals a possible mystical experience. It means that divinity on its own initiative, comes down to mankind or rather to the person with the mystical abilities in order to communicate such a message. So in the disposition of the text and its organization of contents, we discover the way to the mystical experience.

In this moment of research a question arises. What is the central part of this narration and central part of this mystical way? The answer is shown to us in parts four and five. If we interpreted this homily with the Christological key we would have to underline part five – *Christus*, but if we accept the mariological point of view we need to distinguish part five – *Virgo (Maria)*. So *Christus* and *Virgo* are the most important, fundamental protagonists of this process and the principal actors of the drama of Incarnation. Christ is accepted and received by Mary, because she reveals her virginity and humility. We have an experience of the humility and virginity of Mary in the mysticisms of the Incarnation and so can conclude that, through this way, we find a profound background, the mys-

<sup>2</sup> S. Bernardus, *In laudibus virginis Mariae*, [in:] *S. Bernardi Opera*, vol. 4, Romae 1966, p. 9–58.

tics of the Song of Songs. Christ himself is attainable through the attitudes of his Mother.

In the profound background of this way there are the mystics of the Song of Songs. This book was interpreted mystically by Bernard of Clairvaux who exposed two symbolical Persons – a bride and bridegroom. Their love represents the love between Christ and his Church.

## TRINITY – SUBJECT OF ACTION AND OBJECT OF ADORATION

### *Art*

A painted table from Świeżawa in Silesia (Wrocław, National Museum), probably a part of the altarpiece, represents a peculiar situation<sup>3</sup> (fig. 2). There is an old man sitting on the architectonical throne, exposing



2. Trinity – Sedes gratiae, table from Świeżawa, Wrocław, National Museum.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Świeżawa, *Obraz Trójca święta*, [in:] *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce. Katalog zabytków*, ed. A. S. Labuda, K. Secomska, Warszawa 2004, p. 265.

a serious face. This person holds the cross with the figure of hanging Christ and above the top of the cross there is the Holy Spirit as a dove. Two persons from this picture attract our attention – God the Father and the Son of God. The first person is active although he is sitting on the throne. He is full of determination and full of power. This determination and this power show us one vector, which is directed from the Father's eyes, through the hanging Son in the Holy Spirit to the eyes of an observer. God the Father not only reveals his Son, but he is deciding to offer us the Crucified.

The second person, crucified Christ is passive and immobile. He is in the hands of his Father.

The scene represented here tells us that the focus of the Father and the Spirit is on the Crucified. He is a focal point and the center of attention.

Trinity is the subject of the action. The three persons are protagonists of the action of salvation and redemption. This action is directed to the contemplating person, who observes the picture and in doing so, the faith is expressed in the visualization of Trinity's work.

### *Mystique*

Since Trinity is revealed in the picture, what kind of orthodoxy could we find in the mystical experience?

Johannes Marienwerder wrote in his *Expositio symboli apostolici*, that God could be known in three ways, constituting the way of mind, the way of devotion and the way of glorification: "*Notice Dei triplex in Scriptura manifestatur, scilicet rationis, devocionis, glorificacionis*"<sup>4</sup>

These are three manners in which the Trinity could be professed and achieved. The first, the profession of the Father, goes through created things. The second, the profession of the Son, goes through devotion, because Jesus is mentioned in the Gospel of John (J 5, 20). The third, the profession of the Spirit goes through an experience of glory.

These ways are the results of a personal search, but this search is inspired by the notion of the Trinity. It means that the three aspirations/vectors pointed to God are directed by the Three Persons. These ways and three manners – throughout creation, throughout devotion and throughout glorification are organized by every person of the Trinity, although initiated in human beings.

Another way to Trinity is in the prayer book of Vladislaus The Jagiellon, the king of Bohemy and Hungary (*Orationale Vladislai II Regis*, Bo-

<sup>4</sup> J. Marienwerder, *Prologus ad Expositio symboli apostolorum*, [in:] *Textus et studia historiam theologiae in Polonia excultae spectantia*, vol. 2, fasc. 2, Warszawa 1974, p. 24.

hemiae et Hungariae, k. 195). The King recognizes his state of misery and sin. In this spiritual situation he requests the pity of God and from it discovers his trinital structure. From each person of the Trinity he waits the action which could bring him the renewal of his state and salvation.

Benedicat me Deus Pater, qui me creavit.

Benedicat me Filius, qui me de morte aeterna praetiosissima sanguine suo redemit.

Benedicat me Spiritus sanctus, qui super me effusus est in baptismo.

Et ipsa Trinitas liberet me ab omni peccato et ab omnibus angustiis et necessitatibus meis praesentibus, praeteritis et futuris. Amen<sup>5</sup>

The Trinity is recognized as a subject of action and a source of salvation from a personal, and an internal way. We identify three aspirations directed from the praying person to God. Three aspirations, described in the benediction of the King's prayer. These aspirations express the faith of the author – King Vladislaus. This is the faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are present in their activities.

The mystical experience of the Trinity is very different from the reality of the threefold God painted on the table. The mystiques try to meet God and meet him. They recognize his plan and action, but the vector of the knowing is directed from a person to God. The representation contains three Persons of the Trinity communicating his message to the contemplating person.

## THE PIERCED LAMB: AN INTEGRATING SYMBOL

### *Art*

The picture from Toruń (Thorn) represents a very strange and complicated situation. It is traditionally called *Quinitas* (Pelplin, Dioecesan Museum)<sup>6</sup> (fig. 3). The axe of the composition is a tree – a living tree which takes the shape of a cross. The cross as a tree of life is a symbol recognized in that time, but the crucified Christ covered by a veil is an extraordinary representation. The ailed and veiled Christ constitutes the background to God the Father sitting on the rainbow and catching the little Jesus. Above, in the top of the tree sits a dove – the Holy Spirit. Naturally, this is a strange but recognizable representation of the Trinity. But this identification is insufficient. There are other significant elements which

<sup>5</sup> J. Misiurek, *Historia i teologia polskiej duchowości katolickiej*, vol. 1 (w. X–XVIII), Lublin 1994, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Toruń. Kościół franciszkanów. Sześć Tablic polipytyku Quinitas*, [in:] *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce...*, p. 270–274.



3. Quinitas, quarter of retable from Toruń,  
Pelplin, Diocesan Museum.

shed light on and help us to understand the significance of the whole structure. These are the angels, Ecclesia and Synagogue, St. John the Baptist, four animals and the lamb. Among these numerous persons and signs, it is necessary to find the symbol-key. This symbol integrates all elements of the structure and becomes our key of interpretation.

In our representation this key seems to be the lamb with a bleeding wound. The lamb is a different part of the image, separated from the Trinity. It is nailed to branches and to the trunk of a tree. From its wound flows the blood collected in a chalice by Ecclesia.

This symbolic animal and allegorical action connects two realities – Passion and Eucharist. We find in this image the vision of the lamb from the Apocalypse. Here the lamb is defined as one of the most important protagonists of the celebration. The second part of the heavenly liturgy of Apocalypse (chapters 4 – 5) puts into the scene the killed lamb, which acquires, throughout his death, the new people. The scenario of this celebration is made by angels and four animals.

The lamb nailed to the tree introduces the reality of the Trinity.

## *Mystique*

The lamb appears in the vision of Mechtild von Magdeburg<sup>7</sup> She saw John the Baptist as a priest celebrating Eucharist. In the moment of consecration the priest elevates the Host and the lamb, which stayed in the altar, is joined with the white Host. Mechtild didn't see the host but the bleeding lamb nailed to the cross. This lamb is the symbol of the Eucharist. It reveals the intrinsic and essential contents of it.

The mystical experience of the Eucharist is concentrated in the interpretation of the Eucharistic celebration. This vision, the vision of Mechtild, is very similar to the image from the retable from Toruń. On the one hand, we can consider that a mystical experience and iconical representation bring the same result and leads to the same point. But on the another hand, it is necessary to underline the difference. The principal function of the lamb in the picture is to introduce the observer, the contemplator, to the relationship inside the Trinity. The function of the lamb in Mechtild's vision is to express the sense of Eucharist: A representation of the Passion and Death of Christ.

### CHALICE AND BLOOD: BETWEEN EUCHARIST AND NUPTIAL MYSTICS

The wall painting from the Franciscan Convent of Cracow include four representations – *Christ under the press*, *Flagellation*, *Holy Mass* and *Coronation*<sup>8</sup> (fig. 4). The larger part of the sector takes up the image of Christ crushed under the arm of the wine press. His feet are immersed in a basin with grapes. This vision alludes to the description of judgment made from the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 63, 1–3). Christ tortured under the wine press becomes the allegory of Christ put into his Passion and Death. But below there is a particular detail. The wine, squeezed from the grapes by the feet of Christ, flows down and drops to the chalice just in the central representation of the bottom sector. In fact, it a is representation of a mass. The priests with the acolytes are celebrating the Eucharist. The chalice standing on the altar doesn't represent the wine but the blood of Christ. The flowed and dropped wine, transformed into the blood is the symbol, which identifies two different realities – the Passion of Christ and the celebration of Eucharist, especially in the moment of consecration. Is

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. von Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, ed. G. Vollman-Profe, Frankfurt 2003, passim.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kraków. Kościół franciszkanów. *Malowidła w krużgankach. Tłocznia mistyczna*, [in:] *Malarstwo gotyckie...*, p. 59–60; H. Małkiewiczówna, *Interpretacja treści piętnastowiecznego malowidła ściennego z Chrystusem w tłoczni mistycznej w krużgankach franciszkańskich w Krakowie*, „Folia Historiae Atrium” 8:1972, p. 69–143.





4. Christ under the press, wall painting, Cracow, Franciscan Convent.

this symbol an explication of the concept of transubstantiation? The answer must be negative. The vision of Christ under the press and the symbol of flowing blood might rather be a passion interpretation of Eucharist. This interpretation is predominated. The Passion seems to be an enormous universe which exists hidden under the rite of mass. This universe is represented throughout the celebration. Two connected representations define the identity of Passion and Eucharist.

### *Mystique*

We discover the blood to be a symbol and a sign in the *Expositio missae* Johannes Isneri<sup>9</sup> The author cites the word of the consecration: “*Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei*” The chalice of blood is the inspiration to the reflection. The author considers the blood as drink. He recognizes its

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Isner, *Expositio missae*, [in:] *Textus et Studia historiae theologiae in Polonia excultae Spectantia*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1971, p. 86, 90.

natural consistency and alludes to the natural activity of consummation of the drink. The recognition of blood as a drink is fundamental for the mystical experience of liturgy made by Johannes Isner. This theologian who interpreted the liturgy is aware of the meaning of the sign. His mysticism and his expression of faith come from the developed system of signs and meanings – of the roman liturgy from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This system guides him to a profound understanding. The term key is the *mysterium fidei*. In fact liturgy is the place and space of the mystery of faith. Mystery – *mysterium* is the way in which the participant discovers the message. Mystery is the process in which the sense and the message of liturgy are revealed and become legible.

Gertrud von Helfta discovered another meaning for the blood, which it is revealed in the dialogue between Gertrude and Christ<sup>10</sup> We realize that this is a dialogue of love, in which she is a bride and Christ is betrothed. In the intimate exchange we recognize that the blood begins to play a new role. Jesus has washed his bride in his blood and has acquired her at the expense of his blood. This is a new quality in the relationship, the new quality of mystics. Relationship between God and a person as a nuptial cohabitation belongs to the tradition. It has its origin in the Song of the Songs. But the blood of Christ mediates between two persons in love.

Does the blood of Christ have the same role in art as in mysticism? Both domains accept blood and give it the task of visualization and mediation. The visualization of the reality of Eucharist is emphasized in the art. Different ways of mediation – mediation between liturgy and its meaning, between bride and betrothed reveal the complicated structure of the mystics. The mediation seems to be a necessary element of them.

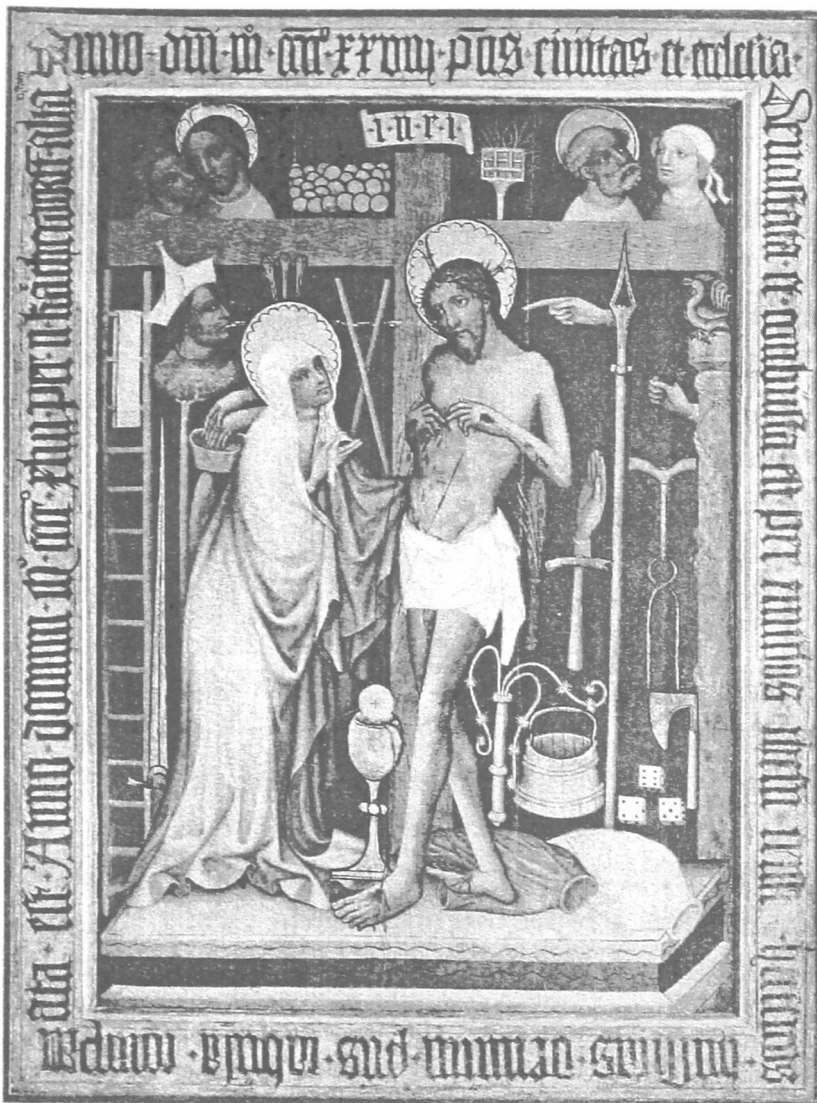
#### MAN OF SORROW: CONTEMPLATION OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD CHRIST

##### *Art*

The retable from the St Nicolas Church in Brzeg about 1427 (Warsaw, National Museum) shows us the suffering Christ standing before his Mother<sup>11</sup> (fig. 5). He is nude and his wounds bleed. Christ presents his most important wound – the wound on the side of his body, from which gushes his blood. The spurt of blood collected in the chalice is a signifi-

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. d' Helfta, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, vol. 1. *Les exercices. Texte latin, introduction, traduction et notes* D. Houplier, A. Schmidt, Paris 1967, p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Brzeg. Kościół św. Mikołaja. Obraz wotywny*, [in:] *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce...*, p. 146–147.



5. Vir Dolorum, retable from Brzeg, Warsaw, National Museum.

cant element but not central. The centrality of Christ in suffering is evident. But this isn't historical Passion. This is eternal suffering which happens before eyes of his Mother and before the eyes of the observer. We realize that this never-ending torment comes from the historical event and the human experience of Passion and Death. In fact, in the environment there are tools of torment and death – *arma Christi*.

The suffering of Man of Sorrow reaches its conclusion in the chalice full of blood. Naturally the connection between Passion and Eucharist is clearly exposed. But emphasis is put on the Passion.

What is the purpose of this representation? The answer to this question gives us the person of the Mary – Mother of Jesus. She contemplates her suffering Son and she expresses her emotion of pain. His attitude is called in the *compassio*.

The observer is inspired to share this same attitude and those same emotion as Mary.

### *Mysticism*

The mystical experience of Mechtild von Magdeburg contains a similar experience and especially a similar vision<sup>12</sup> She saw the dead body of Christ. And she was surprised, because this dead body was bloodless. In fact from his body had flowed all the blood. Christ answered that in fact his body has died, because all his blood has indeed flowed out. Although his divinity remains still in his died body still.

This experience of the dead body involves the Christian tradition. The adoration of the dead Christ, after his Crucifixion is known. But the divinity, which stays in the body is a new idea. The blood which flowed, plays a particular role, because it is the blood of grace. The stream of blood is connected with the stream of divinity. In this vision it doesn't achieve the meaning of Eucharist. Mechtild contemplating the dead body touches the divinity and so the body becomes a mediator between a contemplating person and God.

There are differences between the vision from retable of Brzeg and the vision of Mechtild. In the representation from Brzeg Christ is living. He is alive and active, although his suffering is obvious. The never-ending Passion is the source of blood. Christ in the vision of Mechtild is dead. There is no more blood in his body, but his corps is the dwelling of his divinity. Here, the blood of Christ is just out the body. The most important attitude performed in both experiences emphasizes the central element of Christianity – the body of Christ.

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Could we give the answer to the question put in the beginning? Did both excellent areas – art and mysticism become the ways in which the Christian faith was expressed and professed? We can answer positively. But at the conclusion of research we need to emphasize some observations. The works of art and the texts of mystics have never become the official professions of faith. The concrete representations and statements have included the totality of Christian faith. It was rather a particular and personal expression concentrated on certain aspects. The key which could give us the understanding of faith in art or in mysticism is vision and

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. von Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit...*, passim.

visualization. Vision as an intimate and personal experience which rather belongs to the area of mysticism. Visualization as an effort to create a picture which could be able to put eyes to its spectators on some content of faith, is characteristic of this art.

Both ways take various directions. It is possible that art and mysticism go along parallel routes. In many cases the routes have opposite directions. But in different cases art and mysticism pursue journeys in these parallel routes both reaching different points and different purposes. It means that in the same reality of the Christian faith they discover different aspects. It is fascinating that art and mysticism observe the events of history of salvation from different points of view.

There is another aspect of both mediums: it is a phenomenon of reciprocal exchange. Art has taken some images and iconographical types from mysticism. Mysticism has been inspired by some pictures. This new object of research needs to be studied further.

IN SEARCH OF EXPRESSION OF FAITH  
TWO COMPLEMENTARY WAYS IN THE CENTRAL EUROPE –  
ART AND MYSTICISM

**Summary**

The one of the most important trends of medieval culture was the tension between faith and its expression. This text explains how two parts of the medieval culture – art and mysticism was becoming the manifestation of faith. The picturing legend of saint Hedwig contains the miniature which represents God the Father entrusting Gabriel the mission, God the Father holding Jesus Child and archangel Gabriel announcing to Mary. The descending line, in which these pictures are disposed corresponds with the descending structure of the first sermon from the cycle *In laudibus virginis Mariae* of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. Both express the mystery of Incarnation. The retable from Świeżawa represents the Trinity as the *Throne of Grace* (*Sedesgratiae*). In fact it represents God the Father displaying the crucified Christ. Two texts of mysticism converge on the content of this picture. Johannes Marienwerder (Jan of Kwidzyna) describes three ways of God's cognition: way of reasoning, way of devotion and way of glorification. The prayer of Wladislaus, king of Bohemy and Hungary has also the Trinitarian structure – the praying person mentions the Father as Creator, the Son as savior and The Holy Spirit acting in Baptism. The nailed lamb from the retable quarter of Torun, named *Quinitas* is the integrating symbol, who connects the persons of picture. He symbolizes the crucified Christ and the Christ present in the Eucharist. The lamb from the mystical vision of Mechtild of Magdeburg holds the similar meaning. *The press of wine* – the wall painting in the Franciscan cloister in Cracow represents the situation, in which the blood of Christ flows from the basin of press to the mass chalice. It corresponds with the theological explanation of eucharistic transformation in the work of Johannes Isner "*Expositio missae*" Gertrude of Helfta recognizes the consecrated wine as a manifestation of love of Christ to his bride – Church. The retable of Brzeg – *Vir Dolorum* represents the suffering Christ. Mechtild of Magdeburg displays the similar vision of the suffering Savior in her writings.