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The Kenosis of Christ and the Mother of God in Byzantine Iconography

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Introduction

In this paper I share with you a number of images and ideas from my recent book on paradox in Byzantine art. My primary focus is on the sacrifice of Christ, which was central to Byzantine theology, art, and liturgy. But in what follows, you will not see even a single image of the crucifixion. Instead, we will be looking at images of the infant Christ, reclining in his mother’s arms, which, as we’ll see, are not sentimental depictions of a loving family. For a Byzantine viewer, the cross is present even here.

In the Byzantine religious mind, the sacrifice of Christ was not an isolated event abstracted from the larger narrative of Christ’s final hours, but the revelation of the very form of his being. In making this form visible, Byzantine artists developed images containing integral connections between Christ’s conception, birth, suffering, and death. These images may be understood as a visual exegesis of the divine “self-emptying” or “kenosis” famously invoked in Paul’s letter to the Philippians [Text]:

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped at, but emptied himself (ἐκένωσεν ἑαυτόν), taking the form of a slave, and was born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name which is above every name.” (Phil 2:6-8)

In this lapidary statement, the entire life of Christ, from birth to death (and beyond), is compressed within the unifying framework of the kenotic. From this point of view, the whole of Christ’s life, beginning with his conception, came to be understood as a ceaseless self-emptying, an ongoing self-offering, in which the crucifixion was only the concluding act. Giving full weight to the biblical notion that Christ was the “Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29), who was “slain before the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8; 1 Pet 1:19-20), Byzantine theologians concluded that the sacrifice on the cross was but the realization in time of God’s eternal, self-sacrificing love. In this way, the divine self-emptying became a foundational, indeed universal, principle, so that according to Maximos the Confessor: “Whoever has understood the mystery of the cross and the tomb has understood the underlying reasons of all things.”

But if patristic and Byzantine theologians naturally developed the notion of self-emptying in relation to the person of Christ, they did not typically explore this theme in relation the Mother of God. Yet

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1 The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography (Alhambra, 2014), chap. 2.
2 Maximos the Confessor, First Century on Theology 66: ὁ μὲν γὰρ σταυρῶς καὶ ταφής τὸ μυστήριον, ἔγγραφ τῶν Πατριστίκης συνεδοξάζετο (PG 90:1108B).
3 There are of course exceptions. See, for example, Gregory Palamas, Homily on the Dormition (= hom. 37.5): [ἡ ἀειπαρθενὸς] συμπαίρτουσα γὰρ καὶ συμπλήγυγουσα τῇ δι’ αὐτῆς υἱόσωπος κενώσει τοῦ Λόγου τοῦ Θεοῦ, καὶ συνεδοξάζετο καὶ συναυστήσαν δικαίως, τοῖς ἑπερφεύσεσι προσθήκαις ἀεὶ προστιθείσα τῶν μεγαλῶν.
this is precisely what we find in Byzantine iconography, where, it seems to me, the artists are leading the way. And they do this by showing us a world in which the kenotic form of God is also the form that the Mother of God has chosen for her own life, an expression of her innermost being as surrendered and poured out to God.

**The Christological Cycle of Images**

Faithful to these beliefs, the Byzantine iconographic cycle depicting the life of Christ (also known as the “Festal Cycle”) abounds with allusions to his sacrificial death, beginning with the iconography of the Nativity. [Image] In this eleventh-century image from an illuminated manuscript,⁴ the Virgin is seated at the head of a manger of masonry work, while Joseph (in his signature state of perplexity—although according to Henry Maguire, Joseph is actually in the posture of the Marys at the tomb of Christ) looks out at the viewer from the lower left. Above the cave, on either side of a three-fold ray of light, are two glorifying angels. An angel on the right announces the good tidings to a shepherd. Below the manger is the apoplyphal midwife giving the child his first bath.

In the center of the image, we see the child wrapped up like a body for burial, alluding to the body in the tomb, so that the story’s end is present from the beginning. The tall, upright manger, with its bright masonry work, also appears in earlier images of the Nativity [Image], such as this eighth- or perhaps ninth-century panel painting from Sinai, which was produced in a local Palestinian workshop.⁵ This distinctive masonry manger appears on a large number of late-antique souvenirs and other objects (ἐνλογίαι) distributed to Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Lands.⁶ Based on this

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⁴ I.e., the so-called *Menologion of Basil II*, dated to ca. 1000, and containing 430 miniatures by eight artists. Like all the images in this manuscript, the scene is reduced in scale and the sense of space is more intimate. Background landscape and architecture tend to be flat and confined to the middle ground, like scenery hung behind actors standing upstage. Figures appear less monumental than select works of the past. The eleventh-century collapse of space works well with the earlier collapse of church and cave, noted below.

⁵ After K. Manafis, Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine (Athens, 1990), fig. 6. This icon (32.6 x 19.7) was originally the central panel of a triptych. The icon conflates the Nativity with the adoration of the shepherds (upper left). The “Palestinian school” is distinguished by its color scheme of reds and browns; peculiar linear highlights; and ornamental stylization; note, too, the flattened figures like appliques on a tapestry.

⁶ See, for example, (1) the fifth-century, Egyptian Nativity textile in the Victoria and Albert Museum, published in Weitzmann, *The Age of Spirituality*, p. 435: “At the right is a masonry crib with the swaddled Christ child ... In the lower part of the crib is a niche, a feature that appears frequently in Syro-Palestinian renderings of the Nativity, probably as an allusion to the grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem”; (2) Cf. ibid., p. 582, on the late 7th-8th c. Syro-Palestinian Dumbarton Oaks Nativity ivory (which notes that the relic of the swaddling clothes was housed at S. Maria Maggiore in Rome); (3) ibid., p. 497, on the sixth-century Berlin ivory pyxis, also with a masonry crib; (4) ibid., 499 (on a similar pyxis in Essen-Werden): “The unusual manger may even reflect the actual stone altar in the Nativity grotto at Bethlehem; it is among the most characteristic motifs marking the series of New Testament scenes developed in association with the famous pilgrimage sites of the Holy Land.” (5) Ibid., 509 (Manchester ivory plaque, Syria, 6th-8th c.) also has the tall, masonry crib; (6) ibid., 531 (British Museum ivory plaque, 1st half of 6th c., also said to be Syro-Palestinian); (7) ibid., 587 (Palestine Ampulla, late 6th-7th c., with Nativity at the Franz Dölger Institute, Bonn), where, between Mary and Joseph “is an arch closed by a grill and hung with a lamp [which is] a distinctive feature of the Nativity on ampullae, meant to depict the entrance to the sanctuary of the cave beneath the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem;” (8) ibid., 626, on the ca. 600 bronze (Syro-Palestinian) censer with six New Testament scenes, including the Nativity with the tall, masonry crib with oval opening in its base. (It is debated if these objects were made in Antioch, Jerusalem, St. Savas, or some other locale in the “cradle” of Christianity.)

Note that at least some late-antique pilgrims were able to make these thoughtful connections, spurred by the sight of one object; in the cave of Nativity at Bethlehem, Paula claimed “that she could behold with the eyes of faith the infant Lord wrapped in swaddling clothes and crying in the manger, the wise men worshipping Him, the star shining overhead, the virgin mother, the attentive foster-father, the shepherds ... She declared that she could see the slaughtered innocents, the raging Herod, Joseph and Mary fleeing into Egypt” (Jerome, *Ep. Eustoch*. 108.10).
evidence, it has been argued, not unpersuasively, that this peculiar looking manger was modeled after the altar table in the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which marked the site of Christ’s birth.7

The niche in the side of the altar, moreover, which also appears on all the souvenirs, is said to correspond to the niche in the Bethlehem altar table that contained Christ’s swaddling clothes. [Image/modern photograph of the Grotto.] The collapse of cave and church, and the conflation of the biblical narrative with the architecture of liturgy and pilgrimage, assimilates the manger to the altar of sacrifice, on which the child is placed like a sacred victim.8

[Image/Mystras Nativity] In later images of the Nativity, such as this fourteenth-century fresco from the Peribleptos church in Mystras (in the Peloponnese), the masonry altar has become a stone-carved sarcophagus, narrowly framing the child’s body. At the same time [Image/detail], the new mother assumes a pensive look, raising her right hand to her face,9 leaning on it heavily, the pressure of which is evident in her folded cheek. This is a gesture she will repeat in many images of the crucifixion, while standing by the side of the cross.10 Once again, the child’s birth is closely intertwined with his death as the drama of divine self-emptying begins to unfold. [Image/Volpi Nativity] The fifteenth-century Volpi Nativity,11 which is based on the Peribleptos fresco, makes these kenotic and sacrificial references explicit by the inclusion [Image/detail] of a cruciform sword, the line of which passes through the child’s body to the body of his mother. The sword, which is also a cross, alludes to the prophecy of Symeon from Luke 2:35, concerning the sword that will pass through Mary’s soul at the time of the crucifixion. We will say more about this in a moment.12

7 Or perhaps the original altar that stood in the grotto (a space still accessible to pilgrims by a narrow flight of stairs) over which the fourth-century sanctuary was built.

8 For a liturgical transformation of the manger and cave, see Proclus of Constantinople, hom. 17.1-2: “A manger, foreshadowing the sacrificial table; a manger, rendering the cave a church. Come and let us imitate the Magi, conceiving the church instead of Bethlehem. Instead of a cave, the sanctuary; instead of the manger, the altar; instead of the child, the bread of the Eucharist” (Constas, Proclus, 244). A pseudo-Athanasian text transforms Joseph, the shepherds, and the angels into priests, deacons, and bishops, while the breasts of the Virgin are described as Eucharistic chalices, etc. (ibid.). Note that the Byzantine liturgy of the Nativity is modeled in part on the Crucifixion; compare the hymn “Σήμερον γεννάται” modeled directly on the “Σήμερον κρεμάτας,” along with other parallels, such as the “myrrh” of the wise men, understood by Romans the Melodist as a foreshadowing of Christ’s burial.

9 A similar pose, with a reclining Mary, turning away from the child, with the top of her hand raised to her cheek, is already found on the Fieschi-Morgan staurothech (i.e., a reliquary containing a fragment of the cross), a Syro-Palestinian (or Jerusalem) object dated to the early 8th c. (Age of Spirituality, 634-35, no. 574 = underside of reliquary lid). Note that the inscription here reads: η γεννα (sic), reminiscent of the Greek title of the Protoevangelium, i.e.,γεννα Μαπια.

10 The hand-to-face gesture seeks to replace the pressure of the child’s cheek against that of his mother, functioning as what psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls a “transitional object.” Winnicott came to psychoanalysis from pediatrics, working closely with children and their mothers, from which he developed the notion of the “holding environment” and the “transitional object” (or “security blanket”). He established “touch” and “holding” as central to the mother-infant dyad. Is, then, the cross the child’s transitional object away from the mother, the object that differentiates the “me” from the “not-me,” providing the means for the child’s awareness of separation? Note, finally, the 14th-century Glykophilousa in Moscow, in which the child presses his hand to his face (Baltoyianni, fig. 2).

11 This is the work of a Constantinopolitan painter working in the first quarter of the fifteenth century (25 x 25 inches, indicating that it was intended for use as a festal icon in church, or perhaps for a private patron). The work was formerly in the Volpi Collection (Venice), but is now in the Benaki Museum in Athens.

12 Last year the icon was cleaned and the “sword” (i.e., the grip and the cross-guard) was found to have been a later addition, perhaps of the 17th or 18th century; it has since been removed from the icon. Though not part of the original design, the addition says a great deal about how the sacrificial nature of the Nativity was correctly perceived by the icon’s later “editor.” The addition may have been inspired by the “first sword” (i.e., the prophecy of Symeon) associated in Roman Catholic piety and art with the Our Lady of Sorrows.
The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Next in the narrative cycle of Christ’s life comes the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, depicted here in the margin of a ninth-century Psalter, produced in the immediate aftermath of Iconoclasm. The story is recorded only in the Gospel of Luke (2:22-40), which notes that, forty days after the Nativity, Mary and Joseph (standing to the left) brought the infant Christ to the temple, in accordance with the Jewish ceremony for the consecration of the firstborn. Luke informs us that the child’s parents “brought a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons” for the prescribed sacrifice (Lev 5:11), and we see them here folded in Joseph’s robe.

Luke further notes that, upon entering the temple, Mary met a man named Simeon, who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Savior. (And here we see him installed behind the altar of sacrifice covered by a canopy, stooping to receive the child in his covered arms.) Taking the child into his arms, Simeon utters his famous canticle (the “Nunc Dimittis”), after which he turns to Mary and reveals that: “This child is set for the fall and rising of many, and for a sign that is spoken against. And a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

As we shall see, the iconography of the Presentation to a certain extent psychologizes the kenotic drama, and this is especially true in post-Iconoclastic images, which render the Virgin’s presentation of Christ as a sacrificial offering to Simeon. These images dramatize the belief that the child is not simply being “presented” in the temple, but about to be literally sacrificed, and that this sacrifice is at the center of all Christianity. In the words of Hesychios of Jerusalem: “This feast is called the feast of purifications, although one would not be mistaken in calling it the feast of feasts, or the Sabbath of Sabbaths, or the holy feast among holy feasts, for it recapitulates the whole mystery of Christ’s incarnation; it delineates the whole presentation of the Only Begotten Son.”

The iconography of the Presentation contains a number of themes that are central to my argument, and it will be helpful at this point to draw them out.

In this sixteenth-century panel painting by Theophanes the Cretan, from the monastery of Stavronikita (Mt. Athos), the Virgin stands slightly to the left of center. She has just placed the infant Christ, whose legs are bare and exposed, in the arms of Simeon, who stoops to receive him. The eyes of the mother remain fixed on the child, who reaches out to her, while Simeon gazes in gratitude at the source of his long-awaited gift. The transaction unfolds before, or perhaps across the space of the

13 The manuscript is dated to ca. 850. The image illustrates the Ode/Canticle of Simeon (fol. 163v), which appears here as Ode 14 (sic = Ode 13 in Rahlfs).

14 This is virtually a reversal of the iconography of Christ the high priest distributing communion to the apostles inasmuch as it is now Simeon, standing behind an altar table, who is receiving the body of Christ.

15 Interpreted as early as Origen as a prophecy of the crucifixion, followed closely by Basil, Amphiloctius, Ps.-Athanasiarios, Cyril of Alexandria, and Hesychius, for whom the “sword” is the acute and painful thoughts that will afflict the Virgin at the cross, laying bare her thoughts and those of many; she was “all but slain by a sword” when she saw her son crucified. The “sign” (spoken against) is often said to be the “sign” of the cross, or the “sign” of Isaiah (Is 7:14), that Simeon, as one of the Septuagint translators, is said not to have believed, for which God punished him by keeping him alive until the advent of Christ (i.e., a period of some 300 years). The Ps.-Athanasiarius homily (PG 28:973-1000; CPG 2271), ascribed alternately to Proclus, Basil of Seleucia, and George of Nicomedia, offers a remarkable rhetorical expansion of Simeon’s prophecy.

16 This new emphasis promoted the Iconophile interest in the theme of Christ’s mortality as a concomitant to that of his visibly incarnate humanity.

sacrificial table (veiled in a bright red cloth). The table itself is covered by a canopy and screened behind a pair of low doors whose panels form the sign of the cross. To the left of the Virgin stands the prophetess Anna, speaking to Joseph (cf. Lk 2:36-38), who holds the two small birds that he has brought to be sacrificed, just as we saw in the previous image (Lk 2:24; cf. Lev 5:7-8).\(^{18}\) Anna and Joseph duplicate the figures of Mary and Simeon,\(^{19}\) although without the caesura separating the latter pair, which even Christ himself seems unable to bridge.\(^{20}\)

The composition effectively echoes that of the Crucifixion, with Mary standing at the right hand of the cross, here replaced by the sacrificial table. From this point of view, the icon presents us with a liturgical Golgotha, anticipating the self-offering of the God of Israel on his own altar. The space of the temple, moreover, has been reconfigured as a Byzantine church, as if the Mother of God were offering the child as a loaf of bread for the Eucharistic liturgy. (Note, too, that in the Byzantine liturgy, the Eucharistic bread is called the “Lamb.”)

[Consistent with the logic of this sacrificial interpretation, Byzantine writers frequently describe Simeon as a priest, which he was not, or confuse him with Zacharias, who was (cf. Lk 1:5).\(^{21}\)]

Altogether, the Presentation is portrayed as a complex matrix of love and loss. The Mother of God’s handing over the child to Simeon; Simeon’s desire to hold the child; the child’s desire to be held (or his fear of such holding); and Simeon’s plea to depart, to die, to absent himself from the world (Lk 2:29), create a network of longing and desire so dense and complex as to be almost impossible to delineate. The child’s own loyalties vary from image to image [Image/Presentation\(^{22}\)], as his gaze shifts between his mother and Simeon, in whose respective arms he is alternately held (and I could show you many such images which depict dozens of such moments unfolding in almost cinematic sequence). In all of these images, the mother’s loss of the child is central: first to Simeon and then to the cross. Her evident grief is thus oriented toward the future, and she recognizes, in the loss of the child to Simeon, the pain of a much greater sacrifice. The juxtaposition of infancy and death—of embodiment and the destruction of the body—brings together both the mourning for the lost mother and the mourning for the lost son in a single moment of time.

\(^{18}\) Lev 5:7-8 mentions the doves instead of lamb, given to priest; Lev 12:1-8 is about the purification of the mother after childbirth, for which a lamb was required.

\(^{19}\) Note, too, that both Joseph and Simeon carry their precious offerings on hands covered by the folds of their garments; Cf. Num 4:4-15.

\(^{20}\) The Old Testament readings from the Vespers of the Feast of the Presentation are from: (1) Exodus 12:51-13:16, with selections woven in from Leviticus and Numbers; (2) Isaiah 6:1-12; and (3) Isaiah 19:1f. The first focuses on the consecration of the firstborn, in remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, and thus calls for a sacrifice of the firstborn. The Leviticus passage talks about circumcision and purification, with mention of the Lamb and turtledoves. Isaiah 6:1-12 is the vision of the Lord in the Temple, with mention of the seraph with the tongs and burning coal. The final Isaiah reading is the Lord coming on a “swift cloud” (a type of the Virgin).

\(^{21}\) Photios, Amphilochia 156, argues against the idea that Simeon was a priest. Consistent with the argument of this paper, he notes that, with respect to the prophecy of the sword: “He (i.e., Simeon) speaks in summary fashion (συνοπτικά) to the Virgin regarding the entire dispensation” (5:202, lines 79-80; 5:200-202; PG 101:824); Hesychios (cited above, n. 17) also argues against the notion that Simeon was a priest, although he is forced to explain how it was he was able to receive such an offering (ibid., 5:19-24, p. 34)

\(^{22}\) This is a fourteenth-century fresco from the Serbian monastery of Decani, it is dependent on a school of Byzantine (Macedonian) painters working in the region. The inscription is in Serbian Church Slavonic (in Cyrillic), and seems somewhat fragmentary, since it is a subordinate clause (“Simeon prays to die/pass away from this present age”) (Хотещоу Сумеєноу вт соущаго вєка прєставити сє = [wishing][Symeon][from existing age][to pass away]). Both “praying/wishing” and “Symeon” are in the dative, so one would expect a main clause of something to the effect of “Mary and Joseph brought the Child into the Temple. I am thankful to Professor Michael Flier of Harvard University for this translation of the inscription.
Finally, in this twelfth-century wall painting from a church in the southwestern Peloponnese, we find a rare example in which the Lucan text has been incorporated into the scene of the Presentation. The text gives voice to the dialogue between Simeon and Mary, and emphasizes the prophecy of the sword. In response, Mary assumes the pose and gestures she will repeat while standing at the foot of the cross.

The inclusion of the biblical text, however, should not distract us from the power of the image. The unadorned account in the Gospel of Luke cannot provide its readers with the variety of perspectives or range of temporal moments depicted in the hundreds of extant images of the Presentation; neither can it offer the array of nuanced expression and emotive force available to artists. Whereas Luke can simply say that: “Mary went into the Temple and there was a man named Simeon,” artists have to depict the scene much more concretely, locating the figures in physical relation to each other. Doing so is a process that requires countless decisions of design, scale, proportion, perspective, use of color, gesture, etc., which are not simply elements in the organization of forms on the surface of a picture plane, but modes for the visual expression of theological meanings. In this case, the visual forms present the kenotic sacrifice as the defining feature of the life of Christ and his mother. In these visual interpretations of the biblical story, artists are exegeses negotiating the possibilities inherent within the text, the closed narrative of which becomes an open space for artistic ingenuity.

Mother and Child

Closely related to the iconography of the Presentation is the iconography of Mother and Child, surely the most popular of all Byzantine images. This fifteenth-century icon from Sinai, which is a mere 11 x 7 inches, was made for private devotion, and would have been the object of close and sustained looking over the course of a lifetime.

Here, Mary gazes pensively over the head of a bare- and rather limp-legged Christ, who nonetheless rises in a graceful, balletic turn, his head bent back against her mouth and his left hand pressing on her cheek (a point of contact that we have already had occasion to notice). The Virgin grasps his right leg, which is wrapped in a golden cloth on which she supports him. These portrayals of maternal affection, in which Mother and Child are depicted with their cheeks pressed closely together or exchanging an affectionate kiss, are saturated with complex allusions that anticipate maternal grief over the loss of the child. In the words of Hans Belting, “these images represent, on a single panel, the whole of a theological system, which is centered both in the Incarnation and in the death on the cross.”

The look of sorrow or anxiety on the mother’s race, the child’s reclining posture, his bare legs (which we noted in the iconography of the Presentation), his upturned sole of his foot, the bandages around his body (which allude to the binding cloths of the grave), along with many other elements, are subtle but inescapable anticipations of the child’s death on the cross. In a type that was to have a long history, these allusions are made explicit by the addition of angels bearing the instruments of the Passion. This twelfth-century wall painting, from Lagoudera in

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23 The church (of the Zoodochos Pege or perhaps Mary of Egypt) is in the village of Samarina, Greece, (in Messenia); it was built and painted in the late 12th century. The painting is damaged, but the church is currently undergoing restoration.

24 The type is known as the Virgin Pelagonitissa, named after present-day Bitola; although this particular icon is not called Pelagonitissa, and this pose is not limited to icons bearing this name.

Cyprus, is the oldest surviving example of this type, which, thanks to a dedicatory inscription, can be securely dated to 1192.

The life-size figure of the Mother of God stands upright in front of an ornate, backless throne. She holds the reclining child in her arms, while two hovering angels hold the cross (on the right), and the lance and the sponge (on the left). Below them is a lengthy votive inscription, aligned horizontally in two columns on either side of the throne. The inscription identifies and greets the Virgin (ἡ Ἀρακιότησσα κε Κεχαριτομένη), followed by the donor’s request that the Virgin intercede for the salvation of his household on the Day of Judgment. 26

This iconographic type became extremely popular and widely diffused through panel painting. [Image] In this early fifteenth-century icon (from a private collection in Athens), the child recoils from the approaching figure of the archangel Gabriel, who presents him with the cross and the crown of thorns (to the right is the archangel Michael holding the other instruments of the passion). On the upper left hand side is an inscription, which is found on many of these images: “(Gabriel), who previously said ‘Hail’ to the Virgin, now reveals in advance the symbols of the Passion, while Christ, clothed in mortal flesh, seeing these <signs of death>, cowers in fear at what would befall him.” 27

To be sure, these allusions to the Passion are most acutely rendered [Image] in the type known as the “Kardiotissa,” which we see here in a panel painting by Angelos Akontatos, the most significant painter working in Crete in the early decades of the fifteenth century (d. 1436). 28 Here, the extreme backward thrust of the child’s head is perhaps derived from the iconography of the Massacre of the Innocents, part of the tableau of violence surrounding Christ’s birth. 29 [Image] Others have drawn parallels to images of the sacrifice of Isaac, whose head and neck are likewise pulled back at an acute angle. 30 One also thinks of the sacrificial birds carried in the arms of Joseph, whose necks, according to the law, were to be broken (Lev 5:7-8; Lk 2:24). This strong sacrificial imagery has made the cross and the other instruments of the passion unnecessary in this icon, and thus the angels’ hands, though covered, are empty. Let’s note the palpable pressure on the cheek, which we saw in the fresco from Mystras.

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26 On the inscription, see A. Nicolaides, “Panagia Akariotissa,” DOP 50 (1996): 4-5; and David Winfield, The Church of the Panagia tou Arakos at Lagoudhara Cyprus: The Paintings and their Painterly Significance (Washington, 2003), 67-68. Winfield led the Dumbarton Oaks/Harvard restoration of this church beginning in 1968; the work was completed in 1977. In 1985, the church became a UNESCO site. The painting was cleaned in the early 20th century, resulting in the loss of layers of paint in the face and hands, along with perhaps the painting’s original gold and silver leaf, Winfield, 77.

27 Ὅ το χαίρε τῇ Πανάγῳ μηνύσας, τὰ σώματα νῦν τοῦ πάθους προδεικνύει, Χριστὸς δὲ, θυμήσιν σάρκα ἐνδεδειγμένος, πότιμον δεδοκικὸς δελίας ταύτα βλέπων. The icon identifies the Virgin as “Amolyntos” (i.e., the spotless or immaculate or undefiled one), and is perhaps based on the patronal icon housed in the Byzantine monastery of the Amolyntos.

28 On whom, see M. Vassilaki, The Painter Angelos and Icon-Painting in Venetian Crete (Ashgate, 2009). Crete was under Venetian rule from 1210-1669, and became the most important center of artistic production (stimulated by high demand, the emergence of new organization of workshops, and the new status of the artist). Angelos migrated to Chania (the capital of Venetian Crete) from Constantinople, following the trail of a large number of Constantinopolitan artists. There are 30 icons signed by Angelos and 20 more that can be reliably attributed to him.

29 The imagery is complex: it may also allude to the iconography of the Flight into Egypt (with the child clinging to his mother in fear); it is also related to the image of Christ “Anapeson.”

30 As in the mosaic from the Cappella Palatina, Palermo, Sicily, 12th c., produced by Byzantine artists. The building and its decoration have challenged art historians. It seems clear that, whereas the design behind the decoration, and its overall aims, are decidedly “un-Byzantine,” the images incorporated into this design (by Byzantine artists) were derived from Byzantine prototypes (probably from manuscript illuminations, since Byzantine churches were not normally decorated with extensive narrative cycles from the Old Testament).
In this powerful and somewhat disturbing image from the Byzantine Museum in Athens, the extreme backward thrust of the child’s head creates the unsettling sense that we have entered a world turned upside down. The child’s upraised arms appear frozen in a timeless moment of surrender, almost as if he were falling backwards into an abyss. The viewer’s eye is drawn to the bright-red sash, tied in the figure of a cross, although it is to the body of the mother that the child is fastened, prompting one Byzantine writer to state that: “I call the Mother of God a cross, for the Lord was suspended on her outstretched arms.”

Here the body of the mother is the locus of the divinity’s self-emptying, the matrix in which God assumed the “form of a slave” and became “obedient to death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). The “Kardiotissa” type is thus a mirror held up to the future, in which, by anticipation, we see Christ crucified in reverse (that is, with his back to the viewer). These icons give graphic expression to the notion that the self-emptying of God in the Incarnation signals the death of God; they suggest that the incarnation is a voluntary “crucifixion” in which the divinity is nailed to the flesh, the body of the Mother.

Before leaving these images, it is intriguing to note that they have often been seen as details or close-ups taken from the iconography of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Like all close-ups, these images allow artists to emphasize the importance of the main figures, but they can leave viewers uncertain as to what they are seeing, since the figures are not shown in the context of their surroundings. But if we pull the camera back for a wide-angle shot, and understand that what we are seeing is a detail from the Presentation, our perception of the image undergoes a radical shift. To see the image in this way is to see Mother and Child from the perspective of Simeon, in whose place the viewer has been inserted. As a result, we are not simply looking at a picture of Mary holding her child; but neither are we seeing the child being offered to Simeon. Instead, the child is being offered to us, who are in the subject position of Simeon, directly interacting with the child and his Mother. The image thus engages the viewer in a kinetic and participatory encounter. It moves toward us, and we are installed in it, being invited to complete the action initiated by the image.

The Annunciation

We may now turn to the iconography of the Annunciation, seen here in this fourteenth-century icon from Ohrid. In his Letter to the Philippians, which I cited earlier, Paul had designated the moment of Christ’s conception as the kenotic moment par excellence. And as such it could not be ignored by Byzantine artists. But how exactly could it be depicted? How could an event invisible to the naked eye be expressed through the medium of art? Clearly, an even further compression (or simplification) of the kenotic concept was required, along with a symbolic form that would give clear yet appropriately discrete expression to the mystery. The solution was found in the seemingly mundane activity of spinning thread, with which the Virgin is engaged in virtually all Byzantine images of the Annunciation. This skein of wool and spinning implements were so important that they appear on even the smallest of images and object, such as this seventh-century marriage ring at Dumbarton Oaks, on the facets are images of the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Presentation, Presentation.

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31 Ps.-Epiphanius, *Homilia in laudes S. Mariae deiparae*: λέγω γὰρ ταύτην σταυρόν, τὰς γὰρ ἁγίας ἁγιάλας ἐστείνασα τὸν δεσπότην ἐξιστασεν (PG 43:497C). CPG 3771 ranks this among the spuria of Epiphanius, citing Caro who dates it to some point after the fifth century.

32 For this idea I am indebted to the study of Annemarie Weyl Carr, “The Presentation of an Icon at Mount Sinai,” *DChrArchE* 17 (1993-1994).
As unlikely as such a symbol might appear to the modern mind, the choice was perhaps inevitable. In the ancient world, the span of life was compared to a thread, spun out by the Fates at the moment of birth, and drawn to a length delimited by death (Odyssey 7.197-198; 24.28-29). The same image is found in the book of Isaiah, expanded to include the work of the loom: “My life was with me like cloth on the loom, when she that weaves draws near to cut off the thread” (Is 38:12[LXX]). Ancient Greek medical writers understood the formation of human flesh as the weaving together of finely spun threads, and modern science continues to speak of the production of human tissue from a “double-stranded thread” (DNA) through a system of “fibres” called the “mitotic spindle.”

But we don’t need to go back to Homer and Hippocrates in order to find the source of Mary’s thread, which is derived directly from the second-century Christian apocryphal work known as the Protoevangelium of James, which was extremely influential in Byzantine Christianity. According to this text, Mary was spinning wool for the veil of the temple when the archangel Gabriel approached her (cf. Lk 1:28). In the letter to the Hebrews, the flesh of Christ—as if it were a veil concealing his divinity—is directly identified with the veil of the temple, and this was undoubtedly the source for the symbolism of the apocryphal Gospel. If Christ’s flesh was derived exclusively from his mother, then the veil symbolizing that flesh can have been woven by no one but her, an activity coincident with the moment of Christ’s conception. At the drama’s conclusion, the work of the Mary’s hands and her womb together suffer a common fate: both will be rent as Christ perishes on the cross (Mt 27:50-51). With the strictest visual economy, then, the Virgin’s thread gives consummate expression to the kenotic continuum of conception and crucifixion.

Stavronikita Sanctuary Doors

From at least the twelfth century, the Annunciation was depicted on the low, double doors of the icon screen. This is a view of a tenth-century icon screen in the church of the Protaton on Mt. Athos. The low double doors, which are the main entrance to the sanctuary, are in the center, surmounted by a red veil; to either side are images of Christ and the Mother of God. Directly above the doors, in the eastern apse of the sanctuary, is a fresco of Mary with the infant Christ on her lap, as if in fulfillment of the promise signaled by the doors.

For a striking example of how thoughtful artists exploited the kenotic possibilities inherent in the iconography of the Annunciation, we may turn to the sanctuary doors painted by Theophanes at Stavronikita. (These doors have been removed from the icon screen and are now in the monastery’s museum). Against a golden ground devoid of landscape or architecture, the archangel Gabriel appears on our

34 Note, too, that the wool that Mary is spinning is most likely from a lamb.  
35 Originally a tenth-century structure, the Protaton was repaired and largely rebuilt in the fourteenth century, although the doors are from the twelfth century, while the icon screen survives from the original structure.  
36 Image from Christos Patrinelis, Μονή Σταυρονικήτα. Ιστορία, εἰκόνες, χρυσοκεντήματα (Athens, 1974), 62, fig. 12; its dimensions are 1.275 x 0.365. On the Lavra doors that inspired Theophanes’s painting, see Euthymios Tsigeridas, “Icônes portatives de la deuxième moitié du XIVe siècle au monastère de la Grande Lavra au Mont Athos,” ΔΧΑΕ 25 (2004): 31-33, figs. 6-8.
left, facing the Virgin who stands on the right.\textsuperscript{37} In his left hand, Gabriel holds the staff of a messenger, while his right hand is raised in a gesture of blessing. He is clothed in a flowing purple garment, the shimmering liquid forms of which contrast dramatically with the rigid lines and right angles of his bejeweled scarf. With one section plummeting down his front, and another crossing around his right side to drape over his left arm, the heavy, stone-encrusted stole gives his twisting, ethereal form solidity and structure. Simultaneously at rest and in motion, the undulating figure is moored by the scarf’s strong, vertical axis, which balances the horizontal extension of the left hip, thrust forward in exaggerated \textit{contrapposto}.

The Virgin, on the other hand, rises up like a monolith, solid and self-contained, a state of composure reflected in the limited colors and subdued tones with which she is depicted. Standing on a pedestal as one “of low degree exalted” (Lk 1:52), she wears a blue green gown draped by a deep red garment, the latter trimmed with gold fringe and falling behind her in a series of ordered folds. Her head is inclined toward the archangel, although her gaze is focused directly on the viewer, who is thereby drawn into the intimacy of the fecund transaction. Prompted by strong diagonal lines, the viewer’s focus soon shifts to the icon’s numinous center: the cruciform distaff and spindle. The distaff pierces through a whorl of bright red wool, while its vertical partner is wound with a growing length of thread, a single strand of which is visible at the top.

As if about to begin a stately dance, the elegantly turning figures advance toward the center of the composition. The centripetal movement, however, is countered by the three-quarter turn of their bodies, evident in the outward thrust of their right and left legs (respectively), which creates a sense of open space that is closed only at the point where their fingers nearly touch. The same movement is reproduced by their hands, which are not parallel like the legs, but crosswise, so that the left hand of each is lowered and the right is raised. As a result, the name of Christ, uttered in the liturgical sign-language of the angel’s fingers, bridges the space between them, and finds willing acceptance expressed in the Virgin’s open hand.

The cross-like patterns generated by this sacred choreography (and these doors do move) are repeated in the angel’s scarf and in the Virgin’s spinning tools, both of which intersect in the shape of a cross. Located on the icon’s central horizontal axis, the two crosses mirror each other across the space of the panels. The bejewelled scarf (known as a \textit{loros}), was a sign of imperial rank, but as a rule it is never worn by angels in icons depicting historical events from Scripture.

Theophanes could not have been unaware of this general principle, and to my knowledge this is the only time he breaks the rule. It seems clear that his decision to include the proscribed motif was motivated by his desire to create an icon in which conception and crucifixion would appear within a thematically unified field of meaning.\textsuperscript{38} To achieve such a goal, clothing the angel in imperial regalia was crucial. In the Byzantine world, the \textit{loros} was understood both as a symbol of Christ’s cross and of the shroud that was wrapped around his dead body.\textsuperscript{39} Simultaneously evoking the death and the burial, Gabriel announces, not simply the divine child’s conception, but his voluntary submission to the cross and the grave (cf. Phil 2:9).

\textsuperscript{37} The angel is slightly constrained by the narrow format of the door panel, which did not allow sufficient space for part of his right wing and the whole of his right foot.
\textsuperscript{38} Related, perhaps, to the name (\textit{σταυρῷς} = cross) of the monastery? There are multiple traditions concerning the monastery’s name, none of which support such an interpretation, although the pun cannot be ruled out.
\textsuperscript{39} It was worn only rarely by the emperor, but always at the feast of the Resurrection, when the emperor was accompanied by twelve dignitaries, symbolizing Christ and the twelve apostles.
Like an object magnified in a mirror, the angelic cross reflects the Virgin’s distaff and spindle, which presents the icon’s core message in vivid, concentrated form. The Virgin’s symbolic crucifix gives striking emphasis to the fact that the Word of God, who has entered her womb, will be woven together with mortal flesh and surrender his life on the cross. Like a sacred hieroglyph, the small cross depicts the facts of the larger narrative through the use of a visually associated object. As a kind of pictogram, it additionally mimes the form of the body, and thus couples the formation of the body with its destruction, merging the creative sacrifice of birth with the redemptive sacrifice of death on the cross. Finally, the small cross seems to rest—without the weight it will soon acquire—on the Virgin’s left knee, as if in anticipation of the incarnate Word, who will lie there both as a child and a corpse.

The Annunciation by the Well and the Lamentation

One image of the Annunciation stands out from all the rest by virtue of its extraordinary interpretation of the Pauline theology of kenosis: the Annunciation by the Well in the Church of the Perivleptos in Ohrid. Painted in 1295 by Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, this image presents us with a rather formidable interpretive challenge, for it is part of a complex network of images covering the north wall of the nave.

In what follows (and this is the last stop on our tour) we shall focus on the figure of the Mother of God as she appears within two contiguous narrative cycles: an upper cycle with scenes from the Gospels and the Passion, and, below it, a cycle depicting the life of the Virgin derived largely from the Protoevangelium. Moving from left to right, each register tells its own story, as if one were looking at pictures in a book, or pronouncing words in a sentence. At the same time, the various figures and events may also be linked vertically, like chords on a bar of music, generating profound and unexpected meanings. We shall therefore attend, not only to the figure of Mary at the well, but also to the figure of Mary lamenting the dead Christ, which appears directly above it. By means of this juxtaposition, the painters have brought together the moment of Christ’s conception with his death, although to say this is to have revealed only the most obvious feature of this remarkable composition.

We shall begin our approach to this rich and multi-layered fresco with the lower register, with the Annunciation at the Well. Sometimes referred to as the “proto-Annunciation,” the Annunciation at the Well is not mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, but is an apocryphal invention of the Protoevangelium, which describes another Annunciation, which took place by a well, where Mary had gone to draw water, shortly before the Annunciation story described by Luke.

Here, in keeping with the kenotic motif, the well is tellingly depicted in the form of a cross. Mary is flanked by two female attendants, while a third is visible behind the well wheel. Art historians have suggested that the attending women are based on classical images of assisting midwives. They also recall the women who support Mary at the Crucifixion. Above and to the right of Mary is the angel. It seems clear that the artists have chosen to depict the moment of surprise, when Mary is startled by the angelic voice, for not only is the angel depicted in a gesture of speech, but Mary’s body betrays all the signs of being “greatly troubled” (Lk 1:29) and “shaken with fear” (Protoevangelium).

Despite the biblical authorization for Mary’s acute discomposure, it would be difficult to find another

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40 They are also closely related to personifications of the divine “powers” who accompany Mary in illustrated Akathist Hymn cycles, i.e., the “power (δύναμις) of the Most High,” mentioned in the Lucan account, and thus are associated with activity of the Holy Spirit.
depiction of the Virgin in which she appears in such a disturbed and indecorous pose [Image/detail]. This was a daring decision on the part of the artists and their patrons, although exactly what they sought to convey is not immediately clear. Is Mary in motion or standing still? And if she is in motion, what direction is she moving in? Her body appears fragmented, partitioned into different zones, organized along several different angles and axes. Her head, for example, is turned up and back to the left, causing her shoulders to slant sharply, as her upper body hunches over to the right. Her left hand is raised up, and her left leg is extended downward, although it is not certain if her left foot touches the ground. In contrast, her right arm is thrust heavily downward, and yet her right leg, bent at the knee, is raised up so that her right foot floats in mid air. Altogether she seems to be moving in several directions at once, with her upper body diverging from its lower half, and her right side acting independently from her left. With her upper body seemingly entering a fall; her arms moving in opposite directions; and her legs and feet flying out from under her, she remains upright only by virtue of her powerfully built companions, who form a piece of ample human furniture that is at once a royal throne and a birthing stool.

The angle of Mary’s upturned head (in danger of losing its veil), the line of her shoulders, and her raised left hand, [Image] are closely paralleled in the Lamentation, as if we were seeing the same gestures repeated in two different contexts. Mary’s two companions likewise have their counterparts in the upper zone. But it is Mary herself who is the connecting thread, for she is the sole figure that appears in both registers, the common chord uniting the beginning of the story to its end, revealing the hidden pattern in this complex tapestry. It follows, then, that Mary’s peculiar posture in the Annunciation by the Well must be seen in light of what she befalls in the scene above, so that, all told, we are witnessing a continuous event, an event which is the very form she has chosen for her life: an expression of her existence as surrendered to and poured out before God.

Turning now to the upper register [Image], we see Mary overcome by grief and falling in a swoon, with her hands raised in a wilted orans posture over the dead body of her son, who lies before her on the anointing slab. Both their heads are thrown back at acute angles (point). Her eyes are turned upward, but they appear lifeless and unseeing. She is surrounded by a group of women in attitudes of lament, one, identifiable as Mary Magdalene, raises her hands to heaven, while others pull their hair, hold their hands to their faces in despair, and comfort each other. A company of angels grieves in heaven, one holding its hands to its face in a classic gesture of sorrow, others seemingly frozen in what looks like shock, some lifting their palms outward before them in a gesture that seems lost between prayer and perplexity. Next to Mary, the beloved disciple kisses his teacher’s hand (Jn 19:26), while Joseph of Arimathea, crouching down, kisses his feet, and attends to the linen he has provided (Mk 15:46). Behind him stands Nikodemos (Jn 19:39). Displayed in the foreground are the instruments of the passion: the lance (Jn 19:34), the sponge on the hyssop (Jn 19:29; cf. Mk 15:36), a basket with the nails and pliers (cf. Jn 20:25), the crown of thorns (Mk 15:17), and the “vessel full of vinegar” (Jn 19:29; cf. Mk 15:23; Mt 27:34).

[Image/detail] Unlike the relatively restrained and codified gestures of most Byzantine religious images, the Ohrid Lamentation is unabashed in depicting the agony of unmitigated grief. The Virgin is now physically experiencing the full weight of Symeon’s prophecy: “And a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Lk 2:35), and stricken she falls back into the arms of the women who support her. Her hair is uncovered, although she is not pulling at it like some of the other mourners. Instead, it falls around her shoulders and small wisps stand up in the center of her part. If the “hair of a woman is indeed her glory” (1 Cor 11:15), this is the glory of a grief unbound.
At the center of the composition is the figure of the dead Christ. Like the still point of a storm, all the activity and energy seem to emerge from and swirl around his listless, elongated body, which stands out naked and pale against the comparatively bright garments clothing the voluminous forms of the mourners. The contrast between presence and absence is foremost in this image, as the dead, absent Christ is made intimately present to the mourners; his absent presence causes a disruption among them that is without parallel in Byzantine art. At the same time, the Lamentation is in some ways a relief, since all the tension built up in the earlier images, with their immanent threat of violence and death, has finally been realized, and we move into that time of weeping which is a descent into grief but also a kind of release.

Anyone who has been to the Orthodox Lamentation service on Holy Friday will know that the burst of emotion depicted in the iconography corresponds to the feeling of elevated sorrow experienced by the congregation, a powerful experience of release after the long and arduous journey of Great Lent and Holy Week. The image at the top is an Epitaphios, an embroidered textile depicting the dead Christ, which figures prominently in the Lamentation service. This particular Epitaphios dates to ca. 1300, and its design was taken from the same artists working at Ohrid. Angels appear around the body, but no human mourners, who are supplied by the congregation, who gather around the woven body, greet it with a kiss, press their faces to it, and carry it in their arms in a procession around the church. (Note, too, the Eucharistic images on either side.)

Because we have become so accustomed to seeing the death and burial of Christ as the overture to his resurrection, we may in fact fail to see what is actually before us. To be sure, the Lamentation does not call us to any kind of facile triumphalism, but to a much more delicate and dangerous task, namely, to descend into the moment of bereavement, to live fully and completely the energy of grief, which lifts the figures from stasis to life, breaks open their innermost selves, and impels all creation into the heart of this shattering moment. In the hymns for Holy Friday that are an inseparable part of the image, Mary cries:

"O Word of God, hast Thou no word for Thy handmaiden? Hast Thou no pity, O Master, for thy Mother? said the Virgin, lamenting and weeping and kissing the sinless body of her son. “I reflect, O Master, how never again shall I hear Thy voice; never again shall Thy handmaiden see the beauty of Thy face as in the past; for Thou, my Son, hast sunk down before mine eyes.”

And the Word has no word of response to these requests. Jesus does not utter glad tidings of his resurrection. Mary uses the word “never.” The death that she mourns is not partial, and neither is her grief. Where, then, is the resurrection? I believe it is contained within the painting, within the very moment of lament, for it shows us the unsealed heart and the broken body as the site of creation and transformation, a kind of birth that rends both the body of Christ and the soul of his mother. The Lamentation fulfills the Annunciation insofar as it makes clear the truth that all creative acts are kenotic, and that neither God nor his mother escape the demands of mortal flesh. The Lamentation depicts not only Christ’s “birth” into death, but also the time of Mary’s real travail, when she feels the wrenching bonds of motherhood, both in birth and in death. Whereas Christ’s consent to “assume the form of a slave” (Phil 2:7) was a self-emptying of his power and infinity into the limits of the flesh, Mary’s consent to open her sealed body to the presence of the infinite, is her kenotic act, the consequences of which she now experiences.41

41 For these ideas, I am indebted to the work of my former student, Rachel Smith.
Connections between birth and death are not uncommon in Byzantine images of the Lamentation, such as this twelfth-century fresco from the church of St. Panteleimon in Nerezi (Macedonia). This remarkable image alludes both to the child’s birth and to the days of his infancy. On the one hand, we see him reclining in his mother’s open lap, which is open in a kind of birthing position. At the same time, she supports his neck, and presses her cheek to his, a gesture we have seen repeatedly in these images. The Ohrid Lamentation, however, tells a slightly different story, since it relates the moment of death, not to birth or childhood, but to the very moment of conception, depicted in the Annunciation by the well, which appears directly below the Lamentation; a connection reinforced by the figure of the dead Christ on the stone, and the stone well, conspicuously shaped like a cross.

Mary, both virgin and mother, is a paradoxical figure. In a single moment, in the very form of her being, she embodies all the inviolability of virginity and all the pain of motherhood. In her virginity she is a sealed book and an enclosed garden. Yet in the experience of mourning for her lost son, the seals of her being are torn apart, for this is her real childbirth, in which her hair is loose, her eyes leak, and midwives anxiously attend to her. In her pain she is one with the wounded Christ: she is porous, poured out, kenotic.

Through her tears, Mary is literally “emptying herself” just as her arms are emptied of the life of her son. In her weeping and despair, she embodies the highest form of sanctity defined as the kenotic act of relinquishing all control, opening herself to be changed by the sufferings of Christ. What is taking place externally is a sword piercing her soul (Lk 2:35). She is not, in these images, identified so much by her inviolate self, but by her wounds. And in showing the Mother of God open and wounded in this way, the artists offer us a different vision of the spiritual life and of the transformation of the self in relation to God.

In both the Annunciation by the Well and the Lamentation, the creative act of love is shown to be self-renouncing in the voluntary consent of the Virgin to relinquish perfect control, perfect closure, perfect self-possession, so that she may become the vessel of God. Hers is not a virginity that simply “seals” itself, as if it were form of Stoic renunciation, but is the renunciation of the pierced body of Christ, opening itself to the world. This is the great risk involved in surrendering oneself to God. This is the risk of unsealing the self, of consenting to have the chamber of one’s heart host another’s presence. The unsealing of love is a form of kenosis, an emptying of the self, a making of space within the womb of one’s being for another to reside.

Kenosis and Representation

To these kenotic moments we may, before concluding, add a final one, namely: the “death” of the subject in artistic representation. Byzantine defenders of icons affirmed that Christ’s depictability, that is, his susceptibility to depiction, was a necessary corollary of his embodiment. Artistic representation, in turn, is itself a process of embodiment, a kind of birth, a coming into being, but also a kind of death, constituted around an originary loss, for it is the kenosis of a spiritual logos into objective, material form. In assuming the “form of the slave,” God who is without form consents to be enclosed within the limits of time and space, to live in a world of shared objectification. To consent to have a body means to be framed by the narrow edges of the manger; confined to the lap of the mother; fixed to the arms of the cross; and figured in a work of art. Within these frames, the divine-human center finds itself narrowly circumscribed, surrounded, as it were, by so many walls collapsing in on it, threatening
to crush it alive. Yet in surrendering his body to wounding, and his image to depiction in art, God makes visible the nature of his kenotic engagement with the world. God in pain and God in art carry the emphatic assurance of his real presence among us; they are an amplification of that presence, making God more human, and his human form more immediately apprehensible.42 The virtual identity between Christ “crucified” and Christ “iconized” was grasped by Byzantine iconophiles, who argued for the formal unity of incarnation, passion, and artistic figuration: to be at the center of any one of them was to be, simultaneously, at the center of all three.

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42 Self-emptied from his metaphysical source, the Word remains present in the flesh—and susceptible to depiction in art—even after the Resurrection, inviting his disciples to gaze on him, and to examine and explore his wounds (cf. Luke 24:39; John 20:27).