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A Repeated Image of Light in the Sermons of Vicenç Ferrer **David J. Viera**

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A REPEATED IMAGE OF LIGHT IN THE SERMONS OF VICENÇ FERRER

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An active preacher who traveled to many cities of Western Europe, Vicenç Ferrer repeated images from his previous sermons. One such image, that of the rays of the sun shining on a stained-glass window (a metaphor for the Incarnation), appears at least three times in his published sermons. In his homily preached on the vigil of Pentecost, for example,

...devem creure hun Déu en trinitat: vet aci en lo sol, que axí com no és sinó hun sol en lo món qui.l escalfa, e.l fa fructificar, axí en lo món no és sinó hun Déu qui.l sosté e.l govern. Aprés, devem creure la incarnació del fill de Déu, com pres carn humana en lo ventre virginal de la verge Maria. Saps com? Axí com quant en lo mig jorn, que fa gran sol, e ja sabeu que.l sol entra per algunes vidrieras en la església, e lo raig del sol pren la color de la vidriera (no pas lo sol ni la calor, mas lo rayg del sol), sus axí fo en la encarnació, que lo Pare no pres la nostra humanitat, ni lo sant Spirit, mas lo Fill; e nasqué de la verge Maria, ella estant e romanint verge: axí com lo rayg passe per la vidriera, no romp la vidriera ans la fa pus bella, sus axi fo que Jesuchrist no rompé la virginitat de la verge Maria, ans fo pus bella, pus santa e pus beneyta. (*Sermons*, I, 129).¹

Commenting on the same image in the *Sermons de Quaresma*, no. XXI,² Joan Fuster wrote, "Maria serà encara verge després del part, a la manera de la vidriera, que es deixa transpassar

¹ Vicenç Ferrer, *Sermons*, ed. Josep Sanchis Sivera and Gret Schib. 5 vols. (Barcelona: Barcino, 1932-1984). Henceforth cited in text.

² Ed. M. Sanchis Guarner (València: Albatros, 1973), I, 174.

per la llum i l'acoloreix, sense per això sofrir-ne gens".³ Emilio Suares repeats this same interpretation, adding:

Juegan en esta exposición cuatro elementos. Tres divinos: el sol, que es el Padre; el calor procedente del sol, que es el Espíritu Santo; y el rayo, procedente asimismo del sol, que es cristal en el que actúan los tres.... El único de los tres que traspasa el cristal tomando de él su color es el rayo... la naturaleza humana.⁴

Furthermore, the stained-glass window (Mary, the human element) takes on a radiant beauty as the rays of the sun enter it. To Suares, this metaphor signifies the perfection and grace of Mary at the moment of conception.

Inspired by classical Greek philosophers, Athanasius, Augustine, and other Church Fathers used the sun to explain the Trinity. Medieval authors, especially the Scholastics, looked upon God as the source of light and therefore took sunlight to be an image of the Trinity. Three rays of light issuing from the head forming a nimbus symbolized the Trinity;⁵ and the sun, symbolic of the face of God,⁶ cannot be looked upon at noon, when it is most intense. Ferrer, in his *Sermons*, further compared the Trinity to the sun and its properties (*sol*, *raig*, *calor*) without extending the comparison to the stained-glass image:

En lo sol no. y veeu vosaltres trinitat? Lo sol, de la sua substància, engendra lo raig; *ergo* qui engendra pot ésser dit pare, e qui és engendrat per altri pot ésser

³ "Notes per a un estudi de l'oratòria valenciana". *Revista Valenciana de Filologia*, 4 (1954), 142.

⁴ "La Santísima Virgen en los sermones de San Vicente Ferrer", *Teología Espiritual*, 16 (1972), 53-54.

⁵ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 47, 149.

⁶ *Sancti Aurelii Augustini. In Iohannis Evangelium. Tractatus CXIX* (Turnholt: Brepols Editors, 1953), XXXVI, pars viii, 660.

dit fill; e del sol engendrant e del raig engendrat, veus que proceeix la calor; e donchs, qui és spirat pot ésser appellat spirit. E donchs, veus en lo sol trinitat. (*Sermons*, I, 123-24)⁷

The terms *sol* and *raig* derive their theological significance from *lux*, *splendor*, and *fervor*; also, both *lux* and *splendor* were used in the Bible. Augustine used the terms *lux*, *fulgor*, and *calor* in his *De Processione S. Spiritus* 14 (PL 158, 307a-c), concluding that *calor* does not proceed from *splendor*, a belief Ferrer rejected:⁸

Lo Sperit Sant proceix egualment del Pare e del Fill. E darvos ne una semblança del Sol. En lo sol noy veeu vosaltres trinitat. Lo sol de la sua substancia engendra lo raig; quomodo qui engendra pot esser dit pare e qui es engendrat per altre, pot esser dit fill, e del Sol engendrant e del raig engendrat veus que proceeix la calor; e donchs, qui es spirat pot esser appellat spirit. E donchs, veus en lo sol trinitat: sus axi es de la Trinitat.⁹

Ferrer's source for the procession of the Trinity must have been Thomas Aquinas, who specified doctrine already stated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Athanasian Creeds.¹⁰ St. Vicenç's image of the sun and the stained-glass window, however, originates not in a literary source alone nor in ancient and me-

⁷ Also consult *Sermons*, III, 130. R. Chabas, "Estudio sobre los sermones valencianos de San Vicente Ferrer". *Revista de Archivos. Bibliotecas y Museos*, 6 (1902), 133.

⁸ Also consult *De Libero Arbitrio*, 2, 11, 32 (PL 32, 1258). A more detailed account of these terms is found in J. T. Muckle, "The *Hexameron* of Robert Grosseteste; The First Three Chapters of Part Seven", *Mediaeval Studies*, 6 (1944), 153-54.

⁹ R. Chabas, 133.

¹⁰ For Athanasius' role in the formulation of the trinitarian concept, see H. Flanders Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in the "Divine Comedy"* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 144-50.

dieval optics, but in a combined relationship between theology (perhaps a speculative work on the Trinity), devotional works,¹¹ and Gothic art and architecture.¹² Peter Damian, Hildebert, William of Champeux, and the pseudo-Bernard, among others, used the metaphor of the rays of the sun penetrating stained glass usually to symbolize Mary's virginity.¹³ Late medieval authors continued to use the metaphor in religious literature such as the *Revelations* of St. Bridget (Rome, 1628, I, 1), the *Miracle de Théophile* of Rutebeuf,¹⁴ and mystery plays, sermons, poems, and hymns. Also, in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Flemish, Dutch, French, and German painters depicted scenes of the Annunciation showing rays of light passing through a glass window.¹⁵ And it was in the Gothic cathedral that the large stained-glass windows served two functions: to permit illumination and to depict a symbolic image of God. The symbols were subject to change with the position and movement of the individual contemplating them. Discussing the stained-glass windows, Víctor Nieto Alcalde states:

...lo que nos transmiten no es una idea parcial o fragmentaria, sino total y evolutiva. Los constructores de catedrales del siglo XIII quisieron plasmar una idea trascendente, integradora, mediante la totalidad de las relaciones cromáticas, es-

¹¹ Albertus Magnus, *De Laudibus B. Mariae* (Strassburg: Martin Flach, 1493), Book XII, pt. 5, ch. 4, and other medieval writers also used these terms.

¹² M. Meiss, "Light as Form and Symbol in Some Fifteenth-Century Paintings," *Art Bulletin*, 27 (1945), 176-77.

¹³ Anselm Salzer, *Die Sinnbilder und Beiworte Mariens in der deutschen Literatur und lateinischen Hymnenpoesie des Mittelalters* (Druck und Einband, 1967), 72-75; Louis Grodecki, "Fonctions Spirituelles", in *Le vitrail français*, ed. Marcel Albert et al (Paris: Editions Mondes, 1958), 40.

¹⁴ Ed. L. Cledat (Paris, 1903), 78.

¹⁵ Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Medieval Stained Glass* (Atlanta: Lullwater Press, 1946), 6.

paciales e iconográficas de un simbolismo que presente el interior de las iglesias como una serie de variantes sobre el tema de Dios, *luz del mundo*.¹⁶

Although the image of the illuminated stained-glass window symbolized several mysteries—Annunciation, Nativity, Omnipresence of God, Redemption—St. Vicenç limited its significance to the Incarnation and Annunciation (*Sermons*, V, 227).¹⁷ The close association of the Trinity with the illuminated window image may have been influenced by a Trinitarian treatise. Yet in two sermons he went so far as to give the colors of the windows through which the rays of the sun pass (“vermell” and “verd”, Sanchis Guarnier, I, 174, and “grogà”, “vermella”, and “vert o de altra color”, *Sermons*, V, 227), thus indicating that he may have literally observed the image in a church or European cathedral. Furthermore, his continuous use of the stained-glass image may have been reinforced by his travels in Europe, especially in northern Europe, where the practice was common. On the other hand, the stained-glass image was less common in Hispanic art and literature of the period. St. Vicenç’s acquaintance in Valencia, Francesc Eiximenis, shunned its use in his works, particularly the *Primer del Crestià*, *Llibre dels àngels*, and *Vita Christi*, in which he discussed the Trinity, Incarnation and Annunciation. Eiximenis’s aversion to this image is puzzling since he directed his works to the laity, who were drawn to religious images and their symbolism.

¹⁶ “Función simbólica de la luz en la arquitectura española del siglo XVI”, *Revista de la Universidad Complutense*, 22 (1973), 120-21.

¹⁷ Fifteenth-century painters and writers described Mary’s role in the Incarnation and Annunciation as “le chamber de toute la Trinité”, an interpretation which Jean Gerson treated with indignation: Alphonse Napoleon Didron, *Christian Iconography. The History of Christian Art in The Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (New York: Ungar, 1965), II, 59-60.

In conclusion, Vicenç Ferrer directed his sermons to a large audience which included the clergy and people of different social rank. In order to capture the attention of such diverse groups, he used images from nature: animals, birds, fruits and vegetables, metals and minerals, and celestial bodies such as the sun. Some of these images may be traced to the works of Augustine and Aquinas, but others came from the folklore of his time and perhaps from his own imagination.

Ferrer occasionally used the image of light on stained-glass windows to bring together mysteries, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Annunciation, in order to illustrate doctrine he could explain only through images and symbols. His audience was no doubt familiar with the metaphor, which existed in the art, devotional literature, and late medieval religious practices. His source of this image is difficult to specify because it was frequent in medieval Europe. Although the image may have come to him from literature (i. e., a religious treatise on the Trinity), undoubtedly he observed the image visually, either in a church or in a work art.

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