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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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Vicenç Ferrer directed his sermons to a large audience which included people of different social rank and the clergy. Many of his non-Latin sermons show a marked interest in the «poble menut» or common people. In order to capture the attention of such a diverse group, he used images taken from nature: animals, birds, fruits and vegetables, metals and minerals, celestial bodies such as the sun. Some of these images may be traced to the works of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, two of St. Vicenç's major sources, but others came from the folklore of his time and perhaps his own imagination.

An active preacher who travelled to many cities of Western Europe, Vicenç Ferrer tended to repeat images he had used in previous sermons. One such image is that of the sun's rays shining on a stained-glass window, a metaphor for the Incarnation. In his sermons published to date, this image appears at least three times. In a sermon preached on the vigil of Pentacost, St. Vicenç said:

... deven creure hun Déu en trinitat: vet ací en lo sol, que axí con 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 fo que Jesu-christ no rompé la virginitat de la verge Maria, ans fo pus bella, pus santa e pus beneyta (*Sermons*, I, 129).

Nolasc Rebull describes this image as one which could be used today and which «en la prèdica del Sant guarda com la frescor nati-

va».¹ Francisco Almeda y Vives admires the esthetic beauty of the image,² Commenting on the same image in the *Sermons de Quaresma*, no. XXI,³ Joan Fuster writes, «Maria serà encara verge després del part, a la manera de la vidriera, que es deixa transpassar per la llum i l'acoloreix, sense per això sofrir-ne gens».⁴ 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.⁵

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

Research into the image of the radiant stained-glass window has been limited to describing the image and commenting upon its metaphorical significance. The purpose of this study, however, is to conduct an analysis of St. Vicenç's use of the image itself and its sources.

Athanasius, Augustine, and other Church Fathers, inspired by classical Greek philosophers, insisted on using the sun to explain the Trinity, a method which continued with the scholastic writers. Medieval people looked upon God as the source of light, and patristic and medieval writers took sunlight to be an image of the Trinity. Three rays of light issuing from the head forming a nimbus symbolized the Trinity.⁶ And the sun, which produces light which cannot

¹ «Sermons de Sant Vicenç Ferrer», *Estudis Franciscans*, 45 (1933), 102.

² «Los valores estéticos en San Vicente Ferrer», *Revista de Ideas Estéticas*, 15 (1957), 22-23.

³ Ed. M. Sanchis Guarner (València, 1973), I, 174.

⁴ «Notes per a un estudi de l'oratória valenciana». *Revista Valenciana de Filología*, 4 (1954), 142.

⁵ «La santísima virgen en los sermones de San Vicente Ferrer», *Teología Espiritual*, 16 (1972), 53-54.

⁶ George Ferguson, *Signes and Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford, 1966), p. 47, 149.

be looked upon at noon, when it is most intense, was symbolic of the face of God.⁷ St. Vicenç. in his *Sermons*, compares 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 dit fill; e del sol engendrat e del raig engendrat, veus que proceex la calor; e donchs, qui és spirat pot ésser appellat spirit. E donchs, veus en lo sol trinitat.⁸

The terms *sol* and *raig* derive their theological use from *lux*, *splendor*, and *fervor*. 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 rejected by Vicenç Ferrer:⁹

Lo Sperit Sant proceix equalment del Pare e del Fill. E darvos ne una semblança del Sol. ...engendrat e del raig engendrat veus que proceex la calor; e donchs, qui es spirat pot esser appellat spirit.¹⁰

Rather, the source upon which Vincent Ferrer depended for the procession of the Trinity must have been Thomas Aquinas, who specified doctrine already stated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Athanasian Creeds.¹¹

The origin of St. Vicenç's image of the sun and the stained-glass

⁷ *Sancti Aurelii Augustini. In Iohannis Evangelium. Tractatus CXIX* (Turnholt, Brepols Editors, 1953), XXXVI, pars viii, p. 660.

⁸ *Sermons* I, 123-24; also see III, 130. R. Chabas, «Estudio sobre los sermones valencianos de San Vicente Ferrer». *Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos*, 6 (1902), 133.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ R. Chabas, p. 133.

¹¹ For the role of Athanasius in the formulation of the trinitarian concept, see H. Flanders Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in the «Divine Comedy»* (New York, 1961), pp. 144-50.

window comes not from a literary source alone nor from ancient and medieval optics, but from the relationship between theology, perhaps a speculative work on the Trinity—literature of the Middle Ages,¹² and Gothic art and architecture.¹³ Peter Damian, Hildebert, William of Champeux, and the pseudo-Bernard, among others, used the metaphor of the sun's rays penetrating stained glass usually to symbolize Mary's virginity.¹⁴ In the late Middle Ages, it continued in religious literature such as the *Revelations* of St. Bridget (Rome, 1628, I, p. 1), in the *Miracle de Théophile* of Rutebeuf,¹⁵ as well as 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.¹⁶ And it was in the Gothic cathedral that the large stained-glass windows were allowed to serve 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 Alcaide states:

... lo que nos transmiten no es una idea parcial o fragmentaria, sino total y evolvente. Los constructores de catedrales del siglo XIII quisieron plasmar una idea trascendente, integradora, mediante la totalidad de las relaciones cromáticas, espaciales 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*.¹⁷

¹² Albertus Magnus, *De Laudibus B. Mariae* (Strassburg: Martin Flach, 1493), Book XII, pt. 5, ch. 4, and other medieval writers also use these terms.

¹³ M. Meiss, 'Light as Form and Symbol in Some Fifteenth-Century Paintings', *Art Bulletin*, 27 (1945), 176-77.

¹⁴ Anselm Salzer, *Die Sinnbilder und Beiworte Mariens in der deutschen Literatur und lateinischen Hymnenpoesie des Mittelalters* (Druck und Einband, 1967), pp. 72-75; Louis Grodecki, 'Fonctions Spirituelles', in *Le vitrail français*, ed. Marcel Albert et al (Paris, 1958), p. 40.

¹⁵ Ed. L. Cledat (Paris, 1903), p. 78.

¹⁶ Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Medieval Stained Glass* (Atlanta, 1946), p. 6.

¹⁷ 'Función simbólica de la luz en la arquitectura española del siglo XVI', *Revista de la Universidad Complutense*, 22 (1973), 120-21.

Although the image of the illuminated stained-glass window symbolized several mysteries —Annunciation, Nativity, Omnipresence of God, Redemption— St. Vicenç chose to limit its significance to the Incarnation and Annunciation (*Sermons*, V, 227).¹⁸ By his insistence on the mystery of the Trinity each time the image of the illuminated window appears, St. Vicenç indicates that his choice of image was probably influenced by a religious work on the Trinity. Yet in two sermons he goes so far as to give the colors of the windows through which the sun's rays pass («vermell» and «verd», Sanchis Guarner, I, 174, and «grogà», «vermella», and «vert o de altra color», *Sermons*, V, 227), a fact which would indicate 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 European travels, where the practice was quite common, especially in northern Europe. On the other hand, the stained-glass image was not common in Hispanic art and literature of the period. St. Vicenç's contemporary and acquaintance in Valencia, Francesc Eiximenis, shuns its use in his works, particularly the *Primer del Crestià*, *Llibre dels àngels*, and *Vita Christi*, where he discusses 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.

In conclusion, Vincent Ferrer resorted to the image of light on stained glass and thereby brought together mysteries such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Annunciation. By doing so, he wished to evoke a visual image known to his audience to illustrate doctrine which could not be explained without the use of symbols. His audience was no doubt familiar with the metaphor, for it was common to the art, religious literature, and religious practices of the late

¹⁸ Fifteenth-century paintings and literature described Mary's role in the Incarnation and Annunciation as «le chamber de toute la Trinité». This interpretation irked Jean Gerson, who treated it with indignation: Alphonse Napoleon Didron, «Christian Iconography». *The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1965), II, 59-60.

Middle Ages. Also, St. Vicenç's fondness for the image is evident from his repeated use of it in his Catalan sermons.

Given the commonness of the image in the late Middle Ages, it is difficult to specify the Valencian friar's source. A comparison of his use of the image with other literary sources indicates that his awareness of it and its symbolism may have come to him from a religious treatise on the Trinity. However, the addition of colors and other specific details points to the fact that St. Vicenç observed the image visually, either in a church or an art work of the time.

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