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**The Priesthood of the Virgin Mary as an Image Paradigm  
in Byzantine Visual Culture**

The Priesthood of the Virgin has, since the late Middle Ages, become a very popular topic in Roman Catholic theology, with influence also on the iconography of the Latin West. In Byzantine theology this theme has been never articulated as doctrine, whether positively or negatively. However, in East Christian homiletics and hymnography the notion and metaphor of the Virgin's priesthood is easily perceived. A characteristic example was provided by Epiphanius of Cyprus (7<sup>th</sup> century), comparing the Virgin with the Priest and at the same time with the Altar Table, on which "she has offered to us Christ as Heavenly Bread for the redemption of sins".

In the paper I will attempt to argue the crucial significance of this theme for the development of Byzantine iconography, and visual culture in general. According to my hypothesis, only through the notion of the Priesthood of the Virgin, as present in the minds of iconographers, we will be able to understand the symbolic meaning of several pictorial motifs which have remained unexplained. We begin with the most general theme of the Deesis. In this multi-faceted iconography the Priesthood symbolism should be examined. The Mother of God and John the Baptist, as representatives of the New and Old Testament Priesthood, concelebrate Christ as Great High Priest. The origins of this interpretation may be seen in the early Byzantine period. The seventh-century iconography of the Panagia Drossiani on Naxos provides a convincing example, combining in a single composition of Deesis the images of Christ the Priest, the Virgin, the Personification of *Ecclesia*, John the Baptist and King Solomon. The culmination of this development is the appearance, in the Paleologan period, of the Deesis with Christ in patriarchal garments.

This context of the Priesthood of the Virgin may explain some unusual details of the vestments of the Virgin as well as the clothing of the Child before her. We just mention here the following details: the golden shroud of Christ in combination with a transparent shirt, the priestly cuffs, the depiction of a strange veil over the traditional maphorion of the Virgin, and the fringed edges of the Virgin's garment.

The most impressive detail, however, is the Virgin's handkerchief which appears in a great number of representations from the fourth century on. It may be depicted in her left hand, on her girdle, or raised to her face as in the Crucifixion scenes. Some written sources suggest the origins of the motif: in the early Church, women sometimes received the holy communion in such handkerchiefs. With time it became an element of the liturgical vestments of western and eastern high priests. Some instances of Byzantine iconography of the Communion of the Apostles and the Last Supper show that similar handkerchiefs were in use during the Eucharistic liturgy. The Virgin's handkerchief might be perceived in Byzantium as a declaration of her priesthood and of a deep connection with the Eucharistic sacrifice.

The present topic allow us to pose a theoretical question of Byzantine approach operating with pictorial motives which deliberately did not articulate the doctrinal meaning. It was an image-paradigm which was recognized by beholders, yet it was not perceived as an iconographic device or a particular illustration of any text. So, for them the sublime notion of the Priesthood of the Virgin never coincided with a dubious claim of the Virgin as presbyter.