

Article

Paradisi porta—An Iconographic Analysis of Mary as a Humanity’s Mediator in the Light of Medieval Liturgical Hymns

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Abstract: This article aims to highlight the rich doctrinal meanings underlying the textual and iconic designation of the Virgin Mary as the gate of Heaven, a highly brilliant metaphor used by writers and artists to symbolize her saving mediation before her divine Son on behalf of humankind. To justify our interpretations of this textual and iconic symbol, we will proceed first by analyzing an abundant set of fragments of medieval liturgical hymns, which designate the Virgin Mary as the “gate of Paradise” (*porta Paradisi*) or “gate of Heaven” (*ianua Coeli*) and other expressions alluding to her power to facilitate the eternal salvation of the faithful. In a second step, we will analyze ten sculptural and pictorial artworks that represent Mary as the gate of celestial paradise or the mediator before God in favor of believers to facilitate their eternal salvation.

Keywords: Mariology; Marian iconography; Mary’s universal mediation; eternal salvation; Last Judgement; medieval liturgical hymns; doctrinal symbol; gothic portal



Citation: Salvador-González, José María. 2023. *Paradisi porta—An Iconographic Analysis of Mary as a Humanity’s Mediator in the Light of Medieval Liturgical Hymns*. *Religions* 14: 284. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020284>

Academic Editors: Fátima Matos Silva, Isabel Borges, Helena Albuquerque and Marina Montesano

Received: 5 January 2023

Revised: 16 January 2023

Accepted: 16 February 2023

Published: 20 February 2023



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1. Introduction

The Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325) and Ephesus (431) set up the fundamental dogma of the Virgin Mary’s divine motherhood. Consequently, she quickly began receiving repeated and profound attention from many Church Fathers and medieval theologians, thus configuring a solid and concordant Mariological tradition for more than a millennium. In turn, this doctrinal tradition was translated into two intrinsically related and complementary manifestations: on the one hand, the Fathers and theologians’ statements about Mary served as eidetic inspiration and doctrinal foundation for numerous medieval hymnographers, who composed countless antiphons, canticles, and liturgical hymns, which were recited or sung in public religious ceremonies or private prayers; secondly, the Mariological tradition established by the Fathers and theologians also promoted a widespread devotion to the Virgin Mary according to various invocations and titles, which quickly spread to all corners of the Christian sphere.

In the current article, based on the analysis of texts and artistic images referring to Mary’s savior-like mediation in favor of humankind, we will focus our research on three points: first, in the thematic field, we will analyze the textual and iconic data referring exclusively to the designation of Mary as the “gate of Heaven”, “door of Paradise”, or the equivalent concepts of Mary as “mediator”, “intercessor”, “protector”, or other similar titles; second, in the textual field, we will restrict to the medieval liturgical hymns that allude to the subject under study, since we have destined another academic article to analyze the writings of Church Fathers and medieval theologians on the topic; thirdly, in the iconic field, we will center the study on medieval and Renaissance pictorial and sculptural representations that make Mary visible in one way or another as the gate of Heaven, or as a mediator and intercessor of humanity before God.

We believe it is necessary to highlight the academic novelty of our article in the sense that, based on considerable expertise in medieval Mariology, we are not aware of any study that has addressed the issue of the saving mediation of the Virgin Mary as gate of Heaven

from the perspective of medieval liturgical hymns. As if that were not enough, as far as we know, there is no study that has linked these hymns with some medieval paintings and sculptures that illustrate Mary as the *porta Paradisi* symbol, as we do in this article.

2. A Brief Analysis of Some Liturgical Hymns Alluding to the Gate of Heaven

In this section we will briefly present a select set of medieval Latin liturgical hymns that praise or appeal to the Virgin Mary, designating her with the metaphors “gate of heaven” (*ianua Coeli*), “door of Paradise” (*porta Pzaradisi*), or some other formula alluding to the power of mediation of Mary before her divine Son to facilitate the eternal salvation of the faithful. To better appreciate the conceptual and symbolic evolution of these medieval hymns, we will expose them sequentially in groups corresponding to the centuries in which each was written.

A preliminary precision is now required. Within the strict limits of an academic article, we have selected, as a representative sample of a much larger totality, those fragments of liturgical hymns that seemed to us the most significant for the topic we proposed. Although valid, ours is not the only possible choice. Obviously, another researcher who wants to carry out an investigation with a similar approach to ours will be able to choose many other examples of similar hymns, which will undoubtedly lead to the same or similar results.

2.1. 10th-Century Hymns

Dating from the 10th century, we have documented the following four hymns alluding to the subject we are studying:

The *Hymnus 71. Hymnus de sancta Maria* thus intones the saving and comforting power of Mary, by opening the door of the heavenly Paradise, as an antithesis to the deleterious role of Eve, who closed the door of the Earthly Paradise to us.

You are the only virgin mother,
You remain as the gate of Heaven,
Who are sad because of Eve
Are now happy because of you.¹

The *Hymnus 2. De Nativitate Beatae Mariae Virginis* celebrates the sublime mother of God with these poetic metaphors, which include its designation as a receptacle of divinity, as the pure cell, and as the tabernacle of the Lord:

The star of the sea has already been born,
The star of the sea has already been born,
The gate of Heaven, the pure cell.
The pure cell, the gate of Heaven,
The tabernacle of the Lord.²

The *Hymnus 6. Purificatio* thus proclaims the protective capacity of the Queen of Heaven:

Comfort us
with your guardianship,
Additionally, always being a virgin,
[you are] the happy gate of Heaven.³

The *Hymnus 11. De Annuntiatione Beatae Virginis Mariae* exalts the saving power of the heavenly Sovereign—whose royal Davidic lineage brings to light—in favor of the faithful with these verses:

O venerable Virgin,
Laudable
Queen,
Born of David’s lineage,
You are the proper gate of Heaven,
For all who praise you
with excellent prayers.⁴

2.2. 10th–12th Century Hymns

In that interval of three hundred years, we have documented these two hymns referring to our theme.

The *Hymnus 101. In Annunciatione Beatae Virginis Mariae*, after emphasizing that the mother of God is the only completely chaste virgin, extols the saving power of the celestial Sovereign through these revealing stanzas:

2a. Lady of the world,
Who is the only one
chaste
Queen of virgins,
2b. The cause of salvation
The gate of life
and Heaven,
full of grace.⁵

The *Hymnus 104. In Purificatione Beatae Mariae Virginis* highlights the sublime faculty of the salvation of God the Son's mother through these eloquent verses:

7a. Being earthly you unite yourself
To the celestial beings
and being human
to the divine.
7b. For you the door
Of the Paradise opens to us;⁶

In another stanza, this *Hymnus 104* goes on to stress Mary's efficacious power of universal salvation, when expressing:

You are the nutritious salvation of the world,
You have been made the gate of Heaven,
Life is given
For you to everyone.⁷

2.3. 11th-Century Hymns

From this century, we have found, in reference to our theme, only the *Hymnus 68, In Assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis*, which exalts Mary's saving power in favor of the faithful in the following terms:

Empress of all,
You are the firm hope of believers,
The award,
The price,
the joy,
Additionally, the salvation of the faithful,
The gate of Heaven.⁸

2.4. 12th-Century Hymns

Corresponding to the 12th century, we have found six hymns alluding to the theses of reference.

The *Hymnus 98, De gaudiis Beatae Virginis Mariae* salutes the privilege of the Virgin as the universal helper, whose saving support it pleads for by these lyrical verses, which designates her as several beautiful flowers:

1. Queen of Heaven, rejoice,
Enchanted with heavenly praise.
2a. Rejoice, glittering gem,

Rejoice, the gate of Heaven,
 Splendid as the lilies,
 Blooming rose.
 2b. Splendid gate of Heaven,
 Only you are the unique salvation
 Oh, Lady of the world,
 save us.⁹

The *Hymnus 350. De Sancta Maria* requests the intercessory help of the mother of the Lord, assimilated to the most precious wealth of Paradise, with this plea:

Gem of heaven, the gate of forgiveness,
 Appease the King of glory
 With the flower of your chastity.¹⁰

The *Hymnus 375. Alia de Sancta Maria (troparium)* enunciates this brief but eloquent acclamation to the helping Virgin:

Hail gate
 blazing with eternal light.¹¹

The *Hymnus 516. De Sancta Maria* exalts the Virgin as universal mediatrix with the condensed verses:

This one is the Virgin
 that did not know the man's bed,
 Additionally, as she ended her life,
 [was made] the open gate of Heaven.¹²

The *Hymnus 143. De beata Maria Virginis* proclaims the sublime capacity for eternal salvation on the part of God's mother in these short stanzas:

2a. For you the door of Heaven opens,
 That the Cherubim [of the Terrestrial Paradise] had closed [to Adam and Eve].
 2b. Additionally, God [the Son] who was born from you
 United the man to God.¹³

The *Hymnus 47. De Beata Virgine Maria* extols the exclusive supernatural attributes and virtues of the Redeemer's royal mother in the following statements, that underlines her special roles as mother, daughter, and spouse:

Virgin mother of the supreme King,
 Virgin gem of virtues,
 Holy Virgin, prudent Virgin,
 daughter of Jerusalem,
 Star of the sea, gate of Heaven,
 gentle spouse of the Lord.¹⁴

2.5. 13th-Century Hymns

Dating from this century we have found only the *Hymnus 370. Sequentia de Virgine Maria*, which proclaims the theme studied with these brilliant rhymes that eloquently express the nutritious and healing power of the beautiful guardian of Heaven's gate:

Hail, crystalline door,
 Living bread factory,
 Hellish Death Medicine,
 Flower of the world, Mary.¹⁵

2.6. 14th-Century Hymns

Composed in the 14th century, we have documented four hymns that are inspired by the ideas analyzed.

The *Hymnus 73. De Beata Maria Virgine* praises the mother of the Savior with these expressive phrases:

Rejoice, Virgin, the gate of Heaven,
For you, the light was born to the world,
A mother so laudable.¹⁶

The *Hymnus 74. De beata Maria Virgine* glorifies the immaculate Lord's mother for her co-redemptive power with these statements:

Hail rose born from thorns,
By whom the gate of Paradise,
Which was closed, was opened to everyone.¹⁷

The *Hymnus 67. De Beata Maria Virgine* expresses the virginal motherhood of Mary, from the royal lineage of David, with these illustrative metaphorical figures:

3a. You are called a rod, a bramble,¹⁸
Flower, window, door,
3b. Mother of God, sunlight,
born of the good lineage of Jesse.¹⁹

The *Hymnus 76. De beata Maria Virgine* ratifies the analyzed doctrine of Mary's universal salvaging authority, whose continuous protection ask in these short verses:

6a. You are the always open
gate of mercy,
6b. Always be propitious
For all of us.²⁰

The *Hymnus 83. De beata Maria Virgine* sings the saving power of the Heavenly Queen in this stanza:

The Virgin Mary
Became the door of life,
because she was born
With the glorious titles of kings
Additionally, the prophets.²¹

2.7. 15th-Century Hymns

We have found fifteen hymns alluding to the theme written in the 15th century.

The *Hymnus 510. Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem* salutes Mary, from the royal lineage of David, as God's temple and palace, for her helping and rescuing power through these verses:

Hail, chastity cell,
Gate of Paradise, hail, the temple of divinity,
Hail, the palace of the Sun [God], hail, port of the shipwrecked,
Hail, the little rod of Jesse,
Hail, the splendor of goodness,
Hail, full of grace.²²

The *Hymnus 21. Historia de Domina in sabbato. In 3. Nocturno. Responsoria* underlines the power of God the Son's mother, and the high honors tributed to her in Heaven as follows:

Gate of Paradise,
 hope and path of life,
 the hierarchy of Heaven
 serves you meekly
 Additionally, praises you assiduously,
 pious Queen;²³

The *Hymnus 480. De Beata Virgine. Oratio* thus greets the mother of God for her competence in saving people, especially the poorest, in the following terms:

Rejoice, crossroads of salvation,
 Mary, the hope of the humble,
 You are the open door of forgiveness,
 consolation of indulgence,
 do not despise me, merciful.²⁴

The *Hymnus 484. De Beata Virgine Maria* celebrates the rescuing intercessory power of God's mother in favor of those most in need through these verses:

Hail, holy temple of God,
 Source of salvation, the door of hope,
 all the prisoners run towards you
 With full confidence.²⁵

The *Hymnus 488. Salve regina* proclaims the saving role of the Virgin Mary for the benefit of the faithful in these eloquent terms:

Hail, [you who has been] heavenly created
 for whom salvation is prepared,
 gate of heaven [which is] open,
 [but] closed to sinners.²⁶

The *Hymnus 497. Super eadem sequentia [Ave maris stella]* asks the Virgin to grant the devotee entrance to Paradise in this concise plea:

Happy Gate of Heaven,
 adopt us there.²⁷

The *Hymnus 29. Item alius de Sancta Maria* takes this stanza from the famous antiphon *Salve Regina* to proclaim the saving power of God the Son's virginal mother:

Hail, star of the sea,
 Nourishing mother of God
 Additionally, always a virgin
 Happy Gate of Heaven.²⁸

The *Hymnus 54. De immaculata conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis. In 1. Vesperis* praises the Virgin Mary for her ability to save the faithful from the devil through this illustrative stanza:

Spouse of God, star of the sea,
 You are called the gate of Heaven,
 The salvation of the world, which cuts
 The head of the furious Holofernes²⁹ [the devil].³⁰

The *Hymnus 21. Historia de Domina in sabbato. In 3. Nocturno. Responsoria* acknowledges with these verses the tribute that Heaven and Earth must give to the Virgin for her title as the mediator of humanity:

Gate of Paradise,
 Hope and path of life,
 Heaven's Hierarchy
 Serves you submissively.
 The assiduous praise
 Is appropriate for you, merciful Queen;³¹

The German hymnographer Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach (Udalricus Wessofontanus), in his *Hymnus 10. Oratio devota de Beata Maria Virgine*, invokes the Queen of Heaven for her saving intercession on behalf of the faithful through these fervent rhymes:

Mother, help us quickly,
 So that we are not delivered to the prison of hell,
 Do open the door for us so that we can
 become consorts of Heaven.³²

The same Ulrich Stöcklins von Rottach, in his *Hymnus 38. Abecedarius XIII*, requests the rescuing mediation of Mary before her divine Son, the Supreme Universal Judge, in favor of the believer to achieve eternal salvation through these pressing verses:

Grant us to avoid the terrible
 Wrath of the Judge [Christ],
 When he comes to examine
 Our life,
 [we ask you to] want to reject then
 the snares of the enemy [the devil],
 and open us
 The gates of Heaven.³³

The *Hymnus 80. In Nativitate Beatae Mariae Virginis* extols the excellent role of salvation of Redeemer's mother with this eloquent stanza:

Oh, you, happy gate of Heaven,
 Always closed, for which the true light [Christ]
 Appeared at birth,
 3b. With the beauty of whose light
 The darkened shadow
 Of our night disappeared.³⁴

2.8. As a Synthetic Recapitulation

Some primary results emerge from the analysis of the fragments of medieval liturgical hymns we have presented here.

Practically all the analyzed hymns designate the Virgin Mary as the gate of Heaven or the door of Paradise, to signify her privileged ability to help the faithful be saved in eternal life.

Many of those hymns further emphasize that Mary's saving power derives from her exclusive privilege to be the virginal mother of God the Son.

Some hymns even point to the idea that Mary was created *ex professo* to contribute to the salvation of humankind because she is the mother of the divine Savior. Other hymns add the idea that, in such a condition, the Virgin performs her helping work because she is full of grace and possesses all the virtues, especially chastity.

Almost all the hymns express in some way that, with such sublime attributes and prerogatives, Mary acts as a helper for those who pray to her or trust her, and as their effective intercessor before her divine Son, the Supreme Judge, to ensure that those who resort to her enter the heavenly Paradise.

Some hymns also formulate the idea that believers raise prayers to the Virgin to request earthly and heavenly goods, thus avoiding badness, especially from the devil.

In any case, these hymns designate the Virgin Mary as the door of Paradise or the gate of Heaven to signify her sublime mediating and helping power in favor of humankind, or, in other words: to manifest her role as an effective collaborator of her divine Son to ensure that the faithful obtain goods on Earth and the eternal salvation in Heaven.

However, taking into account the highly significant strength of these hymns to rebuke the thesis of Mary's universal mediation and her practical help to facilitate the believer's entry into Heaven, it is surprising that the traditional Mariology treatises (De Fiores 1992, 2006–2008; Müller 1998; Cerbelaud 2003; Laurentin 2011; Hauke 2021) have not considered these medieval liturgical hymns as supporting arguments to justify the doctrinal theses about the Virgin. One can perceive a similar waste of medieval liturgical hymns as a reflection of Mary's virtues and attributes in other prestigious specific studies on the mother of God (Rahner 1967; Ratzinger and Von Balthasar 1981; de La Potterie 1995; Perrella 2003; De Fiores 2010; Scheffczyk 2010).

3. An Iconographic Analysis of Some Artworks Alluding to the Virgin Mary's Savior Mediation

The doctrinal thesis of the Virgin Mary's mediating, intercessory, and savior power, expressed in the metaphor "gate of Heaven or door of Paradise", stands out in various forms or iconographic modalities in painting and sculpture. We will highlight here the three modalities that seem to be the most representative, namely, the intercession of Mary at the Last Judgment, the figure of the Virgin with the Child at some entrance of the temple, and thirdly, the Virgin framed by a door or opening in various Marian scenes, especially the Annunciation.

We believe that these three iconographic modalities are the ones that most strongly and clearly illustrate the Virgin Mary as the gate of Heaven or the door of Paradise (*ianua Coeli, porta Paradisi, scilicet*) as the decisive mediator in humanity's eternal salvation. The first modality, in which the Virgin appears in the scene of the Last Judgment pleading before her divine Son, the Supreme Judge, for clemency in favor of those who are being judged, is very clear and significant: in the Last Judgment, the salvation or eternal damnation of human beings is settled once and for all, and at this decisive moment the believer hopes to have the saving mediation of universal Judge's mother. The second iconographic modality, in which Mary appears at the entrance to the temple—whether, as we will see later, with her Child in her arms on the mullion of some portal, or on its tympanum, through the scene of the Coronation or that of the Last Judgment—is no less evident: by being located at the entrance of the Christian temple in a prominent place (in the mullion between two doors, and/or in the tympanum that crowns it), Mary exhibits herself in this way once again, due to her condition as mother of the founder of Christianity—the new religion and Church guaranteeing salvation—as the privileged mediator capable of facilitating the entrance to Heaven, symbolized by the physical temple at whose entrance the figure of Mary as *porta Paradisi* stands out. The third iconographic modality, although more subtly suggested, is also explainable: since the human conception/incarnation of God the Son in the virgin womb of Mary takes place just in the event of the Annunciation, it is clear that framing/identifying the Virgin with a door/arch/opening in a pictorial scene of the Annunciation allows us to highlight that, as the mother of the Redeemer/Savior, the Virgin plays a fundamental role in the eternal redemption/salvation of human beings, that is to say, as the gate of Heaven.

On the other hand, we selected here a set of sculptural and pictorial artworks without any pretense of alleged exact "science", as if it were a mathematical equation or a chemical formula: our subjective "humanistic" selection is only a representative sample within a much broader and more complex universe, in which any other researcher can select as many equally representative samples as possible. We chose those paintings and sculptures because they seem to us very important to the subject studied. Additionally, the fact that these artworks are different in type, in dating, and in subject matter, certifies that the various

countries and regions of Christian Europe in those medieval centuries agreed on the same or similar experiences, beliefs, and doctrinal ideas, just illustrated by these artworks.

Let us now see some examples of these three iconographic variants.

3.1. *Mary Mediator at the Last Judgment*

From early medieval times, the Byzantines spread the model of the *Deësis* or *Deisis* (a Greek word meaning “prayer”, “supplication”), in which Christ almost always majestically enthroned as Pantocrator with a book in his left hand and blessing with his right, appears flanked by the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist, both in an attitude of humble supplication. This successful Byzantine model, which in the East took form above all in mosaics, frescoes, and ivory reliefs, was adopted in the West for the Last Judgment scenes, frequently substituting Saint John the Baptist for Saint John the Evangelist. In addition, in Europe, this triple composition (Christ Pantocrator, Mary, and John the Evangelist) was frequently placed on the tympanum of some portal (almost always the central one on the main façade) of temples as the essential nucleus of the staging of the Last Judgment. In any case, the scene of the Last Judgment, with the pleading figures of Mary and John the Evangelist, was also developed in some paintings, one of which we will analyze below.

The tympanum of the central bay of the south transept of Chartres Cathedral, c. 1220–30 (Figure 1), represents the Last Judgment, with Christ half-naked (to show his wounds) enthroned between the Virgin and John the Evangelist, both seated. Above and to the sides of the three protagonists, several angels carry the eight instruments or insignia of the Passion (*Arma Christi*). Under this central set, on the lintel of the door, the archangel Saint Michael weighs the souls on the balance scale—an issue known as the *psychostasis*, of clear origin from Pharaonic Egypt—while to his right (on the left side of the lintel) the blessed head towards Heaven. To their left (on the right of the lintel), the damned are swallowed by the jaws of Leviathan/hell.



Figure 1. Tympanum of the central bay of south porch of Chartres Cathedral, c.1220–30.

As a perfect complement to the analyzed tympanum, the mullion of this portal shows a prominent figure of Christ dressed, carrying a book in his left hand and an attitude of blessing with his right, similar to a standing Pantocrator.

It is interesting to highlight in this Last Judgment of Chartres—a common fact for all similar scenes in many other temples—the gesture of Mary in an attitude of begging her divine Son to treat those who are going to be judged with mercy. That way, she manifests herself as the Virgin of Mercy, the Mediatrix, and the Intercessor in favor of humankind, as many of the liturgical hymns we exposed in the preceding section proclaim.

The tympanum of the Coroneria Portico, c. 1245–1257, on the north façade of Burgos Cathedral (Figure 2), exhibits a narrative-compositional structure quite similar to that of the Chartres tympanum just analyzed. At the top of this tympanum of the Coroneria, you can see the traditional scene of the *Deisis*, with Mary and John the Evangelist bowing with their hands together in prayer before the enthroned Pantocrator to implore his clemency for those in evaluation at the Last Judgment. Additionally, here the half-naked Supreme Judge appears with his arms raised, while above and on both sides of the trio of protagonists, several angels hold the insignia of the Passion. Under the leading group, the archangel Michael weighs the souls of the ones to be judged on a balance scale, which some demons to his left (to our right) try to unbalance, pushing down the pan-holder of sins so that it weighs more than the pan-holder with the good deeds of the one who is being judged. Other devils in the right sector of the strip take the damned to Hell, while to the right of the archangel (on the left of the composition), the blessed enter Heaven, symbolized by a small house with an open door. Once again, Mary shows in this scene of the Last Judgment her attitude of mercy in favor of those subjected to the Last Judgment and her power of mediation and intercession before the Supreme Judge, inducing his clemency and thus facilitating the eternal salvation of the faithful.



Figure 2. Tympanum of the Coroneria Portico, c. 1245–1257. North façade of the Burgos Cathedral.

Hans Memling in *The Last Judgement*, c. 1466–73 from the National Museum of Gdańsk in Poland (Figure 3), offers a highly complex representation of the subject. In the central panel, the Pantocrator, flanked by the twelve seated apostles, appears enthroned on a

rainbow, a symbol of Heaven, and with his feet on a sphere, a symbol of the created world. In this majestic pose, Christ raises his right hand towards a lily stem, a symbol of eternal salvation. He lowers his left arm as a sign of deciding the condemnation of the reprobate, a condemnation also symbolized by the sword that levitates to the left of his head. Kneeling and with hands joined to the right of Christ (to the left of the painting), the Virgin begs the Supreme Judge for mercy, while to the left of Christ, Saint John the Baptist, also kneeling and dressed in a camel skin, shows with both hands, as Precursor, the Messiah. Under the leading group presided over by the Pantocrator in Heaven, on the earthly plane, the archangel Michael, clad in armor as head of the armies of angels, weighs with his balance scale the souls of the just resurrected, who, completely naked, have emerged from their graves across the landscape. In the left wing of the triptych, to the right of the divine Judge, the blessed, received by Saint Peter in the foreground, go up to Heaven, represented by a great Gothic cathedral full of angels. In the right wing of the triptych, to the left of Christ, the convicts fall in disorder into Hell, represented by a den full of fire.



Figure 3. Hans Memling, *The Last Judgement (Triptych)*, c. 1466–73. National Museum of Gdańsk (Poland).

3.2. *Mary as Porta Paradisi in Some Temple's Portals*

The central portal of the west façade of the Leon Cathedral, known as the *Portal of the Last Judgment* or *Portal of the White Virgin (Virgen Blanca)*, from the middle of the 13th century (Figure 4), is a perfect example of an artwork that reflects the theme we are studying. This portal in Leon is a monumental sculptural-architectural representation of the Virgin Mary's exceptional power of intercession and salvation in favor of the human gender under the formula *Mary porta Paradisi* or *ianua Coeli*.



Figure 4. León Cathedral, mullion with the *Virgen Blanca* at the *Portal of the Last Judgment*. Central portal of the West Facade, mid. 13th century.

The tympanum of the Portal of the “*Virgen Blanca*” brings the traditional tripartition. In the lower strip, the two sets of blessed and reprobate, on the right and the left of the archangel Michael with his balance scale, head, respectively, towards Heaven or the cauldrons of Hell. In the central sector, much more significant, the scene of the Last Judgment stands out, with the enthroned and half-naked Christ raising his arms to show his stigmata between two standing angels bearing some insignia of the Passion while Mary and John the Evangelist, kneeling with their hands in prayer in the ends of the compressive space, intercede before the Supreme Judge, begging for his clemency in favor of faithful. Finally, on the reduced apex of the tympanum, other angels carry the remaining *Arma Christi*. With this first presentation of the Virgin asking the Pantocrator for mercy, she already manifests herself in the tympanum as the mediator and facilitator of the entrance of believers to Heaven, that is, as the open “gate of Paradise”.

In addition, in the mullion separating both doors, Mary reappears as an imposing standing figure (the “*Virgen Blanca*”) with her divine Child in her arms and her head encircled with a large crown, which accredits her as the Queen of Heaven. It is evident

that—with her role as pleading intercessor before her adult Son as judge in the scene of the Last Judgment on the tympanum, and with her majestic display on the mullion as Queen of Heaven,—the nurturing mother of the infant King of the universe, whom she shows to the faithful carrying him in her arms—the Virgin Mary affirms herself in this portico of Leon Cathedral as an effective mediator to obtain the salvation of the believer, scilicet, as an open “door of Heaven”. Not in vain, the ecclesiastical hierarchy has reserved for the Virgin this privileged space (tympanum and mullion) of the door through which the faithful enter the temple (an earthly symbol of Heaven) to make them see that, to achieve their entry to the heavenly Paradise, they need to turn to Mary Mediatrix.

The north portal of the west façade of the Notre Dame of Paris, known as the *Portal of the Virgin*, c. 1210–20 (Figure 5), also has—as in the case of the recently analyzed *Portal of the Virgin Blanca* in Leon—for the subject under study two large nuclei: the tympanum and the mullion. This tympanum from Paris is divided into three registers. The lower one includes six seated figures with phylacteries, three Old Testament prophets, and three kings of Israel. The intermediate register presents the scene of the burial of the Virgin (inspired by the Apocrypha), presided over by Christ in the presence of the twelve apostles, with two angels introducing the corpse into the tomb. The upper register narrates the Coronation of the Virgin—a theme we have studied in another paper (Salvador-González 2022a)—with Christ blessing Mary, both enthroned between two kneeling angels, while a third angel at the top places the royal crown on the head of the Virgin. In turn, the mullion presents the majestic figure of Mary as the crowned Queen with her Son in her arms, under whose feet the plinth or pedestal of the mullion describes some scenes of Adam and Eve in the Earthly Paradise, of which the central scene represents Original Sin, with Adam and Eve eating the apple before the serpent coiled in the Tree of Good and Evil.

As in the case of the Cathedral of Leon just analyzed, this Portal of the Virgin in the Notre Dame of Paris illustrates the same thesis about the mediating and saving capacity of the Virgin, emphasizing now her privileged position as Queen of Heaven.

The one known as the *Portal of the Majesty*, from the late 13th–early 14th century, in the Collegiate Church of Santa María la Mayor of Toro (Zamora) (Figure 6), poses almost the same compositional-narrative structure and the same symbolic meanings as the just analyzed *Portal of the Virgin* in the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. Additionally, in Toro, the tympanum is filled with the scene of the Coronation of the Virgin (in the large central sector) and her burial (in the lower strip). The mullion also houses the upright figure of the crowned Queen of Heaven with her little Son in her arms. As if that were not enough, this Portal of the Majesty in Toro adds the representation of the Last Judgment in its last archivolt, whose center is occupied by the enthroned Pantocrator between the kneeling figures of Mary and John the Evangelist.

The mullion of the central portal of the West façade of the Reims Cathedral, c. 1260–70 (Figure 7), houses the monumental figure of the Virgin Mary with her Child in her arms, crowned as the Queen of Heaven. This appearance and this position between the two entrances of that portal to the temple want to highlight the power of Mary as the “gate of Heaven”. She is represented as the facilitator of the believer’s entrance to the heavenly Paradise and—for being the mother of the Redeemer, whom she displays in her arms before the faithful—as a collaborator in the redemption of humankind, as the scene of Original Sin sculpted on the plinth of the mullion also reveals. As if this explicit message were not enough, in the culminating part of the gable of this central portal, the scene of the Coronation of the Virgin as the Queen of Heaven appears, thus reinforcing her exclusive power to collaborate in the eternal salvation of the believer.

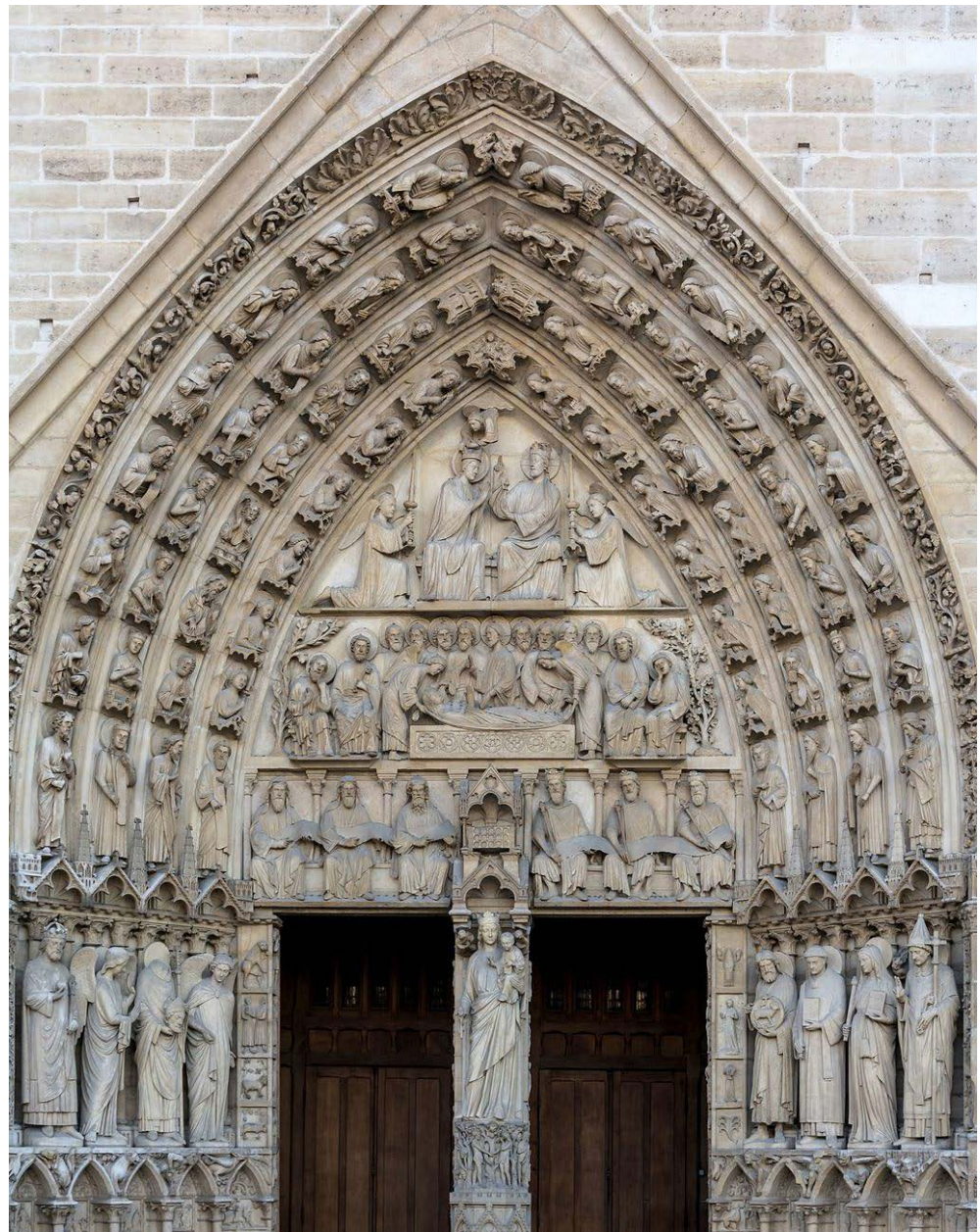


Figure 5. Notre-Dame of Paris Cathedral. *Portal of the Virgin*, North bay of the West façade, c. 1210–20.

3.3. *The Virgin as the Gate of Heaven in the Scene of the Annunciation*

Robert Campin stages *The Annunciation*, c. 1420–25, from the Prado Museum in Madrid (Figure 8), in a monumental Gothic temple. Mary is seated inside its central nave, absorbed in reading her prayers, next to a precious vase with a stem of lilies, a vase whose doctrinal meanings we have explained in another paper (Salvador-González 2022b). Outside the temple, before one of its side doors, the archangel Gabriel remains kneeling. In turn, God the Father, levitating in his splendid mandorla in the upper left-hand corner of the painting, sends the fecundating ray of light towards the Virgin. Significantly enough, this ray, before falling on Mary, passes through a stained-glass window without breaking or staining it, a circumstance whose theological meaning we have explained in another article (Salvador-González 2022c).



Figure 6. *Portal of the Majesty*, late 13th–early 14th century. Collegiate Church of Santa María la Mayor of Toro (Zamora).

By configuring the modest house of Mary in Nazareth as a monumental Gothic temple, the mastermind of this painting wants—in addition to tangentially designating the Virgin as the personification of the Church (Mary as *Ecclesia*)—to directly illustrate various Mariological and Christological meanings, referring to God the Son’s supernatural human incarnation, and to Mary’s virginal divine motherhood, which we have explained in other articles (Salvador-González 2017, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2021b), and which other commentators on this painting ignore (Panofsky 1953, vol. I, pp. 133, 175; Campbell 1974, pp. 634–46; Dijkstra 1994, pp. 312–29; Châtelet 1996, pp. 305, 306; Thürlemann 2002, p. 196).



Figure 7. Reims Cathedral, Mullion of the central portal of the West façade, c. 1260–70.



Figure 8. Robert Campin, *The Annunciation*, c. 1420–25. Prado Museum, Madrid.

However, we are most interested in highlighting in this panel by Robert Campin that he has placed the Virgin framed/focused by a large arch (one of those in the nave vault), which at first glance appears to be the main entrance to the temple. With this resource

of framing Mary in that enormous arch/entrance, the intellectual author of this painting seems to want to identify the Virgin with that arch/entrance, as if aiming to illustrate with this visual metaphor the textual metaphor that designates Mary as *ianua Coeli* or *porta Paradisi*. Being that this painted Gothic temple is a symbol of Heaven, this Virgin framed by that open arch/entrance reveals Mary's privileged capacity for mediation and intercession before her divine Son to facilitate the entry of the faithful to the heavenly Paradise, just as many liturgical hymns that we set out proclaim with determination.

In *The Annunciation (The Friedsam Annunciation)*, c. 1450, from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 9), Petrus Christus—if he is the author of this work attributed to him—poses this Marian episode in a very innovative way. He places the scene outside a large Gothic temple, at the open door of which stands the Virgin with a prayer book in her left hand, raising her right one. The dove of the Holy Spirit, flying high, sends the fertilizing ray of light toward Mary, a ray whose theological symbolism we have explained in another context (Salvador-González 2020a). Meanwhile, the archangel Gabriel, covered in a splendid cope, with the herald's staff in his left hand and pointing his right forefinger upwards to indicate the origin of the announcement he is communicating to the Virgin, remains outside the temple facing its door.



Figure 9. Petrus Christus (attributed), *The Annunciation (The Friedsam Annunciation)*, c.1450. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

We will not dwell here on certain elements highlighted by some art historians who comment on this work (Panofsky 1953, pp. 133–34, 230–32; Schiller 1971, pp. 49–50; Ainsworth 1994, pp. 117–25, 179), nor in the stem of lilies that protrudes behind the lintel on the left side, stem of lilies whose multiple and profound Christological and Mariological meanings we have explained in other works (Salvador-González 2013, 2014, 2016). Due to its direct relationship with the subject we are studying, we are interested, instead, in highlighting two important conceptual decisions that the intellectual author of this painting has adopted in this scene: first, configuring the humble house of Mary in Nazareth in

a monumental Gothic temple; second, placing the Virgin right at her open door. In the analysis of the previous painting by Robert Campin, we already explained the doctrinal symbolism of Mary's house shaped as a temple. On the other hand, the decision to place the Virgin at the open entrance to the temple implies assuming the thesis according to which Mary is the effective mediator in the eternal salvation of the believers who facilitate their entry into Heaven: in other words, Mary as an open *porta Paradisi* or *ianua Coeli*—once again, with the temple painted in the panel as a symbol of Heaven, following what many liturgical hymns presented here exhaustively affirm.

Additionally, Gentile Bellini offers in *The Annunciation*, c. 1475, from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid (Figure 10), a compositional-narrative approach relatively similar to Robert Campin's in the recently analyzed panel from the Prado Museum. However, Gentile Bellini stages the episode not in a Gothic temple but in a splendid Renaissance palace inserted in a city of large porticoed buildings. It should be noted that representing the humble house of Mary in Nazareth as a luxurious royal palace—about the biblical sentence "Wisdom has built her house" (Prov 9:1)—obeys the purpose of illustrating several deep Mariological and Christological meanings that we have already explained in other articles (Salvador-González 2021a, 2021c).



Figure 10. Gentile Bellini, *The Annunciation*, c. 1475. Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. Madrid.

The painter placed Mary inside the palace, kneeling in prayer before a lectern. At the same time, the angel, carrying the stem of lilies and pointing his right index finger towards the heights, remains on his knees outside the palace in the middle of the street.

Now, apart from other details of this painting, we are interested in highlighting that its intellectual author framed/focused the praying Virgin through a monumental arch/open door to identify Mary with this open "door" that allows entry to the palace (the palace as an analogy for Heaven). In other words, he wanted to express, through the visual metaphor of this arch/open door, the textual metaphors *ianua Coeli*, *porta Paradisi*, and other similar expressions with which numerous medieval liturgical hymns proclaimed Virgin Mary's effective mediation and saving power for achieving the entrance of the believers to the heavenly Paradise.

4. Conclusions

We could highlight some direct results in a summary of the two analyses carried out in this article on texts and images.

Numerous Church Fathers and medieval theologians designate the Virgin Mary as the gate of Heaven or the door of Paradise to highlight her capacity for mediation and intercession before her divine Son in favor of humanity.

Based on the doctrinal tradition established by the Fathers and theologians in this regard, numerous medieval hymnographers composed countless canticles, antiphons, and liturgical hymns in which they exalt Mary as the open “gate of heaven” (*ianua Coeli*), “door of Paradise” (*porta Paradisi*), and as its equivalent concepts “mediator”, “intercessor”, or other similar titles referring to Mary’s powerful mediation before her divine Son in favor of humankind.

Many hymns underline that Mary’s saving faculty derives from her privilege as the virginal mother of God the Son. So, being the mother of the Savior, who is also the Supreme Judge, she is in the best condition to intercede on behalf of the human gender.

On the other hand, those ideas of the liturgical hymns—and, of course, those of the Church Fathers and the theologians who inspired them—were reflected during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in a series of sculptural and pictorial artworks that show the Virgin Mary as the gate of Heaven, and as a mediator before God in favor of the faithful.

In this article, we bring to light three iconic modalities in which Mary is represented as a mediator and intercessor of humanity under the metaphor of “gate of Heaven or door of Paradise”: the *Deësis* or *Deisis* in the scene of the Last Judgment, the figure of the Virgin with her Child at the entrance of the temple, and third, the Virgin framed by a door or arch in the scenes of the Annunciation.

Medieval Christianity nurtured the faith of those mostly illiterate populations with two great resources: words and images. The words were expressed, above all, in the sermons of the ecclesiastics in the temple, and these, in turn, fed on the texts of the Bible (Old and New Testament), the Church Fathers, and theologians. To these primary textual expressions of the priests before the illiterate faithful were later added the lyrics of the songs, antiphons, and liturgical hymns that, although written in Latin and also being indecipherable for the illiterate majority, could be explained by the ecclesiastics on the occasion of the celebration of the Mass, or during processions, ceremonies, and devotional acts. Based on such explanations, it seems reasonable to conjecture that few of those uneducated medieval Christians would be ignorant of the basic meanings of such popular antiphons as the *Salve Regina* or the *Regina Coeli laetare*, even if they were not able to read/translate each of their Latin words.

One last important conclusion is necessary: these statements of the liturgical hymns and those sculptural and pictorial images centered around the metaphor of Mary as *porta Paradisi* are in perfect harmony. After all, what the liturgical hymns poetically proclaimed reflected the thousand-year-old exegetical tradition of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians on Mary’s universal mediation symbolized by the *ianua Coeli* or *porta Paradisi* metaphors. Additionally, on the other hand, the ecclesiastical hierarchy could not miss the opportunity to “catechize” its illiterate faithful through that “catechism in stone or paint” materialized in those sculptures and paintings that iconographically represented Mary as the gate of Heaven.

Thus, both texts and images affect the spirit of the believer with the same catechetical effectiveness. In this way, after seeing the material sculptures or paintings of the Virgin “gate of Heaven” upon entering the temple and hearing the immaterial enouncements of the liturgical hymns sung there, the faithful could be super-assured in a solid thesis of the Christian faith: Mary is the effective mediator before God, and the believer must resort to her to obtain goods on this Earth and eternal salvation in Heaven.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Tu sola mater virgo es,
Tu porta caeli permanes,
Qui sunt per Evam flebiles,
Per te fiunt nunc alacres. (*Hymnus 71. Hymnus de sancta Maria. AHMA 2, 71*).
- 2 Orta jam est maris stella,
Stella maris jam est orta,
Porta coeli, pura cella. Cella pura, coeli porta,
Domini sacrarium. (*Hymnus 2. De Nativitate B. M. V. AHMA 2, 122*).
- 3 Tuae nos in pargo
Tutelae conforta,
Atque semper virgo
Felix coeli porta. (*Hymnus 6. Purificatio. AHMA 2, 126*).
- 4 O, virgo venerabilis,
Laudabilis
Regina,
De stirpe David orta,
Tu vera coeli porta,
Cunctis te laudantibus
Precibus praecelsis. (*Hymnus 11. De Annuntiatione B. V. M. AHMA 2, 154*).
- 5 2a. Mundi domina
quae est sola,
castissima
virginum regina,
2b. Salutis causa,
vitae porta
atque coeli
referta gratia. (*Hymnus 101. In Annuntiatione BMV. AHMA 7, 115*).
- 6 7a. Coelicis terrea
tu jungis, divinis
humana.
7b. Paradisiaca
per te nobis patet
janua; (*Hymnus 104. In Purificatione Beatae Mariae Virginis. AHMA 7, 119*).
- 7 Tu salus orbis alma,
tu coeli porta facta,
per te saeculo vita
omni est data. (*Hymnus 104. In Purificatione BMV. AHMA 7, 119*).
- 8 Imperatrix omnium,
Firma spes credentium,
Praemium,
pretium,
gaudium,
Salus es fidelium,
Janua coelestium. (*Hymnus 68. In Assumptione BMV. AHMA 9, 56*).
- 9 1. Regina coelorum, gaude,
Inclita coelesti laude.
2a. Gaude, gemma lucida,
Gaude, coeli janua,
Lucens ut lilia,
Florens rosa.
2b. Coeli porta fulgida,

- Sola tu salus unica,
O mundi domina,
Tu nos salva. (*Hymnus 98. AHMA 10, Dreves 1891, 82*).
- 10 Gemma coeli, porta veniae,
tuaeflorem pudicitiae
placa regem gloriae. (*Hymnus 350. De s. Maria. Mone 1854, 41*).
- 11 Salve porta
perpetuae lucis fulgida, (*Hymnus 375. Alia de Sancta Maria (troparium). Mone 1854, 68*).
- 12 Haec est virgo,
quae nescivit thorum viri,
dum finivit vitam,
porta patens coelica. (*Hymnus 516. De s. Maria. Mone 1854, 299*).
- 13 2a. Per te patet porta coeli,
Cherubim quam clauserat.
2b. Hominemque natus ex te
Deus Deo foederat. (*Hymnus 143. De beata Maria V. AHMA 10, 108*).
- 14 Summi regis mater virgo,
virgo gemma virtutum,
Virgo sancta, virgo prudens,
filia Jerusalem,
Stella maris, porta coeli,
mitis sponsa Domini. (*Hymnus 47. De B. V. Maria. AHMA 4, 37*).
- 15 Salve porta chrystallina,
vivi panis officina,
dirae mortis medicina,
flos mundi Maria. (*Hymnus 370. Sequentia de v. Maria. Mone 1854, 63*).
- 16 Gaude, virgo, coeli porta,
Per te mundo lux est orta,
Mater tam laudabilis. (*Hymnus 73. De beata Maria V. AHMA 8, 65*).
- 17 Salve, rosa spinis orta.
Per quam paradisi porta
Cunctis clausa patuit. (*Hymnus 74. De beata Maria V. AHMA 8, 66*).
- 18 The figure of the rod refers to the rod that sprouted and blossomed in the root of Jesse, prophesied by Isaiah (Is 11:1–2). The figure of the bush refers to the bush that burned without being consumed, through which Yahweh manifested to Abraham (Ex 3:2–4).
- 19 3a. Virga, rubus appellaris,
Flos, fenestra, janua,
3b. Mater Dei, lux solaris,
Jesse stirps ingenua. (*Hymnus 67. De beata Maria V. AHMA 8, 61*).
- 20 6a. Tu pietatis
semper patens janua,
6b. Nobis omnibus
Semper sit propitia. (*Hymnus 76. De beata Maria V. AHMA, 8, 67*).
- 21 Namque regali
Ac prophetali
Stemmata orta
Vitae fit porta
Virgo Maria. (*Hymnus 83. De beata Maria V. AHMA 9, 69*).
- 22 Ave cella castitatis,
paradisi janua, ave templum deitatis,
ave solis regia, ave portus naufragantis,
ave Jesse virgula,
ave splendor bonitatis,
ave plena gratia. (*Hymnus 510. Ad b. Mariam v. Mone 1854, 284*).
- 23 Paradisi janua,
Vitae spes et via,
Tibi servit cernua
Coeli hierarchia.

- Te decet assidua
Laus, regina pia; (*Hymnus 21. AHMA 5, Dreves 1892, 74*).
- 24 Gaude salutis trivium,
Maria, spes humilium,
tu porta patens veniae,
levamen indulgentiae,
non me pia despice. (*Hymnus 480. De b. Virgine. Oratio. Mone 1854, 195*).
- 25 Ave templum sanctum Dei,
fons salutis, porta spei,
ad te currunt omnes rei
plena cum fiducia. (*Hymnus 484. De b. v. Maria. Mone 1854, 201*).
- 26 Salve coelitus creata,
per quam salus est parata,
porta coeli reserata,
clausa peccatoribus. (*Hymnus 488. Salve regina. Mone 1854, 205*).
- 27 Felix coeli porta,
illic nos adopta. (*Hymnus 497. Super eadem sequentia [Ave maris stella]. Mone 1854, 220*).
- 28 Ave maris stella,
Dei mater alma
Atque semper virgo,
Felix coeli porta. (*Hymnus 29. Item alius de S. Maria. AHMA 2, 39*).
- 29 This expression alludes to the Jewish Judith, who decapitated the enemy Syrian general Holofernes, as an Old Testament prefiguration of the Virgin Mary, who—as promised by God in the Earthly Paradise after the Original Sin—would crush the head of the serpent (the demon) with her foot.
- 30 Sponsa Dei, stella maris,
Porta coeli tu vocaris,
Mundi salus, saevientis
Caput caedens Holofernis. (*Hymnus 54. De immaculata conceptione BMV. In 1. Vesperis. AHMA 4, 41*).
- 31 Paradisi janua,
Vitae spes et via,
Tibi servit cernua
Coeli hierarchia.
Te decet assidua
Laus, regina pia; (*Hymnus 21. Historia de Domina in sabbato. In 3. Nocturno. Responsoria. AHMA 5, 74*).
- 32 Mater, ope succurre celeri,
Ne inferni tradamur carceri,
Ut possimus consortes fieri
Coeli, nobis januam aperi. (*Udalricus Wessofontanus, Hymnus 10. Oratio devota de B.M.V. AHMA 6, 55*).
- 33 Diram da iudicis
iram nos fugere,
Cum nostram venerit
vitam discutere,
Velis insidias
hostis tunc pellere,
Et nobis januas
coelorum pandere. (*Udalricus Wessofontanus, Hymnus 38. Abecedarius XIII. AHMA 6, 132*).
- 34 O felix tu coeli porta,
Semper clausa, per quam orta
Vera lux apparuit,
3b. Cujus lucis venustate
Nostrae noctis obumbratae
Caligo disparuit. (*Hymnus 80. In Nativitate BMV. AHMA 10, 68*).

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