

---

*Miguel Gallés*  
(Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona,  
Departament d'Art i Musicologia)

## NUNC DIMITTIS: WHEN THE OLD BECAME NEW

*Abstract:* This paper deals with an important and unpublished 16th / 17th-century Balkan icon whose topic is that of the Lord's Presentation to the Temple. That historical moment in which Simeon cries out his "Nunc dimittis". We are going to try to answer two questions: Why "Nunc dimittis" can be related to the resurrection of Byzantium? And, why "Nunc dimittis" can be related to the praise of truth? We are going to describe it and compare it with similar productions. Ending with a surprising interpretation of the buildings at the background of the scene, identifying them as Hagia Sophia and the Galata Tower in Istanbul. We have also shown that the transit of the Child from Mary to Simeon and back is differently indicated in the iconography and have essayed appropriate readings. And we have targeted the issue of symmetrical images for this topic.

*Keywords:* Byzantine, Icon, Presentation, Hagia Sophia, Galata Tower.

In the course of our research on a private collection of icons in Barcelona for the completion of my PhD, an unpublished 16th/17th-century Balkan icon drew our attention. It depicts the well-known scene of the Lord's Presentation to the Temple (**fig. 1**), that historical moment in which Simeon cries out his canticle "Nunc dimittis" (Now you dismiss). Although the topic is very common in Byzantine art, as a part of the *Dodekaorton*, in this icon some specific features make it extremely original. The theological idea that the Presentation of Christ is an image of the bond between the Old and the New Testament is displayed in a very convincing way that is going to be developed through suggestive image sequences. Furthermore, this icon itself is a proof of the long survival of Byzantium and how some of its topics entail a true and specific statement of the Christian faith and the Orthodox heritage.

*Why "Nunc dimittis" can be related to the resurrection of Byzantium?*

There are probably many answers. With no intention at all of being exhaustive, we would like to propose and develop some of them:

The controversial issue of the Byzantine and the post-Byzantine



Fig. 1. General view of the icon. Five characters, and background buildings.

Сл. 1. Изглед иконе, пет ликови и изглед позадине

That is to say, from an iconographic point of view, that the two hundred years since the definitive fall of Constantinople cannot avoid granting the icon that we are presenting the character of inheritance / tribute to Byzantium. And, therefore, we can refer to it as essentially Byzantine. Though post-Byzantine.

This is a surprisingly unclear point given the progress of knowledge as it relates to art history. Although it is true that rigorous proposals have been made in this regard<sup>1</sup>, it is also a matter of fact that Byzantine wins by a landslide against post-Byzantine. Probably it would be enough to consider the number of subjects taught from one or the other in several university campus. Something similar, if we are allowed the expression, to

compare the concept of genuine/original with any of its derivatives (imitation/copy). As if the creation did not have, in current terms, the DNA of its creator. At this point, that of re-creation, is where we reach the resurrection element suggested in the statement: post-Byzantine as resurrected, so living, Byzantine.

#### The Orthodox Tradition

Without any doubt, this living construction of the Christian faith does not understand certain historical vicissitudes that, having affected it in so many ways, have not been able to bow down the message of Salvation through Christ. Simply, and to put it clear, Tradition, always alive and growing, cannot be limited to its origins or to any specific period in the recent two thousand years of

<sup>1</sup> To approach this discussion we have considered two papers. The first one issues clarifying formulations based on relevant monographs on this matter: E. L. Spratt, *Toward a Definition of "Post-Byzantine" Art: The Angleton Collection at the Princeton University Art Museum*, Volume 71-72, Princeton University Art Museum, 2012, 3, 15, 16. The second takes advantage of a specific case to address the problem: E. S. Moutafov, *Where is Byzantium in the end of the eighteenth century? Puzzle for art historians*, Problems of Art 4/2015, Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria, 63, 64.

Fig. 2. Detail.  
The Child in  
the hands of  
Simeon.

Сл. 2. Детаљ,  
дете у  
Симеоновим  
рукама



humankind history. It is incardinated at every moment - always faithful to the journey followed from the beginning - in the reality that it is called upon to shape. So, resurrected Christ through Byzantium to our days; Tradition as evidence of the resurrection of Byzantium.

The detail, unfortunately not always considered/not so well known, by which the Son of God passes from the hands of his Mother to the hands of Simeon. And back. Evoking a transit between the Old Testament and the New Testament<sup>2</sup>. The formalization of the before and after, of the old and the new. Of course, this is not the only message from this beautiful icon. Not even the most important. But despite its frequent representation as one of the Twelve Great Feasts of Orthodoxy<sup>3</sup>, this element could pass unnoticed.

Being “incarnate word”, it could well be said that the message is inexhaustible. Therefore, today we focus on this particular topic. The prophetess Anna accompanies Simeon who, recognizing the Messiah, pronounces the “Nunc dimittis”: I may now leave! A preview of new life in Christ. A foretaste, therefore, of the resurrection.

In this sense, a before and a after is indicated. The couple of Anna - specifically described as prophetess<sup>4</sup> - and Simeon means a before. And, the Holy Family, the after, what is to say the Good News. Renewal for humankind.

<sup>2</sup> The image of the History of Salvation, Old Testament - New Testament, as a continuous chain in which the link that unites the “first part” with the “second” is meant by the movement of Jesus Child from the hands of Mary to those of Simeon and vice versa seems quite visual and evident. Especially, as will be indicated further on, if the appropriate icons are considered and they are conceived as the vignettes of a story in images.

<sup>3</sup> A proposal on the evolution of the Twelve Great Feasts according to time and place (historical source), as well as a chapter exclusively dedicated to the Lord’s Presentation to the Temple, can be found at G. Passarelli, *Iconos, festividades bizantinas*, Madrid 1999, 9, 129-146.

<sup>4</sup> *There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day,*



Fig. 3. Detail. Faces of Mary and Joseph where the pictorial execution and the use of different materials can be appreciated.

Сл. 3. Детал, лица Марије и Јосифа и изглед осталих приказаних материјала

And, as we have just suggested, the very same “*Nunc dimittis*” itself. The exclamation by Simeon that implies that something new begins. No doubt, pledge of resurrection.

*Why “Nunc dimittis” can be related to the Praise of Truth?*

In this case, the answer is especially evident when venerating/contemplating the icon. If we consider the words of Simeon – “for mine eyes have seen thy salvation” (Luke 2:30) - we clearly feel that outright inner voice that cries out to the four winds in praise of the truth that the Son of God is here to save us. Simeon, simply, cannot

refuse what his eyes have seen! He has to announce the truth!

Simeon is moved by the Spirit. That inner strength that has kept him alive for such a long life<sup>5</sup> so that he can proclaim the truth to everyone. “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” (Luke 2:26). The truth is in front of him. The unfathomable truth is in his arms. The truth made flesh in the form of a child. Precisely, in the temple.

By approaching this issue, that of the Child in the hands of Simeon (fig. 2), from the icon that is concerning us, we understand what has been said above: the truth in the hands of the righteous and devout Simeon. But it’s not always like this. Surprisingly, if a sufficient large number of icons with this topic are considered and duly chosen, we are going to discover that the location/position of the Child is far from being fixed. That is, the scope of positions ranges from being perfectly seated/nested in the arms of his Mother to find himself, equally, perfectly seated/nested in the arms of Simeon. With many intermediate positions: The Child, more or less suspended in the middle of the image, extending his arms towards the one who is not holding him in his/her hands<sup>6</sup>.

*fasting and praying* (Luke 2:36-37).

<sup>5</sup> Although not specifically stated, we can deduce, as Tradition points out, that since it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah (Luke 2:26), Simeon was an elderly man. In line with the exclamation of the *Nunc Dimittis* that, in the context of natural conditions, refers us to a life already lived.

<sup>6</sup> By paying attention to this detail - the one who holds the Child - we have been able to compare Armenian and Athonite representations over some hundred years. It could be inferred that in the Athonite (greek) environment it is Mary who holds the child, while in the Armenian environment it is Simeon who does it. Although in this later case diversity is



These differences are not easy to be read. However, the key may lie in the transition between Old Testament and New Testament that was mentioned earlier. In this sense, the position of the Child would be equally transitory.

Recapping. The motto „In Praise of the Truth“ leads us to pay attention at Simeon's „Nunc dimittis“. Simeon's categorical affirmation is made through the recognition-contemplation-reception-acceptance of the Child. It is precisely this sequence that leads us to recognize the various iconographic types with regard to the position of the Child. But it is not the only relevant/evident variant in the execution of this iconographic type. For this reason, we would like to mention two others: Anna's specific position on both sides of the image<sup>7</sup> (Simeon's side or Mary/Joseph's side) and the possibility of dealing with iconographical proposals with an inverse arrangement<sup>8</sup> (symmetrical image<sup>9</sup>).

greater. Some examples, related to their corresponding sources, underlining who is the main character, and pointing out iconographical details related with our icon, are:

- G. Vigo, *I Tesori Di San Lazzaro Degli Armeni*, Cinisello Balsamo 2011
- Bibbia di Naghash (1418-1422). Simeon. Very similar to our icon.
- Vangelo di Khizan, 1499. Mary. Symmetrical image.
- Bibbia di Abro Bagratuni, 1647. Five field illumination. Mary, transit to Simeon.
- J. Oughourlian, *Matenadaran the hidden gem*, Amber Capital, 2017
- Lectionary of Hethum, 1286. Simeon. Jesus grabbing Mary with his hand.
- Gospel, 1287, Akner, Scribe Archbishop Hovhannes. Simeon holds, Mary embraces, centrality in composition.
- Gospel, 13th century, Cilicia, Scribe Sukias. Simeon. Similar to our icon.
- S.M. Pelekanidis et al., *The treasures of Mount Athos, illuminated manuscripts, vol I*, Athens, 1974
- Codex 587, Gospel Lectionary, 1059, in the Monastery of Dionysiou. Mary.
- S.M. Pelekanidis et al., *The treasures of Mount Athos, illuminated manuscripts, vol II*, Athens, 1974
- Codex 1, Gospel Lectionary, 11th century, in the Monastery of Iveron. Mary.
- Codex 5, Gospel book, 13th century, in the Monastery of Iveron. Mary.
- Codex 2, Gospel Lectionary, 12th century, in the Monastery of Saint Panteleimon. Mary. Simeon in reception position.
- Diptych with miniatures, 13th century, in the Monastery of Chilandari. Mary. Simeon has a man behind him, not Anna!

<sup>7</sup> The usual arrangement is that Anna is behind Simeon, in the Temple. But with some frequency we find her with Mary and Joseph, as is the case of the illumination in the aforementioned Bibbia di Abro Bagratuni, in the corresponding fresco of the Monastery of Dionysiou, or even in that of the Niğde Gümüşler Monastery, in Turkey.

<sup>8</sup> In this way we want to signify those iconographic proposals in which Simeon and Anna appear on the left of the image while Mary and Joseph appear on the right. Such is the case of the miniature in the aforementioned Vangelo di Khizan, the small icon in the Benaki Museum (in which, in addition, Anna is with Mary and Joseph), and the Armenian miniature of T'oros Roslin (1262) in The Walters Art Museum.

<sup>9</sup> This brings us to a very suggestive point: the use of sketches to paint icons as well as frescoes. It is easy to understand that the widespread use of those devices, more or less transparent, in which after intensive use it was not obvious to recognize the faces of the paper, could lead to the frequent phenomenon of symmetry in certain iconographic types. In this sense, the paper of M. Castiñeiras (*Oxford, Magdalen College, MS. Gr. 3: Artistic Practice, Byzantine Drawings and Mobility in Mediterranean Painting around 1200*, Arte Medievale, Roma 2015, 87,93) is especially relevant. The one of E. N. Tsigaridas (*Theophanes the Cretan*, Thessaloniki 2016, 60) points out the sequence Angelos-Ritzos-Theophanes.

### *Description of the icon*

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, we would like to approach these thoughts by means of the presentation/description of the unpublished icon of Balkan origin and compare it with similar productions. To be able to place it in space and time. It is an icon of medium dimensions, 45.5cm x 34cm, in which the five characters appear. They seem to be suspended in mid-air in the Temple.

*Simeon* stands out being the one in the most central position and more suspended in the air. Therefore, in a higher and preeminent position. Since the Child is in his arms, it is he who occupies the centre of the icon preciously nested between Simeon's chest, arms, hands and head. We could suggest that this is a kind of Simeon's shelter for him.

*Mary, the Mother of God*, second in the centre of the image, is in front of Simeon extending her arms and hands as if to welcome the Child. He also extends his to his Mother. It would seem that he returns to her, given the position and the logic of the narrative.

*The prophetess Anna* stands behind Simeon. Her position, respectful inclination forward like Simeon, shows however details typical of the character. With her right hand she leans on a long cane that reminds us of a crutch and indicates her advanced age („she was a widow of eighty-four years“, Luke 2: 36-37). Consequently, her difficulties in locomotion. While her left hand supports a scroll that grants her the role of prophetess.

*Joseph* occupies the tightest position, accordingly with his hierarchical rank, in the lower left margin of the icon. He appears behind Mary and carries in a fold of his clothes the two pigeons that mean the agreed offerings. He is the only one who wears simple sandals and seems to really step on the ground. Again, details consistent with his narrative relevance.

If we look at the faces, we can appreciate a reliable execution of the flesh and the design of mouths, noses, eyes, and hair. The same can be said of the delicate white lines that enlighten them. In all cases, the brushstrokes are fast and despite the fact that the whole display reflects mastery, they show a certain level of imprecision, as if the painter had been copying rather mechanically or was in a hurry to finish the work. The same may be appreciated in the bordering of the garments. Uncareful mastery?

However, an item specially surprises in the base shading proplasmos veiled with the subsequent lighter layers (**fig. 3**). The apparently/deliberately unprecise use of an unknown dark material containing obvious-sized yellow granules. Not completely veiled by the subsequent layers. The result is a very special effect. Painter's choice? Lack of proper material?

This stuff has also been used in the shading of the hands, necks, and feet. Also, in Simeon's outfit. As well as on the floor of the composition. We have

---

L. Ouspensky (*La théologie de l'icône*, Paris 2003, 271-272) develops the Russian context. And M. Didron (*Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine*, 1845) is the famous Hermeneia - painter's manual - of Dionysius of Fourna that was the reference book when we added a Prophet Elijah icon to the catalogue of Dionysius workshop (M. Gallés, *Some additions to the catalogue of the workshop of Dionysius of Fourna. An icon of the Prophet Elijah opens fire*, Thessaloniki 2019. <https://vimeo.com/381309100> ).

only been able to appreciate something similar in an icon on the Raising of Lazarus attributed to Theophanes the Cretan that is in the Benaki Museum and which was dated between 1535 and 1546<sup>10</sup>.

The particular design of the eyebags in the case of the prophetess Anna is striking (fig. 4). A detail that may be of use to emphasize her age with respect to Mary and Joseph. This same type of technical procedure, without being exclusive to a specific painter or period, we find it well developed in Theophanes himself. Such is the case, for example, for the right-side Myrrh-bearer Woman at the Katholikon of the monastery of Great Lavra<sup>11</sup>. And, of course, in many others.

The architectural background takes up almost half of the space in the composition. Without a doubt, the place in which the scene unfolds, the Temple, is the central stage for the believer. What deserves to be pointed out in this case is that the architecture of the building does not correspond to the simple traditional canopy, but rather to a more sophisticated and specific architecture consistent with that of the buildings in the upper left quarter of the icon.

We refer to the fact that the architectural structure, considered from the capitals of the columns upwards, bows included, recalls in a more than evident way a top partial view of a schematized Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (fig. 5). The proportions of the central dome, the layout of the squared panels on the exterior of the dome, as well as the double window system, lower big ones for light including its railings or protections, and upper round smaller ones for ventilation, point in that direction. The side system of secondary domes shown to the right, window system included, reinforces the idea. The inner part, obviously undeveloped, is where the Presentation of our Lord is being performed. So, no more structure details are needed for the purpose.

At this point it may be interesting to retrace another historical „sequence“. Since the scene that we are considering takes place in the Temple, it is not trivial to consider the Temple par excellence, the Temple of Solomon, as a starting point. So, it makes perfect sense to think that the scene takes place in that particular place, following Tradition. The interesting thing is that, following this very same Tradition, in Byzantine times and further on, the new Temple par



Fig. 4. Detail. Anna's face where eyebags are evident.

Сл. 4. Детаљ, Анино лице са израженим подочњацима

<sup>10</sup> See N. Khatzidaki, *Icones Gregues de la Col·lecció Velimezis*, Barcelona 1999, pl 14.

<sup>11</sup> For Theophanes Myrrh-bearer Women, cf. the monography of N. Tsigaridas (*Theophanes the Cretan*, Thessaloniki 2016, 139-140). And for the Lamentation at the Tomb icon in the Monastery of Aghiou Pavlou, that of M. Vassilaki et al (*The Holy Monastery of Aghiou Pavlou. The Icons*, Mount Athos 1999, 112-114). In both cases, the eyebags are very evident.



Fig. 5. Detail. The Temple: top partial view of a schematized Hagia Sophia.

Сл. 5. Деталъ, Храм: схематизирана Света Софија

excellence, becomes Hagia Sophia. Thus, we move from the general idea of a Temple to the idea of a specific temple which is that of Solomon, and from this, to Hagia Sophia. The link could well be Justinian's assertion: have defeated you, wise Solomon with all your glory!<sup>12</sup> It is implicit in it that Hagia Sophia is the new Temple of Solomon. Therefore, it should not surprise us that, despite the more canonical assumptions of orthodox iconography, what should be a generic representation of a Temple or, in the best of cases, a representation of the Temple of Solomon, turns out to be that of the new Temple of Solomon: Hagia Sophia.

But, the more striking issue in the upper part of this icon is that in the opposite background there is a very interesting group of buildings in which, first of all, a tower stands out. By now, and by belonging to the scene, it is more than evident that it is the Galata Tower (**fig. 6**). Of course, in the context of the homonymous neighborhood. Hence the rest of the accompanying buildings. Without a doubt, the intention is to ensure that the background landscape of Hagia Sophia, on the other side of the Golden Horn, is perfectly recognized as such and therefore certifies the identity of the Temple. The huge opening with bars in the high wall of the tower is striking. We think that the clear purpose is to show that the "Tower of Christ"<sup>13</sup> became a prison that housed Christian prisoners who were put to work as slaves in the Kasımpaşa shipyards at the Golden Horn<sup>14</sup>, during the reign of Sultan Murat III (1546-1595). So, an evidence of the Ottoman oppression.

The question arises. Why in the vast world of Orthodox iconography, in which the claim is not to reflect in the icon anything that could not have to do with its function of raising the believer to the highest level of connection with the Divine, can we find such a particular reference?

<sup>12</sup> See J.M. Egea, *Relato de cómo se construyó Santa Sofía*, Granada 2003, 205.

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galata\\_Tower](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galata_Tower) (30/10/2020).

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.castles.nl/galata-tower> (30/10/2020).



Fig. 6. Detail. Galata neighborhood with the Galata Tower.

Сл. 6. Детал, околина Галате и приказ куле



Before issuing an answer, it is well worth noting that if there is a specific iconographic type in which such room for maneuver exists is in the representations in which the Temple appears. The architectural structure of the Temple is the only one that allows the iconographer freedom enough to suggest a specific physical context. Although the normal thing is to find the simple canopy supported by four columns<sup>15</sup>.

So, what could be the key? For us, without pretending a single interpretation, the meaning of such a specific and precise representation lies in its role of religious, political and cultural vindication in a context of a strong and new feeling of aggression. This brings us to the time frame that has already been suggested previously, the second half of the 16th century. The end of Byzantium evidenced by the fall of Constantinople was quite present in the tradition of believers. Therefore, the painter and his environment still have fresh in their memories what they have lost. And claim it.

At this point, and based on the general iconographic pattern of this icon, as well as the more specific elements referred to the use of materials and techniques, the architectures and their details, we propose that it is an icon that could have been painted towards the very end of the 16th century or, more likely, in the early 17th. Probably of Central-Eastern Balkan origin.

<sup>15</sup> A precious example of this type of schematic simplicity in a Bulgarian icon of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple in the geographical-temporal context considered could be the one found in P. Русева, *Златна книга Икони от България IX - XIX век*, София 2016, 100.

*Мигел Галес*

(Независни Универзитет у Барселони, Одељење уметности и музикологије)  
„СВЕТЛОСТ, ДА ПРОСВЕЋУЈЕ НЕЗНАБОШЦЕ И СЛАВУ НАРОДА ТВОГА  
ИЗРАИЉА”: КАДА ЈЕ НОВО ПОСТАЛО СТАРО

У једној приватној колекцији икона у Барселони пронађена је једна икона која до сада није обрађивана у историографији, а вероватно потиче с краја 16. века тј. почетка 17. века. Реч је о икони која је вероватно настала на Балкану и на њој је приказано Срећење. Зашто се стихови „Светлост, да просвећује незнабошце и славу народа твога Израиља“ везују за успон Византије? Вероватно постоји више одговора с тим у вези: контроверзни односи везани за разумевање византијског и поствизантијског, православна традиција, детаљ који није увек у употреби а који је везан за Сина који из руку Богородице прелази код Симеона и разумевање молитвеног сусрета Симеона и Христа. Такође у тексту су предложене занимљиве интерпретације грађевина у позадини ове сцене, пре свега да је реч о представи храма Божанске Премудрости (Хагиа Софије) и да је приказана и Галата кула у Цариграду. Имајући у виду неке иконографске обрасце познате из Србије, Северне Македоније и Бугарске, икона је датована у крај 16. века и почетак 17. века.