

CONCORDIA IN PIERO DELLA
FRANCESCA'S *BAPTISM OF CHRIST*

By MARIE TANNER

FOR the priory of San Giovanni Battista in Borgo San Sepolcro, Piero della Francesca painted a *Baptism of Christ* (Fig. 1) which in many ways follows the precedents of baptismal iconography. Piero depicts the two central events of Christian purification—the precise moment in which Christ receives the waters from St. John, and the simultaneous epiphany of the Godhead. In his central placement of Christ he follows a type which predominates in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries¹ and which seems to concur with the symbolic division of Baptism, in which the bank to Christ's right signifies Paradise and the left signifies Earth, with Christ participating in both realms.

Like his predecessors Ghiberti (Fig. 2) and Andrea Pisano, Piero shows a group of angels to Christ's right, and, as in the Florentine baptismal font (Fig. 3), he adds a group of holy men behind St. John. Like Masolino at Castiglione Olona, he includes the Byzantine addition of a catechumen undressing to follow Christ.²

Yet, while adhering to the main lines of baptismal representations, Piero introduces a new combination of subsidiary elements: 1) The angels do not perform their usual function of bearing garments;³ instead two angels clasp hands, while the third gestures to the baptism. Each angel is distinguished by a different crown and a different colored robe. 2) In the middleground is a group of four men, dressed specifically in oriental costume, one of whom gestures heavenward. 3) A contemporary cityscape appears in the distant background, which has been identified with Borgo San Sepolcro.⁴

I shall try to suggest that these differences from traditional iconography reflect an issue of fundamental importance to the unity of the Church.

There is no documentation of the panel's provenance; it is stated to have been the center of a polyptych (Fig. 4), of which the rest is attributed to Matteo di Giovanni, for the high altar of the priory of San Giovanni Battista in San Sepolcro. After the suppression of this monastery in 1808, the painting was moved to the cathedral of San Giovanni Evangelista in San Sepolcro. The

central panel was bought by Robinson for Matthew Uzielli in 1859 and from Uzielli by the National Gallery in 1861.⁵

The central panel of the altarpiece and a missing tondo of God the Father have been recognized as Piero's. The remainder of the altarpiece comprises two tondi with the Annunciate Virgin and the angel Gabriel, two side panels of Saints Peter and Paul, and various smaller flanking saints. The four doctors of the Western Church appear in niches between the scenes of the predellas which show the Birth of the Baptist and his Preaching (both on the left), a Crucifixion (directly below the Baptism), and (on the right) John before Herod and the Dance of Salome. The Graziani family arms appear on the predella,⁶ which is dated in the mid 1450s by Hartlaub,⁷ or in the mid 1460s by Logan.⁸ All this has been attributed to Matteo di Giovanni.⁹

THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION

Piero's panel has long been viewed as a Baptism of usual type. Longhi first described the group of men in the background as Eastern holy men;¹⁰ for de Tolnay, their hats of doctors of the middle ages indicate that they represent prophets or Magi, who figure the world *ante legem* or *sub lege*;¹¹ Kenneth Clark calls them a group of Jewish priests, their hats symbolizing the formal headgear of the Old Law as contrasted with the new life of baptism.¹² But we shall see that the headgear carries a specific contemporary reference that is significant for the total meaning of the painting.

The three angels on the left have been described by Longhi as "three winged adolescents, with that androgynous appearance not infrequently found among the youth of the countryside . . ." ¹³ De Tolnay considers the group to be the three Graces of antiquity, dressed in Christian garb and expressing, as did the graces, Harmony.¹⁴ De Tolnay's suggestion may be objected to because the Graces are female; and while angels are sexless they are always treated in theology and liturgy as male. No-one has attempted an interpretation that integrates all three figural groups in the painting and seeks an overall meaning for the work. In order to do this it will be necessary to discuss separately the main aspects of the painting: the act of Baptism, the role of the three angels, and the exotically dressed men in the background.

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

The sacrament of Baptism is central to the Christian doctrine of salvation, following Matt. 28:19. By the ablution in water and the invocation of the

three divine Persons, all sins are washed away and the punishment of sins is remitted. The remission of punishment is indicated in the Pauline teaching that with baptism the old man dies and is buried and a new man arises.¹⁵ This destruction of the old and creation of the new is achieved not in the catechumen but first in the dead and resurrected Christ; thus Baptism is the antetype of the Passion of Christ.¹⁶ His baptism marks the ritual inauguration of the salvific work of the incarnate God,¹⁷ and institutes the sacrament of Baptism.¹⁸

The rite of the Baptism of the faithful is begun by leading the catechumen into the baptistry, signifying his entrance into the Church, which implies the return to Paradise lost by the sin of Adam.¹⁹ The catechumen is then stripped of clothing, symbolizing the sin of Adam and mortality and first shed by Christ upon the cross. Immersion and emersion follow, accompanied by the invocation of the three Persons of the Trinity. This invocation of the Trinity is the central act of the rite of Baptism and was included in the liturgy from its inception. It was emphasized in early Christian practice by the triple pouring of water;²⁰ and the oldest doctrinal formulation of the Church's belief in the Trinity, the Apostle's Creed, had served as the basis of catechumenical instruction for Baptism since the second century.²¹

The first revelation of the Trinity occurred during the baptism of Jesus, with the theophany of the Holy Spirit and a voice from heaven proclaiming Jesus as the son of God (Luke 3:22). It is with a view to invoking this same theophany that the baptismal prayer for catechumen declares faith in the Trinity.²² The Trinitarian form of Baptism is founded biblically on Christ's words, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

Immersion in the holy waters symbolizes purification from sin; emersion marks the communication of the Holy Spirit, which confers on man sonship by adoption. The waters of Baptism are therefore the tomb wherein man the sinner is buried and also the vivifying element in which the new creature is born, the Spirit communicating the pledges of life.²³ The Church is the mother of the sons of God—in Baptism she brings them forth.²⁴ The final ceremony in the rite is the clothing with the white garment, symbolic of the putting on of Christ.²⁵ Baptism effects this incorporation in the Body of Christ and is therefore the "real cause" of incorporation into the Church.²⁶

Christian baptism, then, comprises two aspects: it is an efficacious symbol of the Passion and of the Resurrection, which, realizing them corporeally in Christ, effects them spiritually in the catechumen.²⁷

Although angels are traditionally represented in scenes of the baptism of Christ, their presence there is not mentioned in the Apocrypha or in the evangelical Canon. It is only explained by their role in liturgy, first specified by Origen²⁸ and developed by Tertullian, who attributes to the angels a function of the first importance in the sacrament of Baptism: "Cleansed in the water by the action of the angel, we are prepared for the Holy Spirit . . ." ²⁹ Although Thomas Aquinas later stated that angels cannot be ministers of the sacraments in the proper sense of the word,³⁰ they act as deacons in the visual tradition of the baptism of Christ until the time of Piero, appearing in baptismal representations as a varying number of assistants who hold the white robe for the catechumen. In Piero's composition this function is eliminated, a fact that in itself indicates a change in the meaning of the angels' presence.

In theological formula, the priest is only the material or instrumental cause of Baptism, the principal cause is the presence of the Trinity.³¹ If the angels no longer prefigure the priests, can they represent the essential presence of the Trinity at Baptism? St. Ambrose, one of the four doctors of the Church represented on the predella of our altarpiece, had interpreted the angel of baptism as Jesus Christ, and again as the Holy Spirit that vivifies the baptismal waters.³² As for the Father, traditionally His angelic messengers may also represent His presence. In general, the representation of the triune godhead in angelic guise is founded on the fact that the essence of God never appeared in itself, coming to the patriarchs and prophets through the ministry of angels.³³ This iconography was established especially in the appearance of angels to Abraham, as St. Ambrose confirms: "Deus illi apparuit, et tres aspexit. Cui Deus refulgit, Trinitatem videt: God appeared to him [Abraham] and he saw three Persons. Who sees God's light sees the Trinity."³⁴ Augustine, who like Ambrose appears on the predella, gives the formula: "et ipse Abraham tres videt, unum adoravit [Abraham saw three Persons and adored one], nonne unus erat hospes in tribus qui venit ad patrem Abraham."³⁵ These ideas are represented in medieval art, for example at Santa Maria Maggiore or Monreale, where the three angels symbolize the Trinity.³⁶ A fourteenth-century manuscript illumination by Spinello Aretino (Fig. 5) juxtaposes the angels and the Trinity. And the angels themselves, without the presence of Abraham, become a virtual image of the Trinity. An Eastern contemporary of Piero's, Andrej Rublev, whose concept was disseminated in innumerable imitations, uses the isolated group of the three angels to express the unity, multiplicity and equality

of all three Persons.³⁷ Piero continues this tradition by identifying the angels with the Trinity, and the colors of the angels' robes implement this identification: red, white and blue were revealed as symbols of the Trinity to Innocent III on the occasion of the founding of the Trinitarian Order.³⁸

This change in the significance of the angels is elaborated by Piero's other innovations—his angels wear differentiated headgear (Fig. 6) and they clasp hands. Different types of headgear were a means of differentiating the Persons of the Trinity as they became more difficult to distinguish;³⁹ so in Piero's painting one angel wears a diadem, the other two wear differently flowered wreaths. Now the use of wreaths is common on *Victoriae*, but not on angels. In Christian iconography they are used to indicate martyrs' crowns of victory, but this is a secondary function: their primary use is in connection with Christ's victory or with the appearance of the Godhead. And while some aspects of the significance of Piero's wreaths are unclear, I think the wreath of roses worn by the central angel in Piero's group is Christological: Christ's crown of thorns turns into a crown of roses according to the liturgy of the Feast of the Holy Crown and Thorns.⁴⁰ The central placing of Christ in such a Trinity group would correspond to that in the angelic Trinity in Santa Maria Maggiore. The angel wearing the laurel wreath may represent God the Father. In depicting both the angelic Trinity and the individual figures of the Father (in the now missing roundel), Son and Holy Ghost, Piero expresses the unity implicit in the Trinity of like members, while also rendering the explicit biblical account of the dove at the baptism of Christ.⁴¹ His duplication of the Persons of the Trinity has a precedent in representations of Christ as the Godhead and separately Christ's humanity, as in the Ghent Altarpiece representation of the Trinity and the Lamb. A duplication of Persons of the Trinity occurs also in the *Quintity* of Winchester and the *Utrecht Psalter*; in the *Utrecht Psalter* this duplication is used to illustrate the *Officium Trinitatis*.⁴²

Piero's two angels in an attitude of concord, alongside the third, whose diadem suggests the Roman personification of *Concordia* (Fig. 7a), stress this equality of the divine Persons, and the unity of all divine activity in creation and redemption. For the two wreathed figures clasp hands in a gesture that is certainly reminiscent of the ancient iconography of *Concord*. In Roman imperial art, *Concordia* is often personified as the third member of a group, in which two others clasp hands in concord (Fig. 7b).⁴³ The particular idea of Trinitarian concord appears in the representation of Abraham and the three

angels on the bronze portal of Monreale, where there is a crossing over of hands similar to the gesture in Piero's work; a more contemporary parallel can be found in a fifteenth-century French manuscript illumination of the New Testament Trinity (Fig. 8), in which the Holy Spirit is held by the hands of God the Father and of Christ.⁴⁴ Another characteristic Roman representation of Concordia depicts her holding a pomegranate, which, since it contains many seeds in one skin, symbolizes Concord.⁴⁵ Piero emphasizes the concord of his group by the inclusion of a pomegranate tree in the foreground—a single pomegranate protrudes from the right of the tree, serving as an emphatic symbol.

But Piero's angels suggest more than celestial concord between divine Persons. As the catechesis of Baptism suggests three levels of participation, Piero's angels suggest a celestial, an intermediate and a terrestrial level of their harmony. The heavenly concord that unites Father and Son is reflected in a nuptial relationship between the Son and the Church, which is an essential element in the baptismal rite. The theme of resurrected new life is conveyed on this second level of the meaning of the three angels.

The marriage of Christ to the Church was generally understood to take place at the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan; the Church was cleansed on Epiphany and the marriage followed that nuptial bath. So the Roman liturgy for the Feast of the Epiphany refers to the "Church . . . today united to her heavenly bridegroom." It is out of this harmonious union of Christ and Ecclesia that the immortal sons of the Holy Ghost will be reborn in Baptism.⁴⁶ The crowning of the bride is also described in the liturgy of the Feast of the Epiphany, "indumento iustitiae circumdedit me, quasi sponsum decoratum corona: For he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation and with the robe of justice he hath covered me—as a bridegroom decked with a crown and as a bride adorned with her jewels."⁴⁷

The suggestion of connubial concord is provided by the ancient traditions of the Concordia figure, since in antiquity the goddess Concordia gradually became a marriage deity. Hence, in the development of coins commemorating the marriage of an imperial couple, Concordia acted as *pronuba*, establishing both the unison of the august couple and its unisonance with the eternal harmony of the universe.⁴⁸ In the Christian era, the identification of Christ with Concordia became widespread. About the middle of the fifth century, the personification Concordia Pronuba ceded her place to Christus Pronubus;⁴⁹ at the same period, Christ is praised as "cuncti concordia mundi," the

concord of the whole world.⁵⁰ The concord-bringing peace of the Lord was represented in a contemporary mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore by an angel acting as *pronubus* and uniting Joseph and the prophetess Anna.⁵¹ This image determines the subsequent iconography of the marriage of Christ and Ecclesia (Fig. 9).

But the tradition of Concordia also extends to political unification. The concept of Concordia had its political equivalent when two emperors were shown clasping hands. The role of Concordia as the bringer of harmony devolved on the emperor, who is recognized in late Empire contracts as an incarnation of Concordia in the legal sphere. In much Hellenistic political theory, it was the chief task of the prince to establish the concord of his subjects and to attune them to a harmony which, in the sublunary realm, reflected the harmony of the spheres.⁵² Constantine established a parallel between the earthly harmony under his reign and the celestial harmony maintained by Christ, and imperial coinage commemorating the reunification of the Eastern and Western Empire displays the standard symbols of Concordia:⁵³ an Antioch medal of *ca.* 318–19, inscribed “Concordia,” celebrated the unity of the state when Constantine and Licinus jointly ruled a pacific Empire in which the Orient was joined to Rome as it had not been since Diocletian. This Eastern extension of Constantine’s power also signified the parallel extension of Christianity to the region where it had been persecuted by Licinus.⁵⁴ Thus, political reunion also united the Empire in Christ. The Quattrocento was familiar with coins of this type and imitated them: an example is a papal medal by Cristoforo di Geremia (active 1430–76) struck with the Roman type of Concordia Augustorum, with Constantine the Great on the obverse (Fig. 10). A copy by Andrea Guacialoti of the Concordia group on Cristoforo’s medal bears the inscription “Ecclesia.”⁵⁵

THE COUNCIL OF FLORENCE

The oriental dress of the elders in the right middle-ground group, which forms a compositional pendant to the angels, suggests the possibility of contemporary significance in this imagery—in the Council of Florence, 1438–39, the first serious attempt at re-uniting the Eastern and Western Churches was made and (what is no less pertinent in this connection) the “keystone of the dogmatic development of the doctrine of the Trinity was laid.”⁵⁶ Filarete’s bronze doors for the central portals of St. Peter’s, commissioned by Pope Eugenius IV, include illustrations of scenes from the Council which the Pope

had convened (Fig. 12),⁵⁷ and so provide documentary evidence for the appearance and dress of many of the Eastern Council members. The tubular hat to be found in certain of these scenes appears again in a portrait done by Pisanello of a Council member (Fig. 11). Since the headgear of two of the figures in Piero's *Baptism* (at the left and right of the group; Fig. 13) is identical with several representations on Filarete's doors—the tall expanding tubular hat and the shorter conical turban—it may be meant to refer specifically to the Florentine Council. The fact that four men are shown may be a reference to the four national delegations present at the meetings.

THE FILIOQUE

The cause of dissent between the Eastern and Western Churches centered on the relation between the three Persons of the Trinity, of which the Holy Scriptures give no theological definition. The root of the difference concerned the procession of the Spirit: Scripture asserts that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone; Latin theology formulated the concept that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son,⁵⁸ hence the term "*Filioque*." The Eastern denial of procession from the Son had led to the schism from the West.

Various attempts at reunion by the Western Church had been ignored until the Greeks needed aid from the Latins against an imminent Turkish threat. A general council was proposed and finally convened at Ferrara in 1438, moving to Florence the following year. The Eastern delegation came to the Council under the leadership of the Emperor, John Paleologus,⁵⁹ heir to the Emperor Constantine, who had first effected the Christian concord of East and West. Agreement was reached despite dissent over the acceptance of the "*Filioque*" formula on the part of the Greeks, and on 6 July 1439 the decree of union, *Laetentur Caeli*,⁶⁰ was signed, affirming the issuance of the Holy Ghost from the Son as well as from the Father. To rephrase in this context suggestions that have been made above, Piero's representation of the Trinity as three like members provided the means of giving greater visual weight to the Western doctrine of their equality; while the handclasp of the two angels suggests the equality of Father and Son as sources for the procession of the Holy Spirit.⁶¹

On 19 October 1439 the Emperor John and his party left for Constantinople.⁶² Meanwhile the Armenians had arrived, and they accepted the addition of the "*Filioque*" clause to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed in the so-called *Decretum Pro Armenis*, the Bull *Exultate Deo*, of 22 November



Fig. 1. PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA, *Baptism of Christ*. National Gallery, London

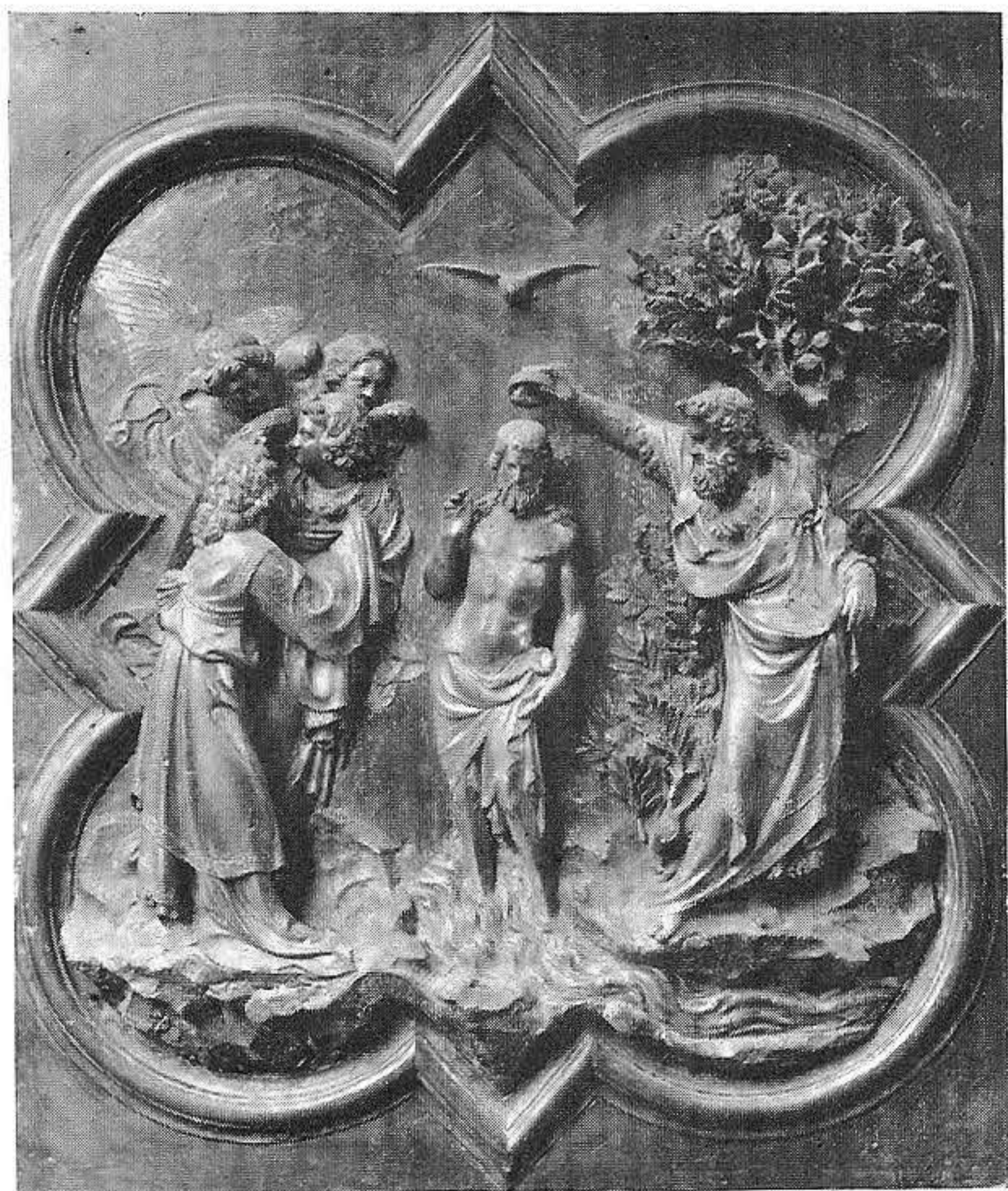


Fig. 2. LORENZO Ghiberti, *Baptism of Christ*
North doors, Baptistry, Florence

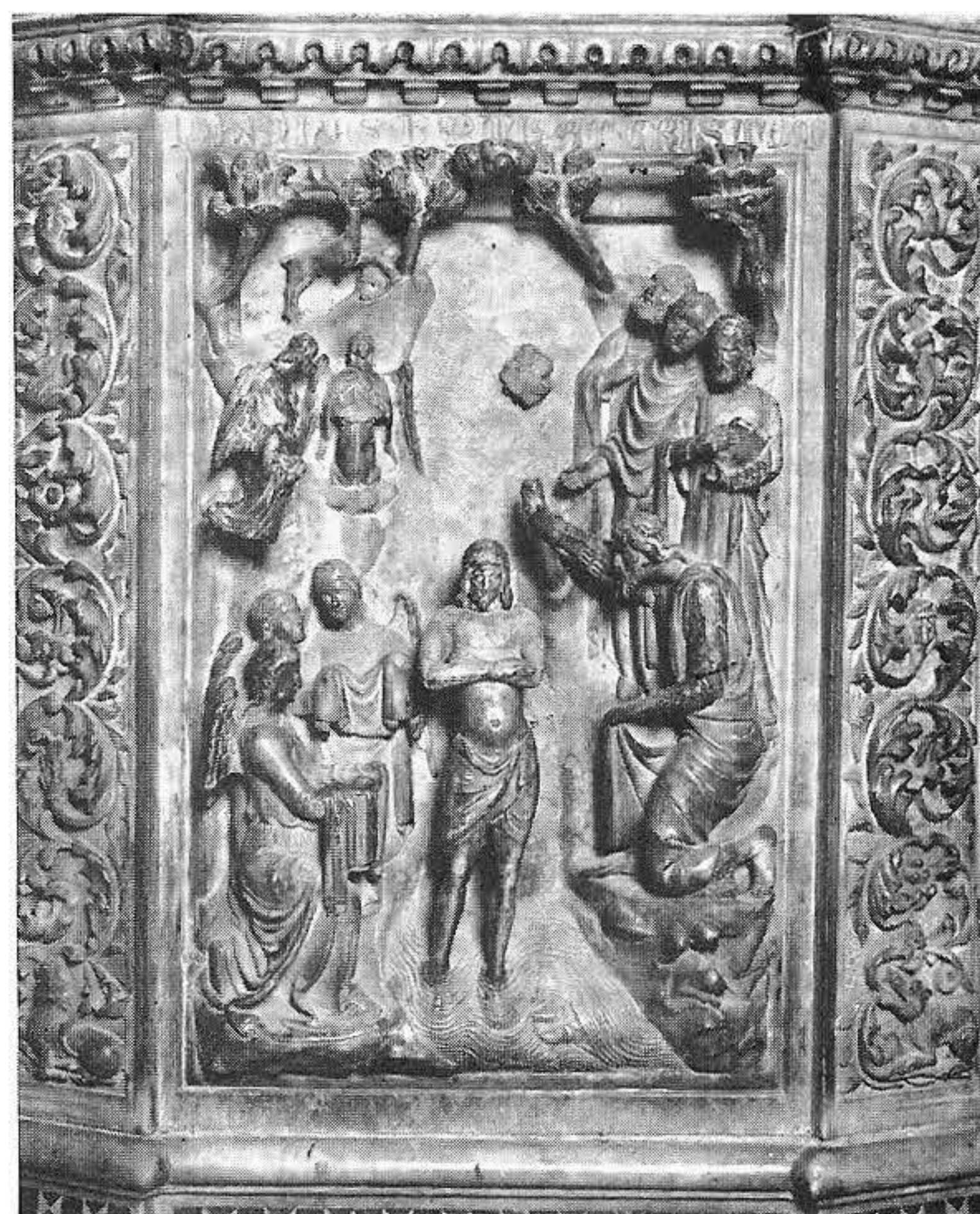


Fig. 3. *Baptism of Christ*
Baptismal font, Baptistry, Florence

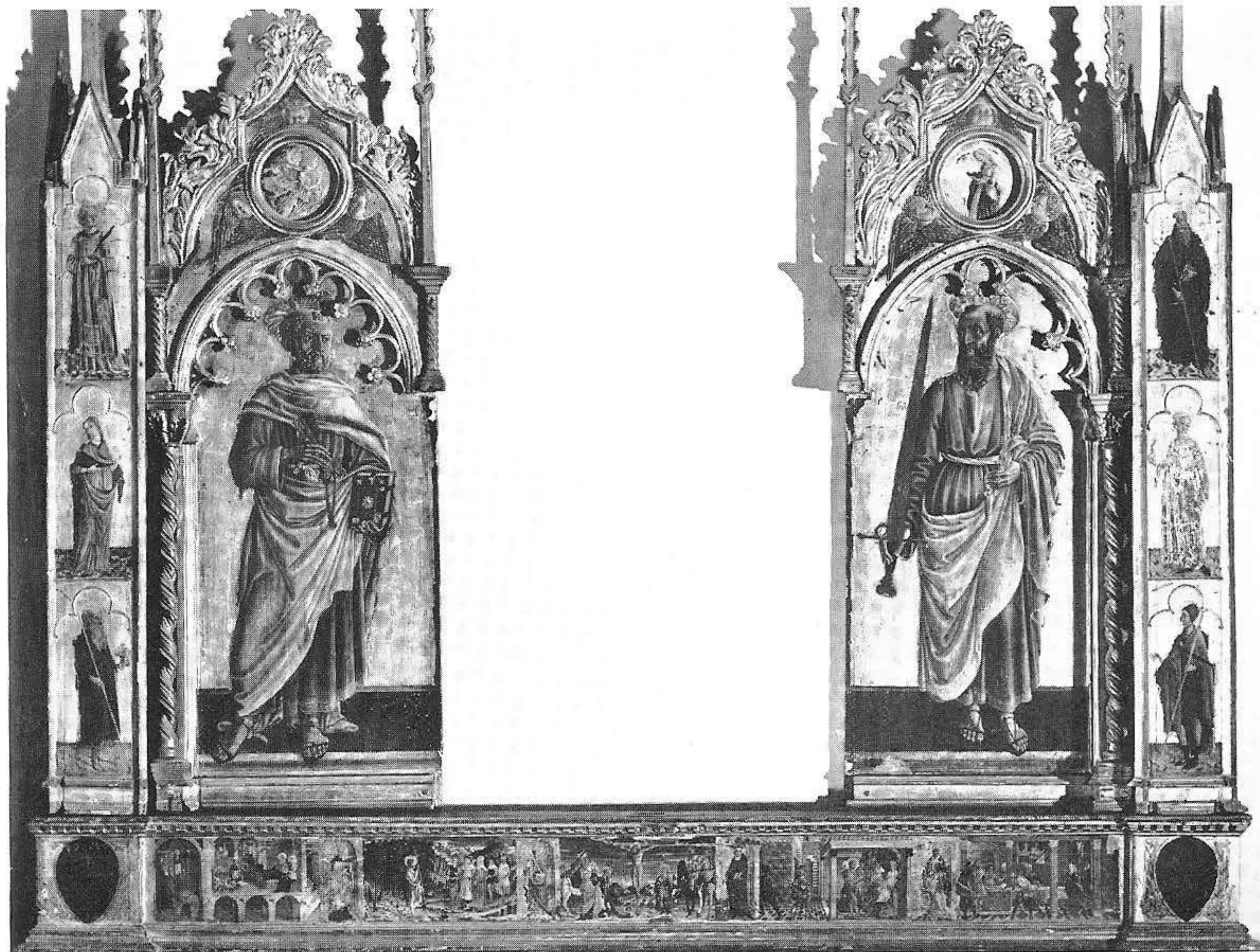


Fig. 4. MATTEO DI GIOVANNI, Polyptych. San Giovanni Evangelista, Borgo San Sepolcro



Fig. 5. SPINELLO ARETINO, Antiphony Pierpont Morgan Library, New York



Fig. 6. PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA, *Baptism of Christ*. Detail



Figs. 7a and b. Roman Coins of Concordia. British Museum, London.

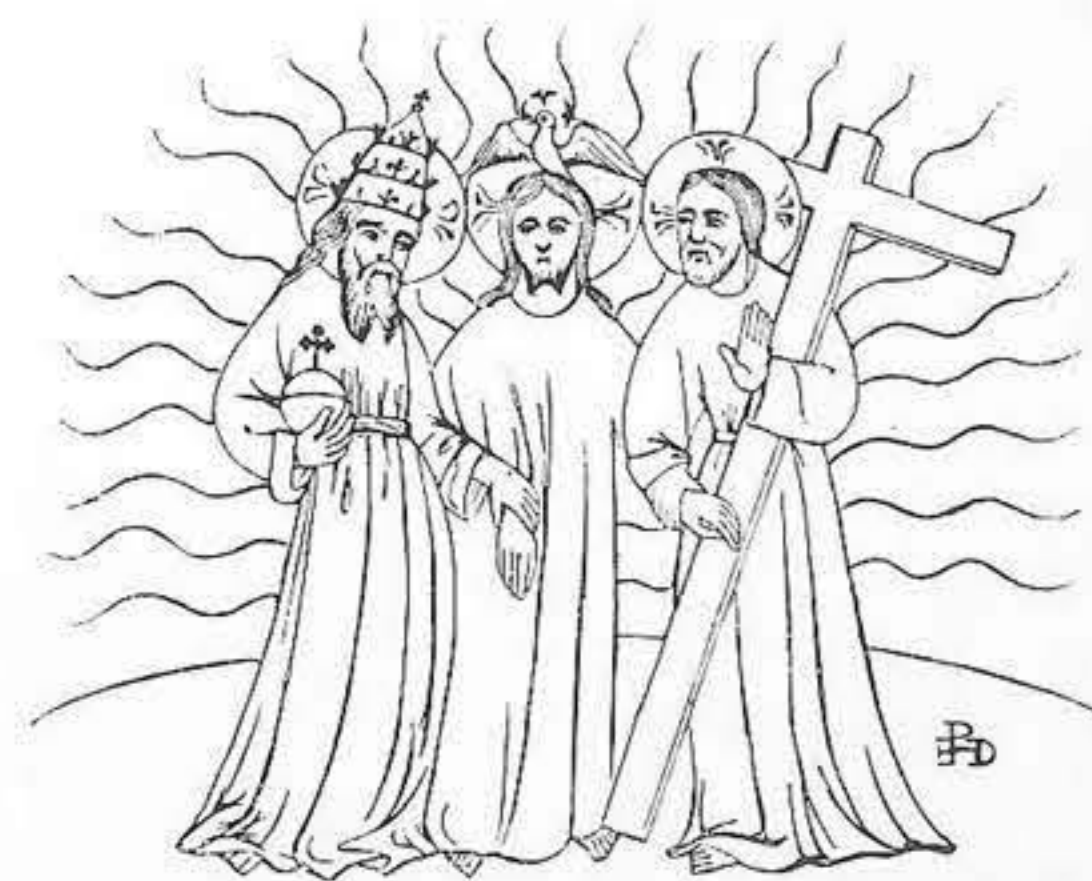


Fig. 8. The Trinity in an Attitude of Concord. Ms. Fr. 927, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris Drawing after Didron



Fig. 9. *Marriage of Christ and the Church*
Ms. 270b, Bodleian Library, Oxford



Fig. 10. CRISTOFORO DI GEREMIA
Medal for Pope Paul II. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 11. PISANELLO, Member of
the Council of Florence
Drawing. Cabinet des Dessins
Musée du Louvre, Paris

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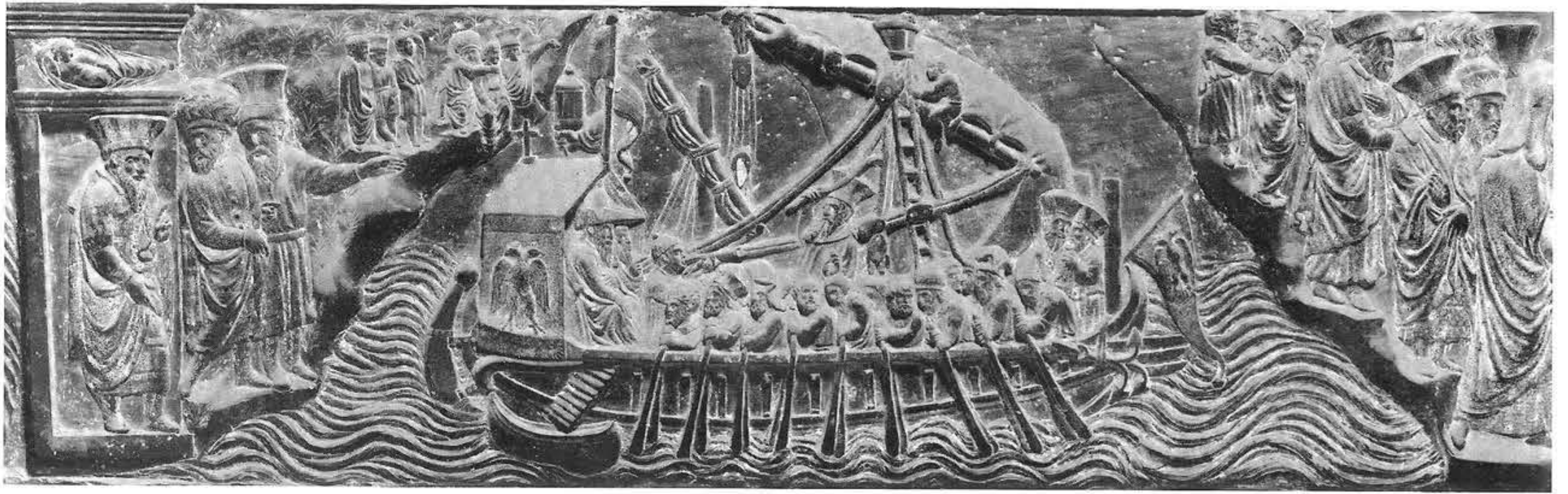


FIG. 12. FILARETE. *The Departure of John Paleologus for the East*. Central portals, St. Peter's, Rome.

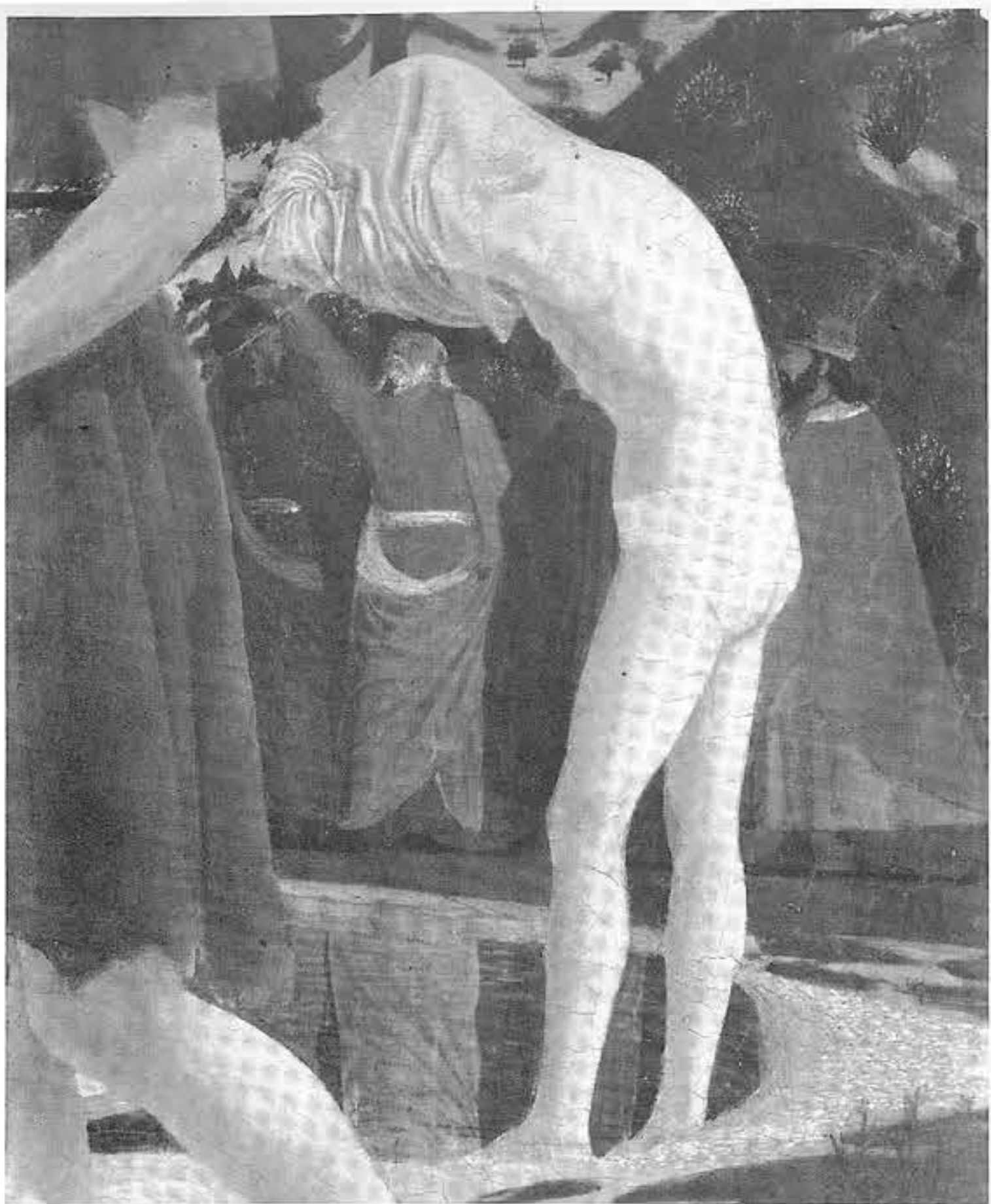


Fig. 13. PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA, *Baptism of Christ*. Detail



Fig. 14. Shop of the VIRGIL MASTER, *Visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon*
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven



Fig. 15. GUGLIELMO DA PISA, *Adoration of the Magi*
Pulpit, San Giovanni Fuorcivitas, Pistoia

1439.⁶³ This decree dealt with the form of the sacraments, and marked the acceptance of the Latin form of Baptism:⁶⁴ the formula of Baptism was stated to be, "I baptize thee in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." Into the decree was inserted the phrase, "through it [Baptism] we are all made members of Christ and compacted into the body of the Church,"⁶⁵ stressing the centrality of the Church's role. Harmony is re-established after the Fall when Christ through His sacrifice makes it possible for man to be one with the Trinity. This union of all things in the Trinity begins on earth in the only Church, which exists as a mysterious extension of the Trinity in time and which not only prepares man for such a life of union but gives him a sure guarantee of it and causes him to participate in it already.⁶⁶

We have suggested above that Piero's *Baptism of Christ* is a *Fides Trinitaris*—a profession of faith in the Trinity⁶⁷—and a Mystical Marriage.⁶⁸ The third meaning imparted by the three angels—a politico-religious record of union between the Eastern and Western Churches under the auspices of Concordia⁶⁹ (Fig. 14)—serves these two meanings. The Council of Florence provided in its baptismal formulation the basis through which the Eastern and Western Churches, legitimized by the union of Christ and Ecclesia, could attune the souls of the faithful to that celestial concord of the Trinity which the Church in its unified state echoed on earth.⁷⁰ The pomegranate tree in the foreground serves as a symbol of the reintegrated body of the Church, outside of which there is no salvation.⁷¹

THE EPIPHANY

Piero historically justifies the presence of the Eastern figures in a scene of Baptism by suggesting the Epiphany⁷²—one figure points skyward. (In fact, Benozzo Gozzoli may refer to Piero's interpretation when he specifically depicts two Council members as Magi in the Medici Palace decoration.⁷³)

The Epiphany was originally the feast celebrating the birth *and* baptism of Christ, the manifestations of Christ as Savior.⁷⁴ The inclusion of the infant bath in scenes of the Adoration (Fig. 15) carries this baptismal sense; and, to cite one example, a painting in the catacomb of Petrus and Marcellinus combines the epiphany and the baptism.⁷⁵ But as the Feast of Christmas became the more popular way to commemorate the birth of Christ, the nature of Epiphany changed. The arrival of the Magi became more important in its celebration in the West, while in the East the Epiphany was, as it had originally been, simply the day of the baptism of Christ and a day for general baptism.⁷⁶

The Roman liturgy combines with the chief mystery of the Feast of the Epiphany^{76a} the commemoration of the baptism of Christ in a subordinate position and the celebration of the marriage of Christ and Ecclesia. Piero's conflation of Eastern and Western liturgies underscores his theme of unity.

But Piero's linking of the Magi with the baptism, besides having the traditional religious significance, had also a contemporary relevance concerning the Eastern members of the Council. Their presence provides a renewed recognition of the established faith, and as such it emphasizes the primacy of Rome. In the *Decree for the Greeks*, 1439, the Council of Florence, whose main object was the re-unification of the schismatic East with the Mother Church, declared that the Holy Apostolic See and the Roman Pontiff have primacy in the whole world.⁷⁷

In using a sacramental framework to suggest politico-religious union, Piero was certainly aware of and utilized the theological tradition established by Orosius, according to which a connection was made between secular and spiritual peace, and between the sacrament and the feast we have just been discussing.

Caesar returned as conquerer from the East and entered the city in triple triumph on the sixth of January. It was at this time too that he was first saluted as Augustus. This title signifies that such seizure of the supreme rule over the world was legitimate. This day . . . is the same day on which we observe the Epiphany. As Mommsen says, this means for Orosius the celebration of the establishment of the sacrament of Baptism.⁷⁸

The reunification of the Church was a reenactment of the original extension of this twofold peace under the legitimate supreme rule of Rome. Piero emphasizes the idea of Roman primacy suggested by the Magi: he places his baptism in the valley of the Tiber, on the outskirts of the town of San Sepolcro.⁷⁹ The Tiber, as it descends into the valley, mirrors in its course those Eastern delegates whose participation in the salutary work of the Church is only a reflection in that river which is inevitably identified with Rome.

THE CENTRAL GROUP

The central group in Piero's painting—Christ, St. John and a catechumen—concretize the cycle of redemption established by the angels and solicit the continuing participation of the faithful in the miracle of salvation. The perspective of Piero's river descending into the valley elucidates the essential

function of Baptism as the ritual inauguration of the action of Christ as Savior. Piero moves from this initiation to the conclusion of His action, which lies in the Holy Sepulchre, figured by the representation of Piero's town of Borgo San Sepolcro.⁸⁰

But as the Baptism is a paradoxical mystery, bringing both death and rebirth, so Piero's river seems to suggest that it flows both ways. It is halted in its course by the command of Christ, and a shelf of dry land is visible beneath Christ's feet. Stemming from our space and our sin, the river carries Christ to the Holy Sepulchre; in reverse, as prefigured in the Miracle of the Jordan,⁸¹ the river illusionistically emanates from the door of the Holy Sepulchre and emerging from the valley extends to our space the grace of eternal salvation.⁸²

It is interesting to ask if the catechumen figures in this dual scheme. His covered head arrests his gesture so that we cannot certainly determine its direction—it might suggest both the putting off of the mortality of the old Adam and the pulling on of the new immortality in Christ.⁸³

Piero exploits the monastic dedication of the priory of San Giovanni, the topographic location of the town of San Sepolcro, and the contemporary event of the Council of Florence to express the fundamental rite of Christianity and the means of its implementation. Yet his painting, which renders the *illuminatio* of the baptism in the naturalistic terms of a light-filled canvas, makes no demands for extra-liturgical considerations. In its function as an altarpiece it maintains liturgical unity. The Magnificat antiphon in the second vespers of the Feast of the Epiphany mentions all three episodes that Piero restructures and makes newly valid: "Tribus miraculis ornatum diem sanctum colimus: hodie stella Magos duxit ad praesepe: hodie vinum ex aqua factum est ad nuptias: hodie in Iordane a Joanne Christus baptizari voluit, ut salvaret nos, alleluia. We keep this day holy in honor of three miracles: this day a star led the Wise Men to the manger; this day water was turned into wine at the marriage feast; this day Christ chose to be baptized by John in the Jordan, for our salvation, alleluia." It is rare for liturgy to be served with such intellectual acumen and such fortuitous incident as Piero's conception provides.

On the basis of this analysis, it may be possible to date Piero's painting to about 1440,⁸⁴ when the decrees of the Council of Florence were established. Certainly a work for the main altar of a priory to St. John the Baptist, which was in a territory of the Holy See until 1441⁸⁵ (when it was sold to Florence by Eugenius IV to defer Council expenses), would reflect those proceedings. It does not seem likely that the painting could date much later, since Italy

would soon learn of the disgruntled reception of the Eastern delegations when they returned home and know that these latest attempts at concord had proved as precarious as their imperial prototypes.

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I am indebted to Colin Eisler, under whose supervision this study was begun, for his continuing interest and enthusiastic support, and to Staale Sinding-Larsen for liturgical bibliography and references to material which served to make more valid various themes and for reading, discussing and advising me on many aspects of this paper. I also acknowledge with gratitude the references given by Irving Lavin and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin. While Mrs. Lavin does not occur with all my conclusions she read and annotated my manuscript and made many worthwhile suggestions. Finally, I wish to thank my editor, Jerrold Lanes, for the bibliographical help he provided when this study was already well under way and for criticisms that made a significant contribution to bringing my manuscript to its final form.

¹ The baptism by infusion was established as a formula in the fourteenth century. For a discussion of earlier formulas, see Karl Kunstle, *Ikongraphie der Christlichen Kunst*, Freiburg, 1928, I, pp. 375f.

² Joseph Strzygowski, *Ikongraphie der Taufe Christi*, Munich, 1885, p. 24, discusses the Byzantine prototype for undressing bathers along with Christ.

³ The observation that Piero's angels uniquely lack a traditional function is made by Charles de Tolnay, "Conceptions religieuses dans la peinture de Piero della Francesca," *Arte Antica e Moderna*, 1963, XXIII, p. 214.

⁴ See Roberto Longhi, *Piero della Francesca*, Florence, 1963, p. 19.

⁵ The early documentation is given by Martin Davies in his catalogue of *The Earlier Italian Schools*, National Gallery, London, 1951, pp. 332-333.

⁶ Although the painting is claimed to be a Graziani commission (G. Magherini Graziani, *L'Arte a Città di Castello*, Città di Castello, 1897, p. 205) and the arms on the predella correspond with the Graziani arms given in Ferdinand Ughelli, *Italia Sacra*, Venice, 1818, III, p. 199, the Graziani family is not adequately documented in connection with the priory of San Giovanni Battista. It is possible that the Graziani commission pertains only to the later parts of the polyptych, not to Piero's painting.

⁷ F. Hartlaub, *Matteo da Siena*, Strassburg, 1910, p. 47.

⁸ M. Logan, "Due Dipinti inediti di Matteo di Siena," *Rassegna d'Arte*, 1905, V, No. 4, p. 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Longhi, p. 31.

¹¹ Tolnay, p. 215.

¹² Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca*, London and New York, 1951, p. 204.

¹³ Longhi, p. 31.

¹⁴ Tolnay, p. 214.

¹⁵ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, St. Louis, 1955, p. 355.

¹⁶ St. Ambrose, ed and trans. by Bernard Botte, *Des Sacrements, des Mystères*, Paris, 1961, VII, 24: "Quand donc tu es baigné tu prends la ressemblance de Sa mort et de Sa sépulture, tu reçois le sacrement de Sa croix."

¹⁷ Michael Buchberger, *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Freiburg, 1937, IX, "Taufe Christi," cols. 1018-1020.

¹⁸ St. Bonaventure, seeking to unify the various opinions of the actual time of the institution of this sacrament, states that according to the matter, Baptism was instituted when Christ was baptized; according to the form, when He rose from the dead and gave it form (Matt. 28:19); according to the effect, when He suffered, for it received its power from His Passion; and according to the purpose when He foretold its necessity and its benefit (John 3:5). See Ott, pp. 351-352.

¹⁹ Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, Notre Dame, paperback ed., 1966, p. 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

²¹ Ott, p. 52.

²² Buchberger, cols. 1018-20.

²³ Daniélou, p. 47.

²⁴ Paul A. Underwood, "The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 5,

1950, p. 55. He includes an inscription from the Lateran Font (before 440 A.D.): "From her virginal womb Mother Church gives birth in the stream to her children whom she conceives through the breath of God."

²⁵ Daniélou, p. 49.

²⁶ Ott, p. 310.

²⁷ Daniélou, p. 45.

²⁸ Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and their Mission*, New York, 1957, p. 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, note 17.

³¹ According to the *Decretum pro Armenis*, "Principalis causa, ex qua baptismus virtutem habet, sit sancta Trinitas, instrumentalis autem sit minister, qui tradit exterius sacramentum. For as the principal cause from which baptism derives its virtue is the Holy Trinity, the instrumental cause is the minister who performs the externals of the sacrament." See Joseph Neuner and Heinrich Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, New York, 1967, p. 268.

³² Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, pp. 214–215. Serapie der Nersessian, "The Homilies of Gregory of Nazianza," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 16, 1962, p. 201, discusses the visual tradition of Christ as an angel in an illustration for the oration on Easter, "On Holy Baptism."

³³ By way of an example of this common idea see Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Augustine*, Grand Rapids, 1956, p. 65, from Book III, Chap. II of *On the Trinity*.

³⁴ See Wolfgang Braunfels, *Die Heilige Dreifaltigkeit*, Düsseldorf, 1954, p. xvii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ There is a precedent in early Christian art for Abraham with the angels accompanying a baptismal scene. See Heinrich Schipperges, *Dreifaltigkeit*, Freiburg, 1954, p. 27.

³⁷ Rublev's Trinity (the picture is in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) is dressed in simple Greek khitons, alluding to the biblical account of the manifestation to Abraham only through the cup on the table; the tree and the house of Abraham are in the background. Victor Lasareff, "La Trinité d'André Roublev," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, December 1952, pp. 292–298, notes that the Trinity was interpreted by the theologians in Rublev's circle not only as the representation of a single God in three Persons but also as a symbol of faith, hope and love. This work of the first quarter of the fifteenth century became the object of innumerable representations; it is not unlikely that a reproduction of such a popular icon would have been transported with a member of the Russian delegation to the Council of Florence. Rublev's work is conveniently reproduced in H. W. Janson, *History of Art*, New York, 1967, pl. 288.

³⁸ See John B. MacHarg, *Visual Representations of the Trinity*, New York, 1917, p. 11.

³⁹ This distinction, which appears, for example, in the Utrecht Psalter, has an imperial prototype; see Ernst Kantorowicz, "Quintity of Winchester," in *Selected Studies*, New York, 1965, p. 115.

⁴⁰ According to the Hymn, *Exite, Sion Filiae*: "Christi rubescens sanguine/Aculeos mutat rosis."

⁴¹ Nicholas of Cusa's ideas on the unity of the Trinity in his *On Learned Ignorance* may have been instrumental for Piero's concept. Nicholas writes (Book I, Chap. V, p. 19): "If there were several eternal beings one would possess something which another lacked and so none of them would be perfect, in other words there would exist an eternal which was not eternal at all, since it is imperfect." Book I, Chap. XX, p. 44: "The Father in consequence is not prior to the Son and the Son posterior to Him; the Son and the Holy Ghost are second and third respectively without being posterior." See also chapter X and note 61, below. Quotations are from the translation by Germaine Heron, London, 1954. The influence of Nicholas on Piero's circle is noted by G. N. Fasola, introduction to *De Prospettiva Pingendi*, Florence, 1942, p. 18.

⁴² Although Piero's main objective is a unified representation of the Trinity, he is constrained to include the Dove by the biblical account of Christ's baptism (Matt. 3:16).

This duplication is liturgically admissible, although ordinarily there would be no particular reason to represent the Trinity in a painting where the Godhead is already present in the Dove and in Christ and in God the Father in the roundel above the panel. But the theological distinction between the nature of the Trinity and the *opus ad extra* of one of its members accounts well enough for such a pictorial arrangement. See Ott, p. 72 for a discussion of the *ad extra* works of the Trinity that are common to all three Persons. This duplication of the Persons of the Trinity, although rare in the West, is very common in later Eastern art: see Kantorowicz, p. 105. In the fifteenth century it is found, for example, in the Ghent Altarpiece: see Staale Sinding-Larsen, "A Re-reading of the Sistine Ceiling," *Acta ad Archeologiam Pertinentia*, IV, 1969, p. 146, note 1. A similar duplication occurs in a crucifix representing God with a cross-halo above the crucified Christ, to be published in a forthcoming monograph on Titian's *Triumph of Faith* by Staale Sinding-Larsen.

⁴³ See the coin reproduced in Ernst Kantorowicz, "Marriage Belt and Rings at Dumbarton Oaks," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 14, 1960, fig. 15.

The clasping of right hands, or *dextrarum iunctio*, which established Concordia, is generally defined as the ritual which unites two different beings whose status vis-à-vis each other is significantly affected: Richard Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art*, New York, 1963, p. 19. Such an iconography is not ideally suited to the Trinity, whose unity exists before time. This would account for Piero's careful choice of a gesture of agreement which does not depict an actual ceremony of concord: the handclasp of his Trinity affirms Concordia, it does not initiate it. And therefore it is not necessarily indicated by a right-hand gesture. In Ghiberti's *Solomon and Sheba* panel, where the handclasp signifies the unity of East and West, Solomon grasps in his left hand the right hand of the Queen. See note 69, below.

⁴⁴ Illustrated in M. Didron, *Iconographie Chrétienne*, Paris, 1843, p. 604.

⁴⁵ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, Venice, 1645, p. 100, illus. p. 102: "Concordia degli Antichi. I pomegranati presso a gli antichi significavano Concordia: perché tali devono essere gli animi concordi, & in tale unione tra sé stessi, come sono le granelle di questi pomi, dalla quale unione, nasce poi l'abondanza . . ." For a Roman imperial example, see Mattingly, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, London, 1923ff., III, pl. XLVI, fig. 14.

⁴⁶ See for example St. Leo the Great, Sermon LXIV, "It is Christ himself, who, born of the Holy Spirit from a virgin (Mother), impregnates His pure Church, so that through the baptismal birth countless multitudes of children in God are born" (J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 54, p. 356B); and again, "And for every man coming to rebirth, the water of baptism is an image of the virginal womb, whereby the same Holy Spirit who also impregnated the Virgin impregnates the font" (*Patrologia Latina*, 54, p. 206A). (The annunciation to the Virgin appears in roundels above Piero's *Baptism*.)

In the same sermon Leo views the baptismal font as a symbol of the womb of the Virgin. Thus the cycle of redemption, which begins in the annunciation to the Virgin, ends in Christ's death and resurrection and the imparting of new life to the followers of Christ through Baptism. The font is viewed also as the womb of Mother Church. See Joseph Lechner and Ludwig Eisenhofer, *The Liturgy of the Roman Rite*, New York, 1961, p. 208.

⁴⁷ The citation is from Isaiah 61:10. Lechner and Eisenhofer, p. 405, with references to Tertullian, Ambrose and others, mention the early Christian practice of crowning the bridal couple. This practice continues today in the Greek Church.

The baptismal liturgy states, "Today has the Church been united with her heavenly bridegroom for in the Jordan Christ washed from her her sins . . .:" Louis Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety*, Notre Dame, 1955. Tertullian also uses the frequent metaphor of marriage for the sacrament of Baptism: "The flesh naturally follows the soul, which is now wedded to the spirit, and as part of the wedding dowry it is no longer the slave of the soul but the servant of the spirit: "Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*, and Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. by R. Arbersmann, Sr. E. Joseph Daly and E. A. Quain, New York, 1950, p. 273.

⁴⁸ Kantorowicz, "Marriage Belt . . .," p. 5.

⁴⁹ André Grabar, *Martyrium*, Paris, 1946, I, p. 225.

⁵⁰ Kantorowicz, "Marriage Belt . . .," p. 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵³ For references to Constantinian Concordia coins see Grabar, I, p. 223, notes 2 and 3.

⁵⁴ Grabar, I, pp. 223-224. In calling his church Concordia, "Constantine was making a triumphal gesture signifying the restoration of the unity of the Roman world, which had been divided into two opposed halves, and at the same time was establishing a parallel between the harmony prevailing on earth under his rule and the celestial harmony maintained by Christ:" Wayne Dines, "The First Christian Palace Church Type," *Marsyas*, XI, 1962-64, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Coins of contemporary Renaissance figures in the gesture of Concordia, after the antique, are illustrated in George Habich, *Die Medaillen der Italienischen Renaissance*, Stuttgart & Berlin, n.d., LVIII, 3 and LXXVI, 17. See our Fig. 10. G. F. Hill, *A Corpus of Italian Medals in the Renaissance*, London, 1930, fig. 753, reproduces Guacialoti's copy.

⁵⁶ Ott, p. 53.

⁵⁷ Gustave Soulier, *L'Influence Orientale dans la Peinture Toscane*, Paris, 1924, p. 168, confirms the Eastern headdress of the Council members in the bronze doors of Filarete, noting that Piero, who was in Florence in 1439 at the moment of the ceremonies occasioned by the arrival of the Emperor, remembered what he saw and evoked it in the Entombment from the predella of the *Madonna della Misericordia*. Jean Babelon, "Jean

Paléologue et Ponce Pilate," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, December 1930, p. 370, quotes from Venturi that Piero "fece allora tesoro di tutta la ricchezza dei costumi orientali come se potessero servirgli ad ambientare storicamente i fatti biblici, gli avvenimenti evangelici e le legende cristiane." Pisanello, too, drew these Council members; see James A. Fasanelli, "Some notes on Pisanello and the Council of Florence," *Master Drawings*, III, 1965, pp. 36-42.

⁵⁸ Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge, England, 1951, pp. 193-194.

⁵⁹ While the Greeks were in Florence the Feast of St. John the Baptist, the patron of the Florentine city-state, was celebrated. The commune made a present to the Emperor in honor of the feast (Gill, p. 283). This, together with the fact that Eugenius IV sold Borgo San Sepolcro to repay the Florentines for expenses incurred by the Council, suggests the possibility that a painting of St. John baptizing Christ may render homage to John Paleologus and to his patron saint, under whose patronage the Council reached accord in Florence. The further reasons for the choice of a Baptism are suggested in the paragraphs below.

⁶⁰ Gill, pp. 412-415.

⁶¹ In 1437 Nicholas of Cusa had entered the direct service of Pope Eugenius IV and was employed in negotiations with the Eastern Church, which culminated in the reunion of East and West. Nicholas' book *On Learned Ignorance*, which defines his position on the unity and equality of the Trinity, was completed at Cusa in 1440. He explains in a letter to the Lord Cardinal Julian that understanding came to him when he was returning by sea from Greece, "... when I was led ... to grasp the incomprehensible ...:" Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, ed. cit., p. 173. See note 41 regarding Nicholas' concept of the procession.

⁶² Gill, pp. 303-304.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 262, for a discussion of the Eastern denial and then acceptance of the Latin form of Baptism, as by the Patriarch Gregory.

⁶⁵ Ott, p. 310.

⁶⁶ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, New York, 1956, p. 175.

⁶⁷ The suitability of a Baptism of Christ for the dissemination of Trinitarian doctrine is established: from the eleventh century the Baptism was represented more often than any other New Testament scene, not, as in earlier art, to draw our attention to the sacrament of Baptism, but because of the revelation of the Trinity associated with it: Kunstle, I, p. 378.

⁶⁸ Eugenius IV, who convened the Council of Florence, drafted the bull which defined marriage as a sacrament symbolizing the union between Christ and Ecclesia. "Septimum est sacramentum matrimonii; quod est signum conjunctionis Christi et Ecclesia secundum apostolum ...:" see Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, London, 1894-1899, VI-VII, p. 274.

⁶⁹ Richard Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton, 1956, p. 181, interprets the significance of Ghiberti's handclasp of Solomon and Sheba on the Gates of Paradise as alluding to the reconciliation of Greek and Latin churches—Solomon representing the Pope and Sheba the Byzantine emperor. He cites the Jarves Cassone, of a later date, in which John Paleologus is in Sheba's train along with figures in oriental garb, and Sheba wears the Paleologan hat, while Solomon wears the papal tiara (our Fig. 14). The handclasp of Concordia is also identified with this agreement between the Churches by Vasari's account of Giovio's description of the medal of John Paleologus, the reverse of which he says showed the cross of Christ upheld by two hands "verbigrazia dalla latina e dalla greca:" Vasari, *Le Vite* ... ed. Milanesi, III, Florence, 1878, pp. 10-11.

⁷⁰ Nicholas of Cusa writes (*On Learned Ignorance*, ed. cit., Book III, Chap. XII, pp. 166-167, 170) of the faithful who are united to Christ: "Now this union is the Church, the gathering together of many into one, as the many members are gathered into one body, each in his own degree ... Whence all diversities that become united take their unity from ... Christ." See also Renata Gradi, *Il Pensiero del Cusano*, Padua, 1941, p. 94.

⁷¹ St. Gregory the Great, who appears in the predella, speaks of the pomegranate as an emblem of the unity of the Church: F. R. Webber, *Church Symbolism*, Cleveland, 1938, p. 78.

⁷² Hugo Kehrer, *Die Heiligen Drei Könige*, Strassburg, 1904, II, p. 17, notes that the number of Magi fluctuates in early Christian art between two, four and six. The use of four representatives here may suggest the four patriarchs who follow the Papacy. Gill, p. 284, notes that the *Acta Graeca* affirms "About the primacy of the Pope, [that] we profess that he is supreme Pontiff and representative and guardian and vicar of Christ, shepherd and teacher of all Christians, that he directs and governs the Church of God, without infringement of the privileges and rights of the patriarchs of the East, he of Constantinople to be second after the Pope, then the Alexandrine, after him the one of Antioch, then the one of Jerusalem."

⁷³ See Pietro Bargellini, *The Medici Palace and the Frescoes of Benozzo Gozzoli*, Florence, n.d., p. 23; and André Chastel, *Art et Humanisme à Florence au Temps de Laurent le Magnifique*, Paris, 1961, p. 241.

⁷⁴ Kehrer, II, p. 94, characterizes this conflation as a Syrian-Byzantine collective type. For Orosius and St. Jerome, the Epiphany solemnizes the baptism of Christ—it is the day of his *apparatio*: although he was already so, he was not yet known to the world. See Theodore E. Mommsen, “Aponius & Orosius on the significance of the Epiphany,” *Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, Princeton, 1955, p. 106.

⁷⁵ Kunstle, p. 376.

⁷⁶ Eisenhofer and Lechner, pp. 224–226.

^{76a} Matteo di Giovanni’s roundel of the Annunciation of course alludes to the Nativity.

⁷⁷ Joseph Neuner and Heinric Roos, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, New York, 1967, p. 206. In this connection we may note that the iconography of Matteo’s panels, which apparently were done with an understanding of the significance of Piero’s work, include side panels of Peter and Paul. Perhaps in this context it may be considered that the Feast of Peter and Paul, symbols of unity, is also the feast of Rome; this would explain the representing of the saints who recall political unity. Charles Pietri, “Concordia Apostolorum et Renovatio Urbis,” *Melanges d’Archéologie et d’Histoire*, École Française de Rome, 73, 1961, p. 313, referring to Orosius, notes that Peter and Paul, symbols of concord, protect the unity of the Empire. A visual tradition exists of Christ crowning Peter and Paul, who manifest their agreement: Pietri, p. 286.

Gill, p. 284, notes that the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul fell two days after the Greek proclamation of Roman primacy, which “would be an excellent and very suitable occasion for the conjoint celebration of union.”

⁷⁸ Mommsen, p. 104.

⁷⁹ *Dizionario Geografico Fisico, Storia della Toscana*, ed. by Emanuele Repetti, Florence, 1843, p. 118, notes that the town of San Sepolcro “se trova alla sinistra del Tevere.”

Pietri, p. 319, says that the Roman activities of Peter and Paul were seen as a kind of purification, effacing the traces of the bloody discord of Romulus and Remus. The city now was delivered and the Tiber consecrated as a holy River: “Tybris sacer ex utraque ripa inter sacrata dum fluit sepulcra.”

A regional setting was similarly conceived by Masolino for the *Baptism of Christ* at Castiglione Olona: see Kunstle, p. 380.

⁸⁰ Piero’s transposition of the baptism of Christ to San Sepolcro and the Tiber is theologically justifiable by the fact that the river has been consecrated. In addition, not only was the town named for relics from the Holy Sepulchre it supposedly contained, but the Cathedral was modeled on the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Moslems at the time of the construction of the Cathedral of San Sepolcro. See D. Ivanno Ricci, *L’Abbazia Camaldolese e la Cattedrale di San Sepolcro*, San Sepolcro, 1942, p. 45.

⁸¹ Fernand Cabrol, *Dictionnaire de’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, II, Pt. 1, col. 349, cites the Chronique d’Alexandrie (seventh century) “. . . Jésus . . . fut baptisé . . . par Jean dans le fleuve du Jourdain, et le Jourdain rétrograda en arrière.” This enigmatic detail is explained by comparison with the passage of the Red Sea, which prefigured the Baptism, which is itself a reference to Psalms. See Louis Réau, *Iconographie de L’Art Chrétien*, Paris, 1957, II, Pt. 2, p. 298, who notes further the reference to Psalms 114:3: “The Jordan flows backward”.

⁸² Underwood, pp. 95–96, refers to the Dumbarton Oaks plaque and others in which the Holy Sepulchre is denoted as being “life giving” or the “fountain of our resurrection.”

⁸³ Galatians 3:27: “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

⁸⁴ Dates suggested for the *Baptism* span several decades, from Longhi’s 1440–45, because of its affinity to the circle of Domenico Veneziano and Masolino; to Clark’s 1450–55, owing to the difficulty of placing it before the *Misericordia* or *Saint Sebastian*; to the mid-1460s, by Hartlaub and Logan. Creighton Gilbert, *Change in Piero della Francesca*, New York, 1968, p. 33, calls it a mature work, dating it *ca.* 1460–64.

⁸⁵ J. Mitarelli and D. Anselmo Costadoni, *Annales Camaldulenses*, Venice, 1762, VII, p. 202, publish the sale document.

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