

The Second Adam

The new Adam brings the blessings of grace and eternal life.

BY GERALD O'COLLINS

THE PAINTINGS ON THE WALLS of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence show Masaccio (1401-28) at his artistic and spiritual best—not least in the way he links Adam and Eve with Christ. Driven from the Garden of Eden, our first parents are in despair. Weeping and weighed down with terrible pain and loss, they move along a path of sorrows. But the same path brings them toward the next scene: Christ on the shores of Lake Galilee surrounded by his apostles, who will found the church. In his own brilliant fashion, Masaccio follows a tradition that reaches back to St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (Ch. 15) and his Letter to the Romans (Ch. 5), the contrast between the first Adam, who initiated the whole story of human sin and the new Adam, who has brought the blessings of grace and eternal life.

Calling Christ the second Adam is a solidly traditional practice. In the second century St. Irenaeus developed the differences between the first and last Adam. By referring twice to Adam, an early liturgical text, the *Exultet* or Easter Proclamation (still sung at the Easter Vigil) implies Christ's role as the second or new Adam. In the medieval mystery plays, the actor who played Adam usually reappeared to play Christ—a vivid way of connecting the first and second Adam. A contrast between the damage done by the first Adam and the gifts of the second Adam entered into the Council of Trent's 1547 decree on the justification of sinful human beings. Right down to the 21st century, images of Adam and Christ are still wonderfully joined in icons used in the official liturgy of the Eastern Christian tradition and in the decoration of its churches.

This iconographic tradition links creation, which reached its climax in the making of the original Adam and Eve, with the redemption effected by the second Adam. Adam and Eve symbolize the human condition in its glory and misery. After being made in the image and likeness of God, they lapsed into sin and lost paradise. Eastern icons show the last Adam descending into the dark pit of the underworld and releasing from their long bondage Adam,

Eve and innumerable others waiting for redemption in the "limbo of the Fathers."

In some of those icons Christ carries the wooden cross on which he has died, and so reminds us of the tree from which Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit. Even more explicitly, a hymn by the Latin poet Venantius Fortunatus (died ca. 610), *Crux Fidelis* ("faithful cross"), links the tree of life with the tree of death in the great drama of creation, fall and redemption. The preface for the feast of the Holy Cross (Sept. 14) declares, "Death came from a tree, life was to spring from a tree."

AN ENDURING LEGEND helped to relate in this way creation and redemption. The tree from which Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit was given a story. Through the centuries it came to be identified with the tree of Calvary on which Christ died to save the world. Piero della Francesca (d. 1492), in his fresco cycle "The Story of the True Cross" in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy, followed this legend and used the cross to link the Adam of Genesis with Christ, the new Adam.

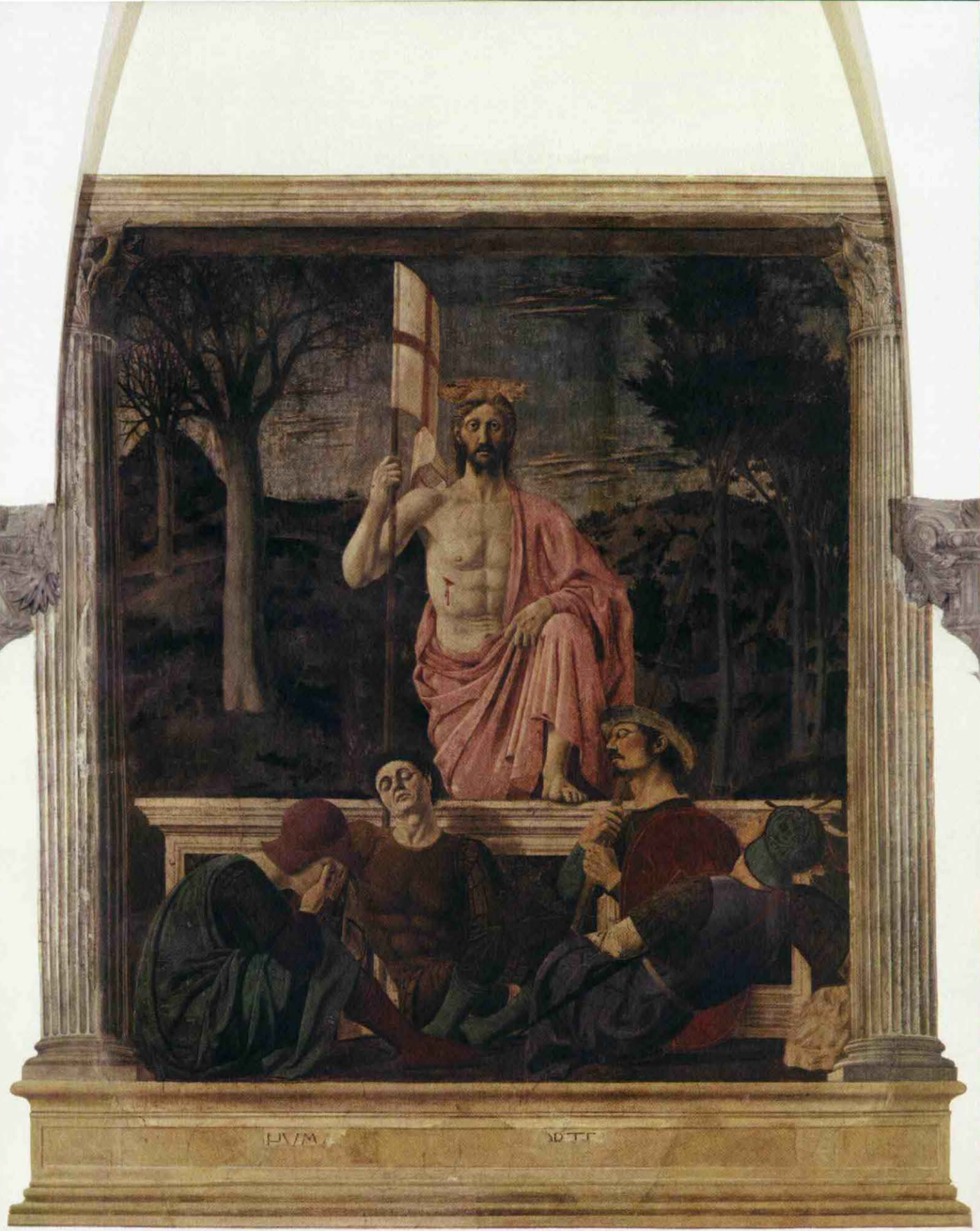
According to another legend, Calvary was the place where Adam was buried. Christian artists have at times placed his skull, and occasionally even his skeleton, at the foot of the cross. Some artists pictured Adam and Eve standing together in a sarcophagus below the cross. One representation even has a tiny figure of Adam holding a chalice to receive the first drops of blood falling from Christ on the cross.

Christian architects and builders have made the same connection. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem has its Adam chapel below the place of Christ's crucifixion. Piero della Francesca himself was encouraged to link Adam and Christ by what he had seen in a sanctuary in the Church of San Sepolcro in Rome: a sculptured scene of Calvary stood above a chapel that bore the name of Adam.

In connecting Adam and Christ, no work of literature

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"Resurrection of Christ," by Piero della Francesca (1463-65), in the Civic Museum, San Sepolcro, Rome.



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has surpassed "Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness" by John Donne (d. 1631):

*We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's Cross and Adam's tree, stood in one
place;
Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the Last Adam's blood my soul embrace.*


A major reference to the second Adam turns up several decades later in *Paradise Regained*, by John Milton (d. 1674). After expanding the Genesis story of Adam and Eve into the 12 books of *Paradise Lost*, Milton focused the four-book sequel entirely on the temptation in the wilderness. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus, the second Adam, succeeds in resisting temptation.

The images of Adam and Eve and the image of Christ the new Adam have been linked in art, literature, legend and liturgical traditions to hold together creation and redemption. To be sure, considering Christ as the new or second Adam is not the only way to understand and interpret what he did for us in his life, death and resurrection. But it is one way that has proved enduringly successful, from St. Paul down to John Henry Newman's "Dream of Gerontius" ("A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came") and beyond. Generations of Christians have found here light and strength, and in three particular ways.

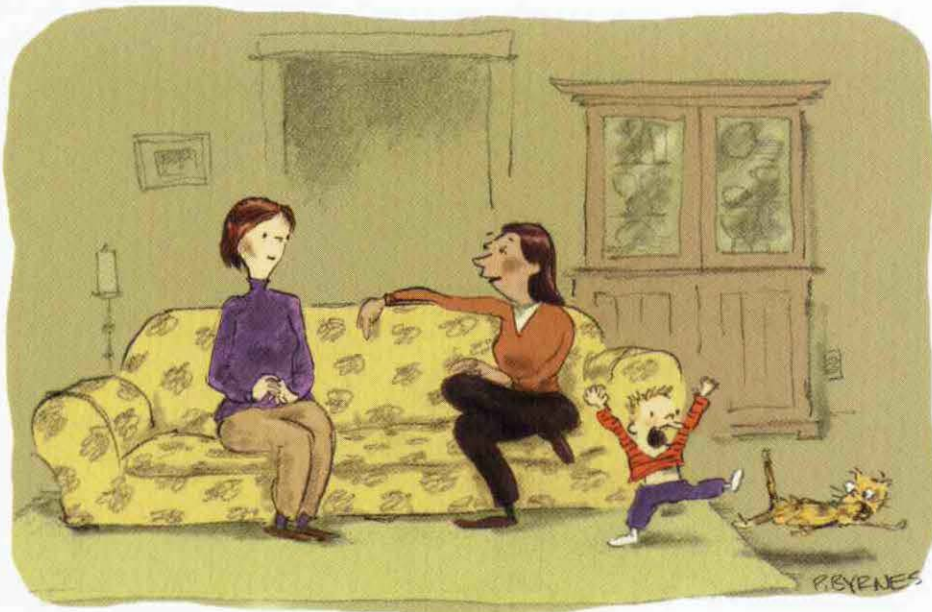
First, the Adam/Christ contrast vividly reminds us that we are saved not merely through divine power "from the outside." By the loving kindness of God's plan, we are also saved "from the inside," through the incarnate Son of God, who is our brother. The two figures in Masaccio's pitiless scene seem to have lost paradise forever. But they are on a path that leads to Christ, the second Adam who will heal and transform human destiny for all eternity.

Second, this contrast shows the deep link between the whole of creation, in which Adam and Eve are the high point and God's intended stewards, and redemption. What Christ did for us in his glorious resurrection from the dead involves the whole created world and our stewardship for the earth. Eastern icons of Christ's descent to the dead hint at this link. Huge rocks, which have been shattered to open Christ's passage down into the "limbo of the Fathers," suggest that the Easter transformation includes the whole world.

Third, Eastern icons depicting Christ's meeting with Adam and Eve show large crowds of people standing behind them. In liberating and raising Adam and Eve, the second Adam raises all humanity. This way of representing Christ's redemptive work differs dramatically from a familiar painting of the resurrection by Piero della Francesca to be found in San Sepolcro and acclaimed by Aldous Huxley as "the finest picture in the world." The victorious Christ stands majestically alone above the prostrate soldiers. No one else is present. The Eastern icons do much better by introducing Adam, Eve and their companions to indicate vividly that the resurrection is not only an individual victory for Christ but also the saving event for all the world.

Through the sequence of his frescoes Masaccio pointed Adam and Eve in the direction of Christ, the second Adam. He drove home the connection by placing diagonally opposite the tormented figures of Adam and Eve a scene of St. Peter baptizing a group of neophytes. The shame and loss of the fall into sin do not have the last word. Incorporation through baptism into the last Adam, now risen from the dead, brings the new life of present grace and future glory. 

Without Guile



"He's really quite gifted, just not in any verifiable way."

CARTOON BY PAT BYRNES

