The *Painted Cross*
by Nicola di Ulisse of Siena

- ◈ **Nicola di Ulisse of Siena**
- ◈ **Tempera on wood**
- ◈ **C. 1472**
- ◈ **St. Eutizio Abbey in Valcastoriana, Preci (Perugia)**

The cross of Nicola di Ulisse is reduced to its essentiality to facilitate the concentration of the monks' meditation. Bright blue colours the entire outline, bringing the cross in which Christ's body is confined back to the nakedness of the wood, made recognisable by the grain. The figures of the mourners disappear. Only the mystical Pelican remains, caught in the act of spreading its great wings over the nest where three little ones await the extreme sacrifice of ripping open its chest to ensure their salvation. The three-lobed terminations that define the contours of the ends of the cross appear to be a development of the models adopted by Giovanni di Paolo (1398-1482).

The example realised in the second quarter of the 15th century for the church of St. Peter in Ovile, or the cross that stands out in the central panel of the decomposed polyptych, signed and dated 1440, from the monastery of the Osservanza in Siena, are particularly noteworthy. Similar attention is paid to the anatomical rendering of Christ's body, with the fingers of the hands blocked by the pressure of the nails, and the chiaroscuro note in the reproduction of the junction of the collarbones. Even the diaphanous and delicate depiction of the loincloth betrays a common feeling that, in the St. Eutizio Crucifix, is embellished with a refined beaded hem.

The exquisite poetry of Giovanni di Paolo was a model and a challenge for Nicola di Ulisse. In his painting, Nicola often searches for that almost dreamlike world, but ends up expressing himself on a more everyday register. He does not manage to match the very high quality of Giovanni's works, from which he takes forms and style, but he brings them back ...to earth. And in this translation 'from the divine to the human', from elegant grace to material heaviness, he is also influenced by the manner of Bartolomeo di Tommaso da Foligno (1408-1454), particularly in his `graphic' volumetry and synthetic line. With the latter, in fact, he had worked in Norcia in April 1442 on the multi-handed decoration of the lost frescoes of the tribune of St. Augustine. Umbria had by then become his adopted region.