

# The Pelican, symbol of The Eucharist.



“Pie Pelicane” is referred to in St Thomas Aquinas’ hymn ‘Adoro te devote’, an allusion to the medieval legend of the mother pelican wounding herself by piercing her own breast with her beak to feed her baby pelicans with her blood.

The pelican symbolizes Jesus our Redeemer who gave his life for our redemption and the atonement he made through His passion and death. We were dead to sin and have found new life through the Blood of Christ. Moreover, Jesus continues to feed us with his body and blood in the Holy Eucharist.

Reference to the pelican and its Christian meaning are found in Renaissance literature: Dante (1321) in the "Paridiso" of his *Divine Comedy* refers to Christ as "our Pelican." John Lyly in his *Euphues* (1606) wrote, "Pelicane who striketh blood out of its owne bodye to do others good." Shakespeare (1616) in *Hamlet* wrote, "To his good friend thus wide, I'll ope my arms / And, like the kind, life-rendering pelican / Repast them with my blood." John Skelton (1529) in his *Armorie of Birds*, wrote, "Then sayd the Pellycan: When my Byrdts be slayne / With my bloude I them revyve. Scripture doth record / The same dyd our Lord / And rose from deth to lyve."

When tabernacles were suspended over the altar, they were sometimes shaped like pelicans: for example, Durham Cathedral, to which was attached a Benedictine monastery prior to the suppression of the monasteries by Henry VIII (1538), had the Blessed Sacrament reserved in a tabernacle fashioned in silver like a pelican and suspended over the High Altar.

In St Thomas Aquinas’ hymn "Adoro te devote," the sixth verse reads:

“Pie pellicane, Iesu Domine,  
me immundum munda tuo sanguine;  
cuius una stilla salvum facere  
totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.”

St Thomas Aquinas, (1227-1274: “Adore te devote”. Verse 6.

“O loving Pelican! O Jesu, Lord!  
Unclean I am, but cleanse me in Thy Blood;  
Of which a single drop, for sinners spilt,  
Is ransom for a world's entire guilt.”

Translation, Edward Caswall (1814-1878): “O Godhead Hid”.