

Pelicans and Blood (*August 2017*)

July, the month consecrated to the Precious Blood of Jesus, has just ended, and it is worth meditating briefly on a curious image very dear to medieval piety: Jesus as Divine Pelican. In Fr Edward Caswall's beautiful translation of S. Thomas Aquinas' hymn:

Pie Pelicane, Jesu Domine!
Me immundum munda tuo sanguine:
Cuius una stilla salvum facere
Totum mundum quit ab omne scelere.

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

Even though the Pelican was an unclean animal in the Old Testament law, excluded from the sacrificial rites of the Temple, and the great theologian Origen considered it being the image of petulant, ill-natured persons (because of its sharp beak), the pelican rapidly became a popular Christian symbol. It probably all started with S. Jerome who writes: “The pelican of the wilderness feeds on poisonous animals, such as snakes and crocodiles.” This view of the pelican eating snakes – eternal symbol of the Devil – contributed to its identification with Christ who triumphed over the ancient enemy.

According to the prophets Isaiah (34.10-11) and Zephaniah (2,14), the pelican lives in the wilderness, on the ruins of destroyed cities. Perhaps for this reason, in the Psalms it appears as symbol of languishing: “I am like a pelican in the wilderness: I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the housetop.” (102,6-7) Christian piety soon interpreted it as Christ abandoned even by His disciples during His Passion.

But it was a widespread legend that finally confirmed the pelican as symbol of Christ. In one version of the legend, snakes, or the pelicans themselves, would could kill their young and then bring them back to life with their blood. In the more widespread version, pelicans were so devoted to caring for their young that, if there was no food, they would peck at their own breast and feed their blood to their children.

A 12th-century English illuminated manuscript resumes one of the versions of the ancient legend in these words: “On the third day, however, the mother bird, with a blow to her flank, opens up her side and lies on her young and lets her blood pour over the bodies of the dead, and so raises them from the dead. In a mystic sense, the pelican signifies Christ. The pelican lives in solitude, as Christ alone condescended to be born of a virgin without intercourse with a man. It is solitary, because it is free from sin, as also is the life of Christ. It weeps ceaselessly for its young, as Christ wept with pity when He raised Lazarus. Thus after three days it revives its young with its blood, as Christ saves us, whom He has redeemed with His own blood.” (The Aberdeen Bestiary)

Of course, today we know that pelicans do not offer their blood to their young. Nonetheless, the pelican has remained a beautiful symbol of the loving sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

And finally a little fact: since the image of pelicans became linked to the feast of Corpus Christi, both Corpus Christi Colleges (in Cambridge and in Oxford) have the pelican in their coats of arms!