



## SACRED WINDOWS

An invitation to gaze into heaven's stained glass windows  
Beauty, Truth and Goodness



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Sunday, July 25, 2021

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### Why the Pelican Symbolizes Devotion to the Precious Blood

Greetings!

Several times a year I walk across the bridge over a waterway near my house and watch pelicans feast on the teeming fish that come to the surface of the warm water. It always seemed to me that the pelican, with its bulbous head, crooked neck and expandable bill, was kind of an awkward bird, but really, it's not.

It is actually quite graceful in a way you don't appreciate **until you see it go fishing**. It swoops down to the water and glides at high speeds about six inches above the surface, and when it spots a school of fish to attack, it rises up to the height of the bridge and then plunges headlong into the water to catch its prey, making less of a splash than the best Olympic diver.

After the bird surfaces and swallows its catch, it spreads out its wings into the warm sun again and rises on the wind to repeat the run.

### Rich Christian Symbolism

The humble pelican is actually a rich Christian symbol **but not in the way you might think**. It would seem to be a perfect baptismal metaphor – plunging into water and rising again – but this is not the explicit symbolism.

Centuries ago, Christians adopted the symbol from surrounding pagan cultures that held the belief that the mother pelican, when she could find no food, struck her own breast and **nourished her young ones with her own blood**. In some versions of the legend, the mother pelican would sacrifice her own life through the giving of blood to make sure that her babies would live.

There is no evidence that mother pelicans actually do that (!), but the ideas of self-sacrifice and the shedding of blood inherent in that image were easily adopted into the Christian worldview as a metaphor for Christ's self-sacrifice and the shedding of His Blood to save our souls.

**If you ever spot this image** (at right) carved into a stone altar or emblazoned in the stained glass windows of a church, you will be looking at an expression of the Church's oldest devotion:



### The Precious Blood of Jesus

In the Eucharistic sacrifice, Catholics worship the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote a Eucharistic hymn called *Adoro Te Devote* (the English

version is *Humbly I Adore Thee*) in which he used the pelican image and marveled that **just one drop of Christ's Blood** has the power to cleanse the entire human race of its sin:

*Like what tender tales tell of the Pelican  
Bathe me, Jesus Lord, in what Thy Bosom ran  
Blood that but one drop of has the pow'r to win  
All the world forgiveness of its world of sin.*

Translations always lose something, which is the case here. The first verse of the original Latin is more explicit (*Pie pelicane, Jesu Domine*) identifying Jesus Himself as the Holy Pelican— **an enchanting image!**

The idea that just one drop of Christ's Blood could redeem the world is a stunning insight into the infinite value of God's greatest gift. It's also why Catholics have always been devoted to the Precious Blood. In fact, **the Church designates the whole month of July** to fostering deeper devotion to the Precious Blood of Christ. It is an old devotion, but it is far from outdated. It is actually rooted in the very suffering of Christ, which brings us back to the biblical witness:

*But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out. (John 19:33-34)*

Even though one drop of His Blood could atone for all the sins of humanity, Christ didn't give just one drop. According to the Gospel, **He gave ALL the Blood in His Body for us.**

Our Catholic devotion to the Precious Blood has borne great spiritual fruit through the centuries, particularly in the establishment of whole religious orders dedicated to reminding the world about the infinite value of Christ's sacrifice.

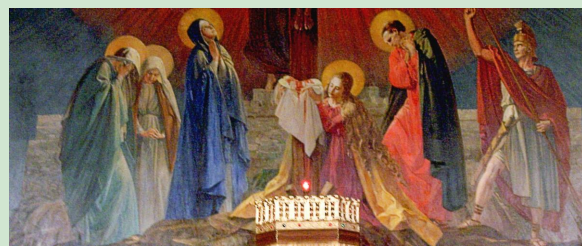
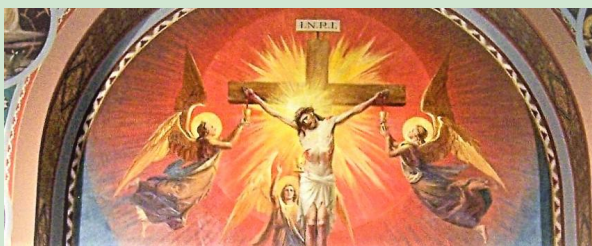
## A Monastery Dedicated to the Precious Blood



One of my favorite religious orders is the **Sister Adorers of the Precious Blood of Jesus**, who still maintain a grand monastery in the Borough of Brooklyn, NY, although their numbers are sadly dwindling. The massive convent is built of red brick, as if to reaffirm the central focus of their order's mission.

Walking up the central aisle to the sanctuary of their church you cannot help but be overcome by the impressive altarpiece, **every detail of which glorifies the Precious Blood of Jesus.**

If you look closely you will see the angels at His hands and side collecting each drop of the Precious Blood into mystical chalices. The Magdalene kneels at the base of the Cross catching the drops that fall from Christ onto a cloth.



## Apply the Blood

What can we do to increase our devotion to the Precious Blood this month? I recommend that we learn to pray the [Chaplet of the Precious Blood](#), which is a beautiful devotion for drawing us closer to the Lord's

Passion.

But the **most direct way to learn and practice this devotion** is to “apply” the Precious Blood to all the problems of life, similar to the way we apply ointment to a wound. In this devotion, however, our act is entirely spiritual.

We call to mind our intention, offer it to Christ Crucified, and we simply **ask Him to cover the person or situation with His Precious Blood**. We pray that He will

- *cleanse* the person of sin or
- *loosen the grip* of Satan on his or her soul.

And, of course, there are also situations in life which **seem totally hopeless**, and the Precious Blood applies to these too, as long as we persevere in prayer. We can ask the sacred Blood to

- *wash* the human indecency and sinfulness out of **any situation that needs inner purification** in order to be remedied.

All of this is done in the heart and, if possible, on our knees before the Lord in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

## The Pelican as Metaphor

Above all, each of us must live the spiritual lesson of the humble pelican in our own way. Self-sacrifice is not an abstract concept. **All sacrifice costs us something** – it is “precious” in the sense of being bought at a great price (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Our sacrifices for the well being of others may not be actual blood poured out like the martyrs’ in a literal, physical death, but we become more like Christ **when we pay the price of true charity** and give from our substance for others rather than from our surplus.

That is the lesson of the mother pelican. She must have learned it from the One who gave every drop of His Blood so that we might live.

## Feature Articles

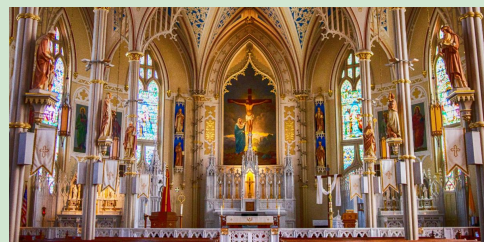
For Eucharistic devotion we have no greater witness than St. Thomas Aquinas who wrote the prayers and hymns of the feast of Corpus Christi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The verse we quoted above is one of seven verses from the fabulous *Adoro Te Devote* hymn that Thomas wrote at the behest of Pope Urban IV.

Our first feature, “[Thomas Aquinas’ Eucharistic Heart and Hymn](#)”, will give you a little background to this prayer with two videos of chant to make it come alive for you.

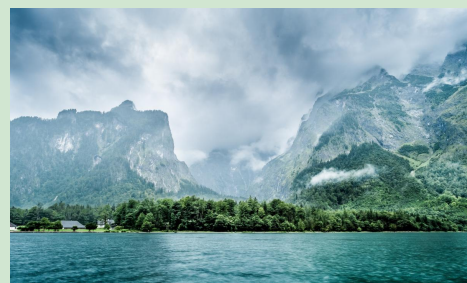
Evangelical artist, Shannon Wexelberg, provides a gorgeous rendition of another hymn that comes from the English Protestant tradition in “[An Old Hymn Given New Beauty](#)”. She reminds us that the truth of Christ’s redemption of the world is written into all of reality.

[Visit the Newsletter Archives](#)

### Thomas Aquinas' Eucharistic Heart and Hymn



### An Old Hymn Given New Beauty



**Thank you and God bless you always!**

# Peter Darcy

*PS – As you know I post one article every Sunday and send out this newsletter every other Sunday to keep you up to date. Kindly forward the newsletter to others who may be interested in our messages of Beauty, Truth, Goodness.*



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