



State bird: Ancient Christian symbol of sacrificial love

By Beth Donze
Clarion Herald

When the image of a mother pelican feeding her chicks is seen in the architecture of a Louisiana Catholic church, observers might logically assume it was placed there as a nod to the state bird.

That assumption would be incorrect.

The mother pelican has been revered – and artistically depicted – since before the birth of Christ, fueled by the ancient Romans' erroneous belief that mother pelicans would pierce their chests with their beaks to feed their own blood to their brood during times of famine.

The legend would grow to include the belief that the blood of mother pelicans would literally bring their ailing chicks back to life.

Became a symbol for Christ

It didn't take long for early Christians to adopt the "selfless" pelican as a metaphor for the sacrificial love of Christ – and incorporate the bird into their sacred spaces.

"They identified it right away with the Eucharist," said Msgr. Christopher Nalty, pastor of Good Shepherd Parish in New Orleans, whose St. Stephen Church boasts an oval-framed fresco of a mother pelican high above the sanctuary. St. Stephen's pelican, original to the 1887 church, was intentionally placed above the sanctuary where every worshipper would see it.

A few blocks away, at St. Henry Church, another nesting mother pelican dominates the painted plaster medallion on the church's main altar – the same altar used for the Eighth National Eucharistic Congress in New Orleans in 1938. This particular depiction connects the mother pelican's legendary "gift of self" even more closely with the Eucharist: a



A nesting pelican (pictured above and below) can be seen in a fresco located high above the sanctuary of St. Stephen Church.

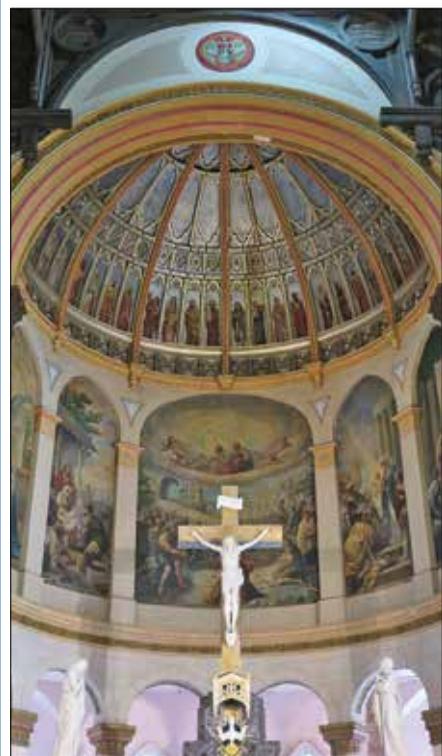
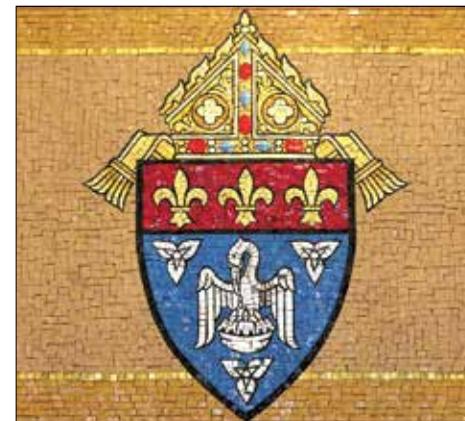


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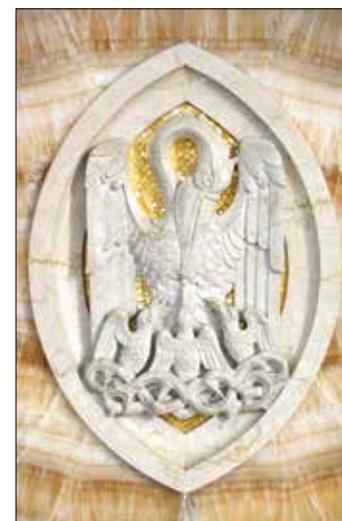


Photo above by Frank J. Methe | CLARION HERALD

Mother pelicans "nest" (clockwise, from upper left): on the altar of St. Henry Church; in a mosaic of the archdiocesan coat of arms in St. Louis Cathedral's rectory; beneath the tabernacle at St. Rita Church in New Orleans; in a stained-glass window at St. Augustine Church; and in the Communion rail at St. Alphonsus Church.

chalice is superimposed over the bird's chest in a way that makes it appear to be collecting the life-giving blood.

Other pelicans can be found in St. Alphonsus Church, where a mother pelican is carved into the communion rail, directly opposite a newer symbol for the Eucharist – the Lamb of God (see photos above for additional examples of pelicans in sacred spaces).

Priest is a church detective

Msgr. Nalty said he made a hobby out of deciphering early Christian symbols during his jaunts around Rome as a student at the Pontifical North American College. He would regularly spot artistic

renderings of the life-resuscitating mother pelican in churches and, quite fittingly, in the catacombs.

The priest's research has uncovered pelican references in literary works, including Dante's "Paridiso," in which Christ is called "our Pelican who shed His blood in order to give eternal life to the children of men"; and in William Shakespeare's "Hamlet," which likens a true friend to the "kind, life-rendering pelican" that opens its arms wide and feeds others with its blood.

Msgr. Nalty said the pelican's status as a metaphor for Christ also is captured in "Adoro te devote," a

eucharistic hymn penned in the 13th century by St. Thomas Aquinas and commonly sung on the feast of Corpus Christi. The lyrics characterize Jesus as the "Pie Pelicane" – the Pious Pelican – whom St. Thomas entreats to wash away his "filthiness" by cleansing him with blood.

A singular state flag

Fast forward to 1912, when Louisiana placed the nesting mother pelican onto its state flag a century after gaining statehood. Msgr. Nalty said it is significant that the pelican on the state flag is depicted not as it is commonly seen in Louisiana – either flying or perched

– but rather in the ancient Roman style that was later co-opted by early Christians: in her nest with her three chicks, offering them her sacrificial blood.

While a handful of state flags bear the Christian symbol of the cross, Louisiana's flag is the only one that is "explicitly eucharistic," noted Msgr. Nalty, adding that this rare American union of the Catholic and the secular should be celebrated for its long and rich history.

"Understanding the symbolism of the pelican and seeing them in nature provide a ready reminder of Christ's redemptive love and his real presence in the holy Eucharist," he said.

Do you know of an example of a pelican in the art or architecture of a local Catholic space? Write to Beth Donze at bdonze@clarionherald.org.