

Pregledni znanstveni članek/Article (1.02)

Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly 83 (2023) 2, 391—401

Besedilo prejeto/Received:08/2022; sprejeto/Accepted:08/2022

UDK/UDC: 27-31

DOI: 10.34291/BV2023/02/Ozelis

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Pelican: a Christian symbol Depicting the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

*Pelikan: krščanski simbol,
ki upodablja žrtvovanje Jezusa Kristusa*

Abstract: Alongside with the legendary phoenix, which rises from death through the fire, and with the lamb, which expresses selfless love, the Pelican is one of the oldest symbols of Jesus Christ. This article reviews the rise of the legends about the sacrifice of the pelican, discusses the pelican as a symbol of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and presents Jesus Christ as a true Pelican, feeding His faithful with His blood. Seeing the pelican through the eyes of the faith helps to discover the deepest Christ's message: to give oneself to one's brothers because it will make visible what evangelist John said about Jesus' love: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (Jn 15:13) The symbol of the pelican in Christianity evokes contemplation of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, understanding the depth of God's love and gratitude for this sacrificial love. Representation of Jesus' sacrifice through the symbol of the pelican visually reminds us that the Lord, when He feeds people with His Body, receives them into Himself to become His Body.

Keywords: Pelican, symbol, Jesus Christ, sacrifice, selfless love, Christianity

Povzetek: Pelikan je poleg legendarnega feniksa, ki iz ognja vstane od smrti, in jagnjeta, ki izraža nesebično ljubezen, eden najstarejših simbolov Jezusa Kristusa. Prispevek obravnava nastanek legend o žrtvovanju pelikana, pelikana proučuje kot simbol žrtvovanja Jezusa Kristusa in predstavlja Jezusa Kristusa kot pravega pelikana, ki vernike hrani s svojo krvjo. Pogled na pelikana skozi oči vere pomaga odkriti Kristusovo najgloblje sporočilo: podariti se bratom, da postane vidno, kar je o Jezusovi ljubezni povedal evangelist Janez: »Nihče nima večje ljubezni od te, da življenje za svoje prijatelje.« (Jn 15,13) Simbol pelikana v krščanstvu spodbuja razmišljanje o žrtvi Jezusa Kristusa, krepi razumevanje globine Božje ljubezni in hvaležnost za to požrtvovalno ljubezen. Prikaz Jezusove žrtve s simbolom pelikana nas spominja, da ko Gospod ljudi hrani s svojim telesom, jih sprejema vase, da postanejo njegovo telo.

Ključne besede: pelikan, simbol, Jezus Kristus, žrtvovanje, nesebična ljubezen, krščanstvo.

1. Introduction

Whether a person lives in an archaic community or in a postmodern society, he or she is surrounded by a number of formed symbols. Symbols are agreed signs, objects or ideas with a deep *otherworldly* meaning (Federavičienė and Valantinaitė 2003, 205). The nature or image of a symbol represents or depicts more than it itself is. It is the key to understanding the spiritual world because the meaning of the symbol does not lie within it, but beyond it (Biedermann 2002, 5–8). It is understood as a process that brings and presents reality *from beyond*. Symbols reveal the deep truth and therefore they are inseparable from the rituals of all religions. Some of them are easy to understand because the interpretation of the symbol itself continues through the centuries and its meaning is recognized through human, mundane and existential experience. However, there are symbols that obviously no longer speak to the postmodern person, so they have to be revealed and interpreted in a new way. Not knowing or recognizing symbols disables understanding of numerous phenomena of everyday life. Without knowing the environment of the origin of a particular symbol, it becomes difficult to interpret the visual symbolic image and understand its meaning (Kazlauskas 2012, 15; Bianci 2011, 6). Interest in symbols can help discern what is behind things, to interlink the visual and verbal manifestations of our amazing multifaceted and multi-layered world. On the other hand, a lot of people admire and become interested in various ancient symbols. This may be due to the desire to return to the roots now that value orientation is increasingly being lost (Oželis 2009, 160).

The pelican symbol, as the sign of Jesus Christ, came to Christianity from legends in its first centuries. It is repeated in the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and is also mentioned by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) as the sign of the selfless Jesus Christ's love for people. The pelican, as a symbol of sacrifice, is also found in the early Christian art. It can be found in the decoration of churches as buildings, in religious art and in the decoration of liturgical vestments. Although the pelican is not a common symbol in churches, it is one of the oldest traditional Christian symbols.

This article will discuss the story of the pelican's sacrifice, as an image of Jesus Christ's sacrifice, revealing God's infinite love for Man. The purpose of the article is to reveal the symbolism of the pelican legend and its applicability to Jesus Christ. The object of the study is the symbol of the pelican in the context of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The tasks are: 1) to present the legend of the sacrifice of the pelican; 2) to discuss the pelican as a symbol of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; 3) to discuss Jesus Christ as a true pelican, feeding His believers with His own blood. The methods are the narrative method, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of scientific literature.

A person for whom the context of the symbol is unknown would not perceive the pelican's connection with Christ. At first glance, a simple description of the symbol in the context of scientific works faces a number of difficulties caused by the object itself – a symbol capable of revealing transcendence, bringing together

and participating in two spaces of limited and transcendental reality. According to this concept of the symbol, the language of the symbol is not the language of words, since it transforms infinity into limitation (Paškus 2002, 90). Thus, the symbol is understood as a process that unifies what is *within reach* with what is *beyond*. The interpretation of the concept of a symbol can lead to scientific despair, as it is impossible to explain scientifically because although being empirically perceived or experienced, it expresses an empirically intangible reality. But a symbol can become a sensual and obvious manifestation of holiness (Derrida and Vattimo 2000, 117) and a sense of meaning. In the case of the symbol chosen here for discussion, this holiness is Jesus Christ.

2. Legends about the Sacrifice of the Pelican

Pelican (Lat. *pelecanus*, Gr. *pelekan*) is a pelecaniform bird. Its feathers are white or brownish. The head is small, the neck is long, the beak is long, flat, and strong, the two sides under the beak are connected by sharply stretching naked skin. It lives in the deltas of rivers of the tropical and temperate zones and on the coasts of seas. It feeds almost exclusively on fish. The Greeks, seeing its very large beak, called the bird *pelekós* from the word *pelecus* which means *hatchet*, or *onocrotalus* because it was *krotós*, i.e. *strange* as its cry during mating reminded of the bleating of a donkey (*Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija* 2010, 734). After mating they make nests and lay eggs in secluded and isolated reeds, islands, less often in trees. They bring food for their hatchlings in these secluded places inside “pockets” at the throat. Due to the fact that a pelican bends its beak to its chest and feeds the little ones with the fish brought inside the throat pouch, it was assumed that pelicans tear their chest and feed the young with their own blood. So, legends were born while observing how adult birds feed their young.

In approximately the second century, an unknown Greek author, who lived in Alexandria in Egypt, wrote *Physiologus* - a work on various animals, including the pelican (*Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore* 2009). There was no biological paradigm in the work that would allow for debates such as whether each cell needs a nucleus or whether animals reproduce sexually, etc. The goal of *Physiologus* was not, as stated in the introduction, merely to physically describe animals, but to present through nature’s creatures the earthly activities of Jesus Christ (*Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore* 2009, 2). But *Physiologus* became an educational textbook that remained popular among Christians for a millennium.

In the 7th century, the book was translated into Latin and several other popular languages of the time, which resulted in widespread distribution among Christians. For a long time, the work influenced all European symbolism; from it came the genre of *bestiarium* - books about animals (*The Medieval Bestiary: Animals in the Middle Ages* 2017). Another interesting thing happened – the original work was didactic and used animals as symbols to explain why things happen the way they happen, and in the Middle Ages, with a strong belief that everything was

created meaningfully and purposefully, symbolic meanings became the essence of animals (Latauskienė 2015, 15). Observation of the natural characteristics of the bird is used for moral instruction, for example, in *the Aberdeen Bestiary* it is written that the life of a hermit is similar to that of a pelican, in that he does not live to eat, but eats to live (Aberdeen Bestiary 1200).

Medieval *bestiaries* contain moral stories about how pelicans love their children. One of them says that growing up young pelican's peck at their parents with their beaks to ask for food. Although the pelican loves his chicks very much, it pecks back and thus kills them. Three days later, the pelican pierces its side or chest with its beak and lets its blood flow onto the dead children. The pelican's blood revives its chicks (*The Medieval Bestiary: Animals in the Middle Ages* 2017). Medieval *bestiary* presents an allegorical interpretation of the story about the pelican. The pelican is Jesus Christ, who is torn apart by the sins of men. Pecking by the pelican chicks at their parents parallels with Isaiah's biblical prophecy about Jesus Christ: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me." (Is 1:2) But Jesus Christ, like the pelican, with His blood flowing from the pierced side, revives the faithful to a new life of grace (Schnitzler 2002). Thus, together with the phoenix, which rises from death by fire, and the unicorn, which can be touched and caught only by a virgin, the pelican becomes one of the first symbols of Jesus Christ (Saunders 2021; Latauskienė 2015, 15). Young pelicans' unreasonable pecks at their parents symbolize the sins of man by which we rebel against God, and thus we are condemned to death, because "sin leads to death" (Rom 6:16). But God's mercy does not allow us to perish. When He dies, He opens His chest so that He can revive us with His blood for eternal life. This is how the pelican's piercing of the chest represents the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and the flow of blood from His pierced side (*The Medieval Bestiary: Animals in the Middle Ages* 2017).

The symbol of the pelican, like the lamb, expresses the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Speaking of this bird, one must remember the word *pelican* found in the Latin translation of the Bible: "Similis factus sum pelicano solitudinis factus sum sicut nycticorax in domicilio" ("I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert") (Ps 102:7). And although the pelican is a bird of waters, the psalm uses this symbol to allude to a man crying in the desert. St. Augustine tried to explain this verse of the Psalm. Knowing that the pelican lives in Egypt, on the banks of the Nile, he identifies this image with that of a Christian: Christians who lived among pagans also felt as if in an isolated desert. St. Augustine does not talk about killing chicks, though, he only mentions that parents pelicans tear their chests to feed their hungry children (Schnitzler 2002). This symbol evokes reflection, understanding of the depth of Christ's love and thus calls us to thank Him for this love.

The pelican symbol was also adopted by the church fathers such as Albert the Great (1193–1280) and St. Thomas Aquinas (Van Parys 2012, 135). Thomas Aquinas, in „Adoro te, devote“, one of the five hymns he composed in 1264 in honour of the Eucharist, calls on God's mercy with words: "Pie Pelicane, Jesu Domine, Me

immundum munda tuo sanguine: Cujus una stilla salvum facere Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere” (“Lord Jesus, Good Pelican, clean me, the unclean, with Your Blood, one drop of which can heal the entire world of all its sins”) (Adoro Te Devote 2017).

By changing theological interpretations of the pelican legend in the Middle Ages, the soteriological message also becomes Eucharistic. The Eucharistic significance of the myth is expressed in a different version of the story of the pelican. There was a famine in the land over all men and against all the living creatures. There lived a pelican in that land, who did not grieve for itself, but for the life of its children. After searching in vain for food for a week, the tired, hungry bird landed in the nest, where five chicks were eagerly waiting. The hungry voices of the chicks tore the mother’s heart. The exhausted bird flew back into the sky and again searched for food but returned empty. The little ones met their mother noisily, pecked and pounded at her chest. The poor pelican, eager to feed the children, did not feel pain. It tore its chest with its beak, and the warm blood began to flow directly into the beaks of the hungry chicks. Their lives were saved. When the famine was finally over, the pelican’s children were already strong and ready for a new life. The good pelican died in sacrifice for its children (Schnitzler 2002). In the first myths, the pelican had the power to revive from death, but here the pelican has the power to protect from death.

In the 20th century, the latter legend of the pelican is applied to donation, where the pelican is introduced as the first donor on Earth. A white, bleeding-chested bird with hungry chicks leaning on it has become an international symbol of donation (*Donorystė – gyvybės viltis* 2011, 132; Pelikan – symbol ofiarności i poświęcenia 2021). Legends about the pelican, feeding hungry children with its blood, became a symbol of mercy, selfless love, devotion, and kindness.

3. Pelican in Christian Visualization

Since ancient times, natural science books have described the pelican to be a special bird, because, in times of famine, it pierces its chest and feeds its little ones with its heart blood; thus, in symbolism, the pelican began to represent Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for the sake of humanity. Christian tradition, in reference to the psalm (Psalm 102:6) and the myth of the pelican, adapted it as a symbol of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for the salvation of mankind. Already in the 3rd century, we find the symbol of the pelican on votive candles in Carthage, where it symbolizes our Savior Jesus Christ. Pelican images began to be used for decorating churches. From early Christian art in Carthage to late medieval art in Italy (Giotto di Bondone, Masolino Da Panicale), from Renaissance and Baroque to Postmodern art, the pelican serves as a symbol of the cross and the cup of the Mass, and also as an ornament on altars (Huggins 2010, 119–132; A guide to the works of the major Italian Renaissance Painters 2021; Zenit 2005). The pelican symbol is depicted above the tabernacle or on its door and becomes an important part of the

iconography¹. Above the tabernacle, on the nest encircled by a crown of thorns, there sits a pelican feeding the chicks with its blood from the torn chest. Jesus announced this sacrifice as a gift and offered it in advance at the Last Supper: “This is my body given for you.” (Lk 22:19) When the tabernacle was installed above the altar table, even its shape resembled a pelican, for example, Durham Cathedral in England (built in the 11th–12th century) had a pelican-shaped silver tabernacle suspended above the main altar (Van Parys 2012, 135). This bird can often be seen in works of art, depicted sitting on the cross or building a nest on its top.

References to the pelican and its Christian meaning of sacrifice are found in Renaissance literature: Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (1321) in the Paradiso (Heaven) part of *The Divine Comedy* speaks of Christ as “our Pelican”, who feeds us in paradise with his flesh and blood in the supreme act of love (D’Sylva 2021). Laert, the son of Polonius, says to King Claudius in English playwright William Shakespeare’s (1616) *Hamlet*: “To his good friends thus wide I’ll open my arms and, like the kind life-rendering pelican, repast them with my blood.” (Shakespeare 2021, 67).

The symbol of the pelican’s sacrifice has found its rightful place in religious art and its examples can be seen in Christian art of different eras. The pelican symbol is depicted in the decorations of churches, on liturgical vestments, crosses, and church altars. The pelican, which feeds its chicks with its own blood, symbolizes Christ’s sacrifice for the salvation of mankind and the sacrament of the Eucharist; therefore, at the top of the cross, it can be considered the highlight of the most important religious idea. Placed at the highest point of the vertical crosspiece, it symbolizes the blood sacrifice by the Son of God in the name of His believers. The symbol of the pelican in Christianity evokes contemplation of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, perception of the depth of God’s love and gratitude for this sacrificial love (Schnitzler 2002). Representation of Jesus’ sacrifice by the symbol of the pelican visually reminds us that the Lord, when He feeds us with His body, receives us into Himself so that we can truly become His Body (Benedict XVI 2011, 188–189).

The symbol of the pelican is found in both old and new Christian churches in the whole world. For instance, there is a 17th-century monstrance in the Archcathedral Basilica of St. Stanislaus and St. Ladislaus in Vilnius (Lithuania), which

¹ The tabernacle is one of the most sacred elements inside a church. Early Christians consecrated ordinary bread and ate it at home. The need for its storage arose as a way to give consecrated bread to the sick later. The Eucharist was used outside the Liturgy even at the very beginning of the Church. This is alluded to in St. Justin’s *Apology* in the 2nd century. In describing the celebration of the Eucharist, he mentions that the Body of Christ was carried to those who were unable to come to the congregation. In times of persecution of Christians, the Blessed Sacrament was already carried to the sick and prisoners in prisons. It was then the custom to keep the Eucharist in the sanctuary outside of Mass, so that Christians could receive it if necessary. Until the 13th century, the usual practice of the Church was to keep the Blessed Sacrament for the sick in a suitable place in the sacristy or in a small storage on the wall of the presbytery. It was only in the 12th–13th centuries, when the altars were pushed against the wall and the priest offered Mass with his back to the people, that a tabernacle was placed on the altar. The first official rule for storing the Eucharist was promulgated in 1215 at the Fourth Council of the Lateran, which stipulated that the Most Blessed Sacrament should be kept locked up. In the 15th–16th century, the tabernacle was always installed in the centre of the high altar, the altar cross was placed on top of it and a pelican was depicted. (Krugelis 2012, 30–32; Kazlauskas 2015, 3; Šinkūnaitė 2008, 186).

has a tiny pelican with two hatchlings above the ostia. The chicks perch in a nest that resembles Christ's crown of thorns and raise their heads towards their leaning mother. The figure of this bird can also be seen in other shrines in Lithuania: above the altar of the Basilica of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Šiluva; above the top of the tabernacle of St. James the Apostle Church in Švėkšna; in the stained-glass window at the tabernacle of St. Casimir Church in Klaipėda; on the cross bar in the fresco of the northern wall of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in Vilnius.

Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik, a famous contemporary Slovenian artist and theologian, uses Christian symbolism in his creations of mosaics. On the altars of churches and chapels, we can find mosaics created by M. I. Rupnik which depict Jesus Christ and His sacrifice in the symbol of the pelican, for instance, in Saint Angela Merici Chapel of The Ursuline Sisters in Ljubljana, Slovenia; in the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy in Częstochowa, Poland; in the Sacred Heart University Chapel of the Holy Spirit in Fairfield, USA; in the Church of Our Lady of the South Cross in Brisbane, USA; in the Church of Santa Maria del Rosario ai Martiri Portuensi in Rome, Italy; in the Church of Saints Elizabeth and Zaccaria in Catania, Italy; in the Chapel of San Carlo Fraternity in Rome, Italy (Centro Aletti 2022).

The Basilica de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona is the most impressive structure designed by Antoni Gaudí. The Tree of Life on the Nativity facade of the Basilica depicts a pelican and two angels carrying bread and wine – the symbol of the Eucharist.

4. Jesus Christ – the True Pelican, Feeding People with His blood

The symbol of the pelican reminds a person of the sins, which rebel against God and thus draw condemnation. But God's mercy does not allow man to perish. Dying on the cross, the incarnate Lord opens his chest so that He can revive people with His own blood. Jesus Christ gives Himself to the people who are His persecutors and feeds them with His sacrifice. He Himself becomes both food and drink for the man, despite the fact that people have offended Him so much. His death gives life (Schnitzler 2002). Thus, the symbol of the pelican conveys God's mercy to His creatures – sinful and weak people. Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ loves people so much that He sacrifices Himself and does not allow them to perish. By the sacrifice of His death on the cross, He gives himself for us to live. Thus, pelican symbolism encourages people to reflect on and comprehend the mystery of the love of Jesus Christ. Only a person who understands it can adequately accept and appreciate this love. This love to love and sacrifice teaches man himself.

In terms of sacrifice, two levels can be distinguished: the willingness to sacrifice and the performance of the sacrifice itself. Sacrifice is only achieved when a person sacrifices oneself and desires this sacrifice because of a noble purpose.

This goal is altruistic and of free will. Such a sacrifice was offered by many martyrs, who were later declared saints. However, if a person goes to death by divine will, but without inner desire or sacrifice, then such a death is not a sacrifice. For example, the shooting of prisoners of war or similar cases where people die without having a choice and without a decisive determination to make a sacrifice would not be considered a sacrifice. The most noble sacrifice is considered the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The very coming of the Lord into this world meant that the Savior and the Redeemer is close to man. By his life and death, by the establishment of the Eucharist, Jesus testifies that he came to sacrifice and atone for the sins of mankind. One single sacrifice was enough for all sinners to live eternal life. This sacrifice is unique, and it does not need to be renewed. It says on forever in its self-sacrificial love (Schnitzler 2002). The live sacrifice of Jesus Christ is constantly experienced by Christians while attending Holy Mass. When bread and wine are offered, a transformation takes place – the sacrifice of the blood and body of Christ for the salvation of mankind. The sacrifice of God cannot be equated with even the greatest, the most noble human sacrifice as it is inclusive of all humanity, it is capable of saving all people from sin, it is not subject to time, and therefore it is eternal. The Pelican is one of the many symbolic images of this sacrifice, representing the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the sacrament of the Eucharist (Daley 2009, 81; Sprindžiūnienė 2013, 2–7).

People are saved through the blood of Jesus Christ, as the Bible says: “we are justified by his blood” (Rom 5:9), we are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:7; Rev 5:9; 12:11). To understand the importance of the blood of Christ, we must understand the principle of the Scripture that “the life of every creature is its blood” (Lev 17:14). The body cannot stay alive without blood, so blood symbolizes life. This explains the appropriateness of Christ’s words: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (Jn 6:53)

Sin leads to death (Rom 6:23), i.e. to the shedding of life-giving blood, and therefore the Israelites had to shed blood every time they sinned, which reminded them that sin ended in death. “And almost all things are by the law [of Moses] purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission [of sins].” (Heb 9:22) Therefore, the garments made by Adam and Eve from the leaves of the fig tree were inadequate; instead, God killed an animal and made garments from its fur to cover their sin (see Gen 3:7-21). Likewise, the animals sacrificed by Abel were accepted more favourably than Cain’s sacrifice of the fruits of the Earth, for Abel understood that without bloodshed one could not approach God properly and receive forgiveness (Gen 4:3-5).

These events speak of the extraordinary importance of Christ’s blood. This is especially evident in the events of Easter (Paschos or Passover), when, in order to be saved from death, the people of God had to anoint the door frames with lamb’s blood (Ex 12:11). This blood testified to the blood of Jesus Christ, by which we are saved. Before the coming of Jesus Christ, the Jews had to offer animal sacrifices for their sins according to the law of Moses. But this bloodshed of animals had only the instructive meaning that sin is punishable by death (Rom 6:23).

It is impossible that man can kill an animal to replace his own death or use it as his own true substitute. The sacrificial animal did not realize what was good and what was bad; so, it could not fully replace man: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (Heb 10:4)

Animals that were killed as offerings for sins were to be without blemish or defect (Ex 12:5; Lev 1:3-10, etc.). They were like a prophecy about Christ, “a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pt 1:19). Thus, the blood of those animals symbolized the blood of Jesus Christ. They were accepted as offerings for sins because they testified to the future perfect sacrifice of Christ. Because of this, God was able to forgive the sins of His people who lived before the coming of Jesus Christ. His death “set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant [i.e. under the law of Moses]” (Heb 9:15). All the sacrifices made according to the law testified to Christ, the perfect sin offering, who “appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26; cf. Heb 13:11-12; Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 5:21). Jesus gives His life voluntarily. When He died, He clearly understood what He was dying for. Christ perceived His death as a gift of His life to the associates at the table of the Last Supper (Ramonas 2007, 47–48). Life is taken from Him on the cross, but he is giving it freely now. He turns his forced death into a free act of giving Himself for others and to others. Jesus sacrificed Himself for our salvation. He offered this sacrifice as a gift at the Last Supper. Like the pelican, Jesus gave his body and blood. Spurts of blood spilt from His side pierced by a spear. His blood is a complete self-giving, enduring all distress of humanity, overcoming all the breaches of fidelity with unconditional loyalty (Benedict XVI 2011, 109–112). Taking into his human heart the Father’s love for men, Jesus “loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1), for “greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). In this way, in suffering and death, His humanity became a free and perfect instrument of His divine love for human salvation. He freely consented to suffer and die out of love for His Father and for the people whom the Father wants to save: “No one takes it [life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” (10:18) Thus, the Son of God went to death completely free (Katalikų Bažnyčios Katekizmas 2012, 609). The greatest plenitude of love was achieved at the moment of death. He really went to the end, to the limit and beyond. He fulfilled all His love – He gave away Himself. Blood and water flowed from the pierced heart of Jesus. In the pierced heart we see the source of blessing, the stream of blood and water that renders eternal life (Benedict XVI 2011, 178–180).

Jesus Christ, like a sacrificing Pelican, once and for all gave Himself to people. And even more: He desires to satiate people daily with Himself – above all with His unique revealed word and Manna – Communion, filled with the fullness of divine life, in which his loyal disciples very often receive with ever-growing faith and ever-expanding gratitude the One who desires that the faithful not only never forget His words, but, above all, are guided by them: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (Jn 6:35) Jesus is the bread given to people. St. Augustine states: “To eat

this is to become stronger, but when you are strengthened, He who has strengthened you will not weaken. To drink is to live. Eat Life, drink Life. You will then have life." (Salij 1996, 151) Jesus says in the Gospel of John: "I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (Jn 6:8-51) Jesus, like the loving Pelican of the legend, feeds His children with His flesh. Jesus gives everything to His children – He dies to give life. By His sacrifice, Jesus showed that God is love. Love is giving oneself to another. Jesus is the true Pelican, who gave his body and blood as food for us to live (Daley 2009, 81; Saunders 2021). So, the image of the pelican reminds us of the need to remain in the love of Jesus and how He loved people and sacrificed Himself for them, "just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:2), so every person is called to selfless love.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of symbols is to bring us out beyond the limits of what is tangible materially, *to awaken* inner senses and to teach new vision, to see the otherworldly. The meaning of the symbol lies not in itself, but beyond it. Symbols reveal the deep truth and therefore they are inseparable from the rituals and images of all religions. The symbol of the pelican, which expresses the selfless love of Jesus Christ for people, came to Christianity from legends in its first centuries. According to the legends, the pelican loves its children so much that it tears its chest to feed them with its blood. Thus, the pelican symbol is found in Christian art of different eras to represent the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The pelican symbol is found in the decoration of churches, crosses, and liturgical vestments.

The pelican, tearing its chest and feeding its chicks with its blood, is one of the oldest and deepest symbols of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true pelican, feeding believers with His flesh and blood. Jesus manifested His love for people until the end by dying on the cross. The depiction of the pelican has long revealed to the faithful the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. The incarnate Lord, by the supreme act of His life sacrifice, gives Himself to men and becomes the Bread of Life. Representation of Jesus' sacrifice by the symbol of the pelican visually reminds us that the Lord, when he feeds people with His body, receives them into Himself so that they truly become His body. Seeing the pelican through the eyes of the faith helps us discover the deepest Christ's message: to give oneself to one's brothers because it will make visible what evangelist John said about Jesus' love: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (Jn 15:13)

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