

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – May 6, 2018
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

Though I have only been appointed to serve this parish since July of last year, I have worshiped here at the Cathedral many times over the years – both before and after my ordination. While this is a familiar space to me, each week I am pleased to greet first-time visitors to our church, most of whom are impressed by the beauty, by the artwork and symbolism of the space. And they invariably have questions. Often I am asked if I know the meaning of one or more of the small images painted on one of the Cathedral's walls – in particular, the meaning of the image right above the word "Labor," the image of a pelican. I happen to know the answer to that question – I should, after all. I spent five years at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans. That same image of a pelican – actually of a mother pelican surrounded by her young – that same image is on the crest of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, on the front of many altars throughout the city – even on the Louisiana state flag. It is a powerful image – not just of the local wildlife – but of charity, of self-sacrifice, of love.

You see, in that simple image is depicted a familiar legend about the pelican. It is said that if a mother pelican has no available food source for her new little ones, she will use her long beak to pierce her own breast. She will feed her young with her own blood – even if she dies as a result. So great is her love that she will give of herself, she will lay down her own life for her little ones. I'm sure that you can already see the symbolism. A mother pelican sacrificing herself for her young is a perfect image of Christ – who feeds us with his Body and Blood, who has already laid down his life for us. It is the perfect image of total, self-giving love.

It is that self-sacrificing love that Jesus talks about in our gospel today. This particular passage is taken from St. John's account of the Last Supper. On the night he was betrayed, on the night before he was to offer himself completely for us on the altar of the cross, Jesus gave his apostles two profound examples of self-giving love. He, their teacher and master, bent down to wash their feet. And then, at table, he offered them his own Body and Blood as food and drink. We don't know if, on that Holy Thursday evening, the disciples fully grasped what was taking place. Their understanding probably grew deeper as the reality of the crucifixion set in. That understanding became more profound when they encountered the empty tomb, when the risen Christ returned to the Upper Room and stood in the midst of them – glorified yet fully human, alive though bearing the wounds of the cross. Like the pelican, Jesus had offered himself completely,

allowing his own flesh to be torn open so that others might draw sustenance from the blood and water that flowed from his open side. And it was in that self-sacrifice, in that complete and total surrender of himself, that eternal life was born. Far from being swallowed up by death, his self-sacrifice opened for all of us the gates of paradise. Jesus' death brought us life. It was – and is – the most perfect expression of his love for us.

The self-giving, life-giving love of Christ Jesus continues to surround us. It is here most perfectly at his altar where he offers us his very self as our food and drink. At [our 10:00am][this] Mass we will celebrate First Communion. A few years ago at another parish, one of the older students who was preparing for First Communion asked me if he had to receive the Eucharist every time he came to Mass. Could he just come up for a blessing instead? Why? I asked. Why would you deny yourself the Bread of Life, the Cup of Salvation? Why would you deny yourself that intimate, loving connection to the living God? The Eucharist is our birthright as Catholic Christians. We do not invite non-Catholics to share in the Eucharist not because they are not worthy – we are not worthy. We Catholics do not invite non-Catholics to the table of the Lord because they do not yet accept the fullness of the faith – the enormity of the commitment it takes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, to be a part of his Mystical Body. Unfortunately, maybe many of us do not understand or accept that either. You see, we are not given the Eucharist as a door prize, as a mere symbol of unity. We come to share in the Body and Blood of Christ to give us the strength – the physical, moral, spiritual strength to love as Jesus loved. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us himself so that we might lay down our lives for him, for his body, for the Church. Those final words of our gospel today: This I command you – love one another – those final words are more than a greeting card sentiment. It is a radical challenge to change our lives, to love with our whole selves – to become as self-sacrificing, as self-giving as parents with their children, as a pelican with her young, as a husband and wife, as our Savior on the cross. We are called to empty ourselves as Christ Jesus did. That self-sacrifice, that self-gift, that complete love must be our identity as a Church, our identity as Immaculate Conception parish, our identity as disciples. Redeemed from slavery to sin, Christ Jesus now calls us his friends. We must live as his friends. We must love as he loves. We must bear fruit that will remain.