

My friends in Christ, for today's celebration of the Lord's Baptism, I would propose that we consider a most unlikely image: a pelican. Now, for *many* of you (perhaps *especially* our children and teenagers), when you hear the word "pelican," you think about that goofy character in *Finding Nemo*, squawking about and speaking with an outrageous Australian accent. But maybe in real life, outside of Pixar, some of you have seen an actual pelican. They *do* look goofy, no doubt about that! But in flight, they are a rather graceful creature. They *hover* over the water in flight – no need to flap wings or anything, it seems...just soaring with a marvelous elegance. When they pass over a wave, maybe their wingtips touch the water then, but otherwise, they just sort of tilt their trajectory and hover up and over the wave with hardly even the slightest change in direction or poise. When there are more than one, they do this in perfect formation.... The very picture of grace.

But *then*...they find a fish – and all of a sudden, grace is *gone!* Have you ever seen a pelican dive for fish? Holy moly – the entire body suddenly crumples up like a heap of broken limbs, legs and wings hopelessly akimbo! And they just *drop* into the water – a truly *epic* crash-landing like the cheesiest of Hollywood disaster films from the 70s! The first time I saw *that*, I thought maybe the poor bird had been shot, killed in an instant...until it came up out of the water again – *now*, with a fish in its throat-pouch beak, and it took flight again and continued its graceful hover like nothing had happened – nothing to see here.... What a *strange* critter!

So...why present that odd image of a *pelican* for the Lord's Baptism. Well, we just heard in our Gospel passage from Saint Luke that when Jesus was baptized, "Heaven was opened...and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a *dove*." But wait just a darn minute! A *dove* is *not* a *pelican*, Father Lewis! Well, I know *that!* Sheesh! But I would propose that the actions of the pelican reveal something to us about the actions of the Holy Spirit. And just as the *dove* can reveal something to us about the Third Person of the Holy Trinity...so, too, can the pelican.

Consider the pelican hovering over the waters. That *might* sound familiar. The Holy Spirit, as we know, is part of the action all *over* the place in Sacred Scripture – in fact, *right* at the very start of it all. In the Book of Genesis, Chapter One: “In the beginning...God created the heavens and the earth...and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss...and a mighty wind [*hovering*] *over the waters.*” The mighty “wind” (*spiritus* in Latin) *is* the Holy *Spirit*. And what is the Holy Spirit doing? Like that pelican, the Holy Spirit is hovering “over the waters.”

I suspect that the Holy Spirit *still* does a lot of hovering. Like radio waves and wi-fi signals all over the place, the Holy Spirit *also* is all over the place...and just like how we do not gain access to the radio waves or the wi-fi signal unless we have the appropriate device to do so (that is to say: unless we *want* to)...just so, we do not tap into the power of the Holy Spirit...unless we *want* to.

But *then*...all of a sudden...when we *do* want to...grace suddenly and recklessly and utterly without warning goes from gentle hovering to crash-course dive-bombing – just like the pelican in its catch of fish. When we *want* the Holy Spirit to enter into our lives, the Holy Spirit is now like a bench-warmer on the football team: “Put me in, Coach!” And boom! He is *in!*

Now as we know, this action of the Holy Spirit happens for us most powerfully above all in the Sacraments. Jesus shows us the truth of this in His own Baptism. The Holy Spirit (Who by the way almost never actually reveals Himself in any visible form) descended upon Jesus at His Baptism in the visible form a dive-bombing pelican – just kidding! In the form of a dove. I propose that the Lord willed for this to happen at His Baptism in order to emphasize the specifically powerful action and presence of the Holy Spirit at *every* Baptism, at every *Sacrament*. And even unto our *own* day and age, we actually *can* (and *do*) see this. If you remember the last time you were at a Baptism, you may recall that before the child was baptized, the deacon or the priest turned toward the holy water font and prayed over the water – perhaps holding his hand over it while he prayed the words...and, at a certain point, he lowered his hand into the water itself. *Hopefully* he did not make like a pelican and

dive-bomb his hand into the water and splash everyone...though *maybe*...I will do precisely *that* the next time *I* administer Baptism. Hm.... Anyway!

That hand *over* the water and then *in* the water is a gesture signifying the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. At Mass, the priest holds his hands over the gifts of bread and wine (and *hopefully* the altar server at that moment remembers to ring the bells, ahem!). Listen carefully to what he says when he, the priest, does this with his hands; he speaks of the action of the Holy Spirit. We call this the “imposition of hands.” The priest does this just before he anoints somebody. The bishop does this whenever he administers Confirmation. He does this *also* when he ordains a man and that man becomes a priest. The imposition of hands is a liturgical gesture signifying the actions and presence of God the Holy Spirit in that moment.

And *that* is the pelican hovering over the water...and the grace that is supplied therein is the pelican dive-bombing for fish. What is the Holy Spirit doing *there*? Like the pelican, the Holy Spirit is making a great catch of fish: our *souls*!

Since today is the Lord’s Baptism, let us conclude by focusing on what happens at Baptism, and what the Holy Spirit is up to when cold water is dumped on our heads and now we are wet!

There are three effects in Baptism – three things that happen to us, and the Holy Spirit is at the heart of the action through it all. The first effect is probably the most well-known – that we are cleansed of Original Sin (and, if we are baptized *after* we have attained to the age of reason...usually seven years old...then we are purified of all *actual* sin in addition to Original Sin. What a sweet deal *that* is!). The second effect: we are adopted by grace as beloved children of our heavenly Father. I know that, by virtue of our having been Created by God, regardless of Baptism, we are, each of us, in some measure a child of God. But the grace of adoption makes it official, as it were...a *covenant*, you see – a family-making ritual. And so, perhaps the distinction between a baptized person and a *non*-baptized person with regard to a relationship with God is something sort of like the difference

between a family who has actually *adopted* a child *versus* a family who merely has the foster-care of a child or has legal guardianship.

And the third effect of Baptism: we are made temples of the Holy Spirit. A-ha! The Holy Spirit is at it again – and not only dive-bombing into the water of our lives and souls...but actually deigning to make a holy dwelling therein! And so by the grace of Baptism, our souls have become something of a little Heaven – a veritable Heaven-on-Earth. Again, what a sweet deal *that* is! And all of *that*...for having just a bit of water splashed on our heads.

And so, hopefully we see that there is *great* cause for rejoicing here. A bit of water...and the Holy Spirit dive-bombing into our lives...so that, *now*, the souls of *each* of us has become something of a little Heaven.... Hopefully, therefore, we will be mindful of so great a gift – and *grateful*, as well; and I might propose that, as a gesture of joy and gratitude, each of us finds out the date of our own Baptism and that we celebrate it each year like another birthday – because it *is* another birthday. In any event, *whatever* we do, we give thanks to the Lord for He is good, and His love endures forever.

Amen.