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The choir was asked to sing at Mass for our parish confirmation liturgy. I'll admit: At first I had no particular excitement about this milestone in our teens' sacramental life. I didn't know any of the dozens of kids being confirmed that Tuesday evening.

During practice the night before, we went through the music, mostly hymns that evoked Christian service or the coming of the Holy Spirit. All of them were familiar songs to me except the English version of Thomas Aquinas' "Adoro Te Devote." I'd sung it in Latin, in the same medieval chant melody, but never:

Godhead here in hiding

Whom I do adore

Masked by these bare shadows,

shape and nothing more,

See, Lord, at Thy service low

lies here a heart

Lost, all lost in wonder

at the God Thou art.

"What archaic language," I thought.

We continued through verses that said, "What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do; Truth Himself speaks truly or there's nothing true." And that on the cross, "Thy Godhead" and "Thy very manhood steals from human ken."

"Surely they have a more modern translation," I thought again, turning up my nose at "Thy" and "Thou art."

Then I looked down at who did the translation: Gerard Manley Hopkins. (I have since learned that Hopkins' translation is the most famous English rendition of "Adoro Te Devote." You probably knew that already.) In a flash, my estimation of the song changed. I began to see poetry instead of anonymous antiquated words.

I saw a soul professing fervent belief in the word of a God he cannot even grasp with his human mind, yet who remains with us in the Eucharist, whose face we hope someday to see bathed in light.

And when we sang verse 6 —

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.

— my own face lit up with recognition, for I knew the tender tale of the Pelican. I remembered it from a book called *Fables of Leonardo da Vinci*, which I'd had when I was about 10. The 1973 volume presented over 70 short fables by Leonardo, gorgeously illustrated by Italian artist Adriana Saviozzi Mazza.

In "The Pelican," a snake bites some baby pelicans while their mother is off getting food. They die. When she returns, she sees her babies (the illustration stands stark in my mind to this day: the pitiful little birds, grayish in death, eyes shut, hanging limp over the sides of the nest), and in despair, Mother Pelican pecks at her own breast. The warm blood flows over the tiny birds and revives them — and she dies, having given her life to bring them back.

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Many of Leonardo's fables were from his own imagination, but the legend of the pelican did not originate with him. It's an ancient tale that predates Christianity. Christians later appropriated it, for obvious reasons.

I had not thought of that story in many, many years.

I looked at the others with me on the choir finishing "Adoro Te Devote." I suspected that at least some of them were thinking, as I had, "What does this convoluted language even mean?"

After we finished, I was moved to ask, "Does everyone know the story of the Pelican?"

No one did. No one had understood verse 6.

So I told them the legend — one that came to my own imagination through so many mediators: Aquinas, and Leonardo, and the illustrator, and Hopkins, not to mention the people who told that story to all of them. The choir members thanked me. This ancient image had been unlocked, un-shrouded, and it now lived in their imaginations, too.

After the confirmation on Tuesday, when we returned to the choir room, people remarked to me that they were thinking of the Pelican story when we sang that song during Communion.

"Adoro Te Devote" has become a meditation for me this month. The entire calendar of May falls within the liturgical season of Easter. Every single day during the month, except for two, our first reading is from Acts, describing those infused with the Spirit passing on what they know to be True.

It wasn't always easy for the new Christians. They were mistrusted as blasphemers, subversives, thrown in jail, or, like Stephen (as we hear on May 6), killed. I'm sure it wasn't easy for the newly revived baby pelicans, either. "The Pelican" ends after the mother dies — we don't find out what happens to them. Apparently, they still needed their mom to bring food to them. So how did the poor things survive? What if the snake came back?

The snake will come back for us. It always does. But we aren't alone: We have the Spirit with us, to guide us as we venture forth in our imperfect knowledge.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the May 2014 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Easter reflections](#).*

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