

My Little White Dove:

The Rich Biblical Symbolism of This Name

The Lenten season begins with the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan by his cousin, John the Baptist, who insisted he needed to be baptized by Jesus, not Jesus by him. So why did Jesus seek out John and his baptism? And what is the significance of the “dove” at His baptism? And why does Jesus use the symbolism of the dove when speaking to Sr. Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil, visionary for the Our Lady of America® devotion, in locutions with her in the 1950’s?

John’s baptism was a baptism of water and repentance which Jesus did not need, as He was sinless. Jesus participated in John’s baptism to show his identity with sinners, for it was for these He had come to die and for these He would be led into the desert to overcome the evil one, definitively! It was for these He had come to bring true forgiveness of sin and a greater baptism, the baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit. Jesus submitted to John’s baptism out of humility and to show the end of the Old Order of law and justice and the beginning of the New Order of grace and mercy in Himself. His baptism was a manifestation to the Jewish world of His divinity through the simultaneous manifestation of the Trinity. He would thereafter clearly reveal Himself as the Son of God in His public mission, inaugurated with this baptism, through His teaching with the very authority of God Himself; through His miracles performed with the power of God; and through His forgiveness of sins which no one but God can forgive.

Jesus' baptism was a confirmation of the "epiphany," the manifestation of His divinity revealed through the Magi who presented Him at birth with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts suitable even for a divine King, the newborn King of the Jews, confessed in the heavens with a star that led them to Bethlehem and the Shepherd-King of David's line, the long promised Savior of God's people. This King would be the King of all Kings, the Eternal High Priest, the Greatest Prophet to speak for God, for He would be God's very Word, made flesh, fulfilling every prophecy ever told, here in the Heart of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.

Jesus' baptism was also a "theophany," a revelation of the Most Holy Trinity, for all three persons of the Trinity were manifested to our senses, our human way of knowing, at this event. See how the heavens opened and the voice of the Father confirmed His divine Fatherhood of Jesus, His dearly beloved Son in Whom He is well pleased, thus confirming the divinity of Jesus. Then a dove came to rest upon Jesus, (Mt 3:16) the dove Holy Mother Church has always understood to be the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not manifest Himself in human form like Jesus, the perfect image of the Father, but in the form of a small dove. Catholic Scriptural teaching has always seen the dove as the emblem of the Holy Spirit, understood as Love personified in the inner life of the Trinity itself, and, in its smallness of form, as Humility when it comes to the way in which the Spirit works in us and in the world, for our sanctification. His way is hidden, interior, gentle, quiet, meant not to be seen but to be experienced deep within the soul, like a gentle breeze, not in the roar of thunder.

After His baptism, Jesus was led by that same Spirit into the desert to bind up Satan, the Strong One, the Deceiver, the Master Liar, and to chain up his power over God's people.

Satan wages endless and vicious war against Christ and His disciples, seeking to rob humanity of its soul and us of our salvation. In our Catholic tradition the dove is always a sign of the Spirit and is connected to Noah and the flood and to baptism, with their cleansing and purifying waters and the new life that follows as the work of the Spirit in both baptism of water and baptism of fire. While Satan continues to wage his battle against us, Our Lady of America® comes, offering us *“miracles, not of the body but of the soul”* if we would embrace the reform of life she asks for, and turn to her to learn the true way of love and purity of heart that is the work of her Divine Spouse, God’s Holy Spirit.

Since Jesus, in locutions to Sr. Mildred Mary Neuzil, called her **“my little white dove,”** it is necessary to understand the rich biblical symbolism of the dove and its manifestation of the Holy Spirit in order to understand why Our Lord would use this **symbol** in addressing Sister in a message that **calls for purification** of our lives if we are to enter into new life in Him.

My little white dove, if the world is dying, it is because it will not let Me give it life. My little white dove, do you know what I find most lacking in the world today? It is FAITH. There are so few souls that believe in Me and My love. They profess their belief and their love, but they do not live this belief. Their hearts are cold, for without faith there can be no love. Pray and sacrifice yourself, My child, that faith may once again find entrance into the hearts of men.

(Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil, Diary, **Our Lady of America®**, pgs. 4-5, and locutions with Our Lord, May 22, 1954)

The dove is regarded as the most important bird in Scripture. It is first mentioned per se in the story of the great flood in Genesis 8. The dove is also the sacrificial offering of the poor which ensures the participation of *everyone* in the

required sacrificial purification rituals outlined in the priestly codes of Leviticus. In the story of the flood, Noah sends the gentle dove out three times to see if the waters had receded. The first time it returned immediately for it had no place to rest. The second time it returned with an olive branch for the waters had receded enough for the trees to rise above them. The third time it did not return because it had found something on which to feed and a place to rest. Just as the flood waters cleansed the earth in Noah's time, then brought new life, so the waters of the River Jordan symbolized a cleansing from sin and a rising to new life for those John baptized. The return of the dove, so often used with the olive branch as a symbol or harbinger of peace, is the sign that the purification is over and new life and peace can reign once more over the earth. In both these purifying waters we see our own baptism and the peace of Christ it brings and His new life it gives us as He takes His rest within us.

But the world is not at peace, for we are not at peace within ourselves. Our Lord spoke to Sister in May and July of 1954 of a necessary purification of this sinful generation, much like the flood of old, before real peace can come into our world.

My Father is angry. If my children will not listen to My Heart, which is a Voice of mercy and instruction, punishment will come swiftly and none shall be able to stay it. The pleadings of my Heart have held back the divine justice about to descend on an ungrateful and sinful generation. (Diary, pg. 6)

I am the resurrection and the life, and unless souls seek their life in Me, they will find only death and destruction. They fear man-made destroyers of life, yet destruction is in themselves. Man destroys himself through the evil that is in himself. Implements of war kill only that which is without. Man kills that within himself which none but he can kill. God is light,

man is darkness, and unless he comes into the light, he will be forever darkness. (Diary, pg. 4)

On February 3, 1957, Our Lady, always a Mother, focused on peace, telling Sister that real peace can only come when there is true love of her Son and of one's neighbor. Our Lady begged us to come to her to learn the way of true love.

My son asks of souls love, that true love willing to sacrifice itself for the One loved. Man fears to sacrifice himself because he is selfish. If souls would place themselves into my keeping, I would teach them the way of true love. If men truly loved my Son, they would not quarrel with each other and they would have peace in their hearts. Peace is from within, not without. If mankind were at peace with itself, there would be peace in the world. Man will only have peace if he has in his heart that true love of neighbor that springs from a whole-hearted love for my Son.

My sweet child, if love does not have its roots implanted deeply within the soul, it will die out or be rooted up by the first storm that besets it. O child of my Pure Heart, tell my children to come to me and learn this true love of my Son, which is so necessary for their peace of soul. (Diary, pgs. 15-16)

Besides being a symbol of peace and new life after purification, the dove is a symbol of purity. Solomon in his Song of Songs speaks of the dove undefiled. Scholars explain that this love song between the Lover and the Beloved represents the espousal relationship of God with His Chosen People in the Old Testament, and the relationship of Christ with His Bride, the Church, His Mystical Body in the New Testament. "My love, my dove, my undefiled..." (Song of Songs 5:2) The dove here is the white dove of purity, one free of defilement, held firm in the pure, unconditional love of the Other. We are familiar with the Church's use of the dove as the sign of purity and love for the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit

is the “ruah,” the very breath of life of God Himself, Who *is Love, the All Holy, All Pure One*. This song not only speaks to Christ’s espousal with His Bride, the Church, but also to the espousal relationship He has with each of us when we are baptized into His Body through the sanctifying grace of His pure Spirit of Love.

The dove is not a city dweller for it prefers a more peaceful deserted area where it can hide away in the clefts of rock. It becomes a symbol of the pursuit of a hidden life, solitude and quiet, a symbol of the humble soul reflecting the humility of the Spirit. Considering that Archbishop Paul Leibold, Sr. Mildred’s spiritual director of 32 years, advised her to enter the cloister and to remain hidden from the world, the “*little white dove*” is a fitting symbol for Sister’s life of contemplation and solitude, religious espousal with her Divine Lord. She models for us our own call to holiness, to solitude and prayer, to baptismal espousal to our Lord, the Lover of all lovers Who seeks intimacy with us through His Divine Indwelling Presence that makes us pure and holy as He is pure and holy.

Now hear the psalmist David cry: “*Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away, and be at rest.*” (Psalm 55:7) While Catholic Tradition views the dove in flight as a symbol of the Ascension of Our Lord, it can also symbolize the soul’s ascent to the mountain of prayer and rest in the Lord. The little docile dove was a quiet and unassuming bird that loved to seek shelter away from the noise. What a fitting image for one seeking a life of contemplation and union with the Lord. Jeremiah prays: “*O ye that dwelleth in Moab, leave the cities, and dwell in the rock, and be like the dove that maketh her nest in the sides of the hole’s mouth {in the sides of caves.}*” (Jeremiah 48:28) Surely Our Lord wished to affirm Sister’s docile, humble

nature, her desire for solitude with Him, never seeking glory for herself, by calling her my *“little white dove,”* for who could know this rich symbolism better than He whose Spirit inspired its sacred use? Our Lord also called Sister *“little secretary of My Heart,”* again recognizing her littleness and her humility. The angels, too, addressed Sister as *“my little sister.”* And Mother Mary constantly addressed Sister as *“my sweet child”* or as *“my daughter,”* and on August 14, 1980, said, *“Beloved daughter, you are not being accepted because you are a small one.”* (Diary, pg. 37) Over and over we are reminded of Jesus’ own words about the little ones: *“Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”* And again of those words on living in union with the Indwelling Trinity: *“the kingdom is within you.”*

Hosea saw the dove as a symbol of innocence. He said, “Ephraim also is like a silly dove without heart:...” (Hosea 7:11) But his understanding of “silly” as used here was that of innocence. Hosea had seen a dove ensnared because of its innocence, totally oblivious of the entrapment set for it. Hence, he said “Ephraim is just like that.” How interesting that Sr. Mildred’s religious name was “Ephrem.” She, too, was an innocent one, trusting and unsuspecting of those who would ensnare her for their own purposes, causing much suffering to herself and her cloistered companions. But alas, the dove is also a sign of hope, as David alluded to when he wished he could fly away *“on the wings of a dove”* to a higher, safer place. Sister Mildred Marie’s higher, safer place was her trust and hope in Our Lady’s promise to her that the message of Our Lady of America® would come to fruition, in time, as She desired. *“But in the end all will come as I desire. Those who oppose you will receive light to understand.”* (Diary, pg. 37) How often Sister was heard to say, “Our Lady will take care of it” when ugly things

appeared on her horizon. Sooner or later, Our Lady always did, and still does, take care of them all.

In Matthew 10:16 Jesus speaks in a similar vein: ***“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”*** Here Jesus bids us be wise about the things of God and innocent concerning things that are evil. Sr. Mildred Mary was wise about the things of God because she had a pure heart and lacked knowledge of all kinds of evil that raged about her. No wonder our dear Lord so lovingly referred to her as His ***“little white dove.”*** She certainly was His love, His dove, His beautiful innocent one! He took delight in her!

But the symbol of the dove as the pure sacrificial offering of the poor is the most vital of all. We see poor Mary and Joseph offer a pair of doves at the Presentation of Jesus in the temple for His circumcision and Mary’s purification after childbirth. Though Mary was sinless and had no need of purification, she humbly submitted to the requirements of her Jewish Faith. The dove, the pure victim of sacrifice! It is this dimension that is the most important in understanding Sr. Mildred’s endearment to Our Lord as His ***“little white dove.”*** She became the “pure little white dove of sacrifice” in imitation of our Lord’s own sacrifice for our salvation, sharing in His passion in an extraordinarily personal way. Nothing could speak to this dimension of *her sacrifice* better than the following passage from Sr. Mildred’s letter to Father Paul Leibold, her spiritual director and later bishop of the Cincinnati, Ohio archdiocese.

J.M.J.
August 16, 1956

Sisters of the Precious Blood
Our Lady of the Nativity Convent Cloister
New Riegel, Ohio

Rev. and Dear Father,

This being the eve of the First Friday I am reminded of some things that should have been mentioned before this. I was as you know, still out West in June. Well, June 8th, Feast of the Sacred Heart, we were allowed to make a night hour, those who wished to. During this time Jesus made known to me the sorrow of His Heart over the ingratitude and indifference shown to Him in the Sacrament of His Love. When I went back to bed, Jesus came to me holding a large cross and a crown of thorns. He said to me smiling, as though He knew what the answer would be (He did of course).

“I come with My cross and My crown of thorns, will you accept Me My spouse?”

You know the only answer I could give Father. Who could refuse Jesus anything? During the night I awoke and Jesus said to me, and He said it with a profound emphasis: “I have placed you upon the Altar of Sacrifice.”

On June 14th, anniversary of my perpetual union with Jesus, He asked me again:

“Bride of My Heart, do you still wish to suffer all things to give Me to souls?”

I answered:

“Yes, yes dear Lord, I am poor and wretched, and unworthy, but you know what is in my heart.”

He said,

“My little white dove, will you then continue to wear the Crown of Thorns, and permit yourself to be nailed to the Cross?”

I told him in the best way I could, how much I desired Him to do with me just as He desired. So in this way my desires are wholly united to His.

When I received my last Obedience, Father, it was a bit of a let-down, as you can guess. Yet I tried to rise above my feelings realizing that God works all things for our good and His Glory. I am glad that Our Lord is not afraid to use me in any way that He pleases. There are

times when pain blurs my vision a bit, but it is not long before His enlightening Grace makes me see again with that clear light God reserves for the lowly and pure of heart. At this time, Father, Our Lord assured me of His continued help.

*He said to me that evening after I had received the Obedience:
“I will be with you wherever you are, spouse of my Heart. You have nothing to fear.”*

This was after I had said to Him:

“Dear Lord, what are You doing to me?”

Here are some words spoken to me since. Sometimes He repeats or uses similar expressions to emphasize the special lesson He wishes to impart. Pride must be the great sin of our times, or at least one of the great ones, for Our Lord speaks so often about humility.

“My Heart speaks to the humble. It is they who hear My Voice.”

“Be humble My children, be humble and pure of heart. Then will I come and dwell with you.”

“My little white dove, how humility and simplicity are despised by the proud of this world. Oh what a loss they suffer. For despising the humble, Christ will judge them.”

“By my humility and simplicity of Heart I glorify My Father more than all the Angels and Saints together. So it is that the humble soul glorifies God more than all the great of the world.”

Surely it is obvious why our dear Lord called Sr. Mildred His “little white dove!”

“I have placed you upon the Altar of Sacrifice!” He said.

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**(Some aspects of the dove symbolism are taken from the Catholic Encyclopedia: Dove, www.newadvent.org/cathen)*