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Matthew 3:16—Why a Dove? (Church Tradition)

The Synoptic Gospels all report that the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove at his baptism.

Matthew 3:16	Mark 1:10	Luke 3:21–22
“And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.”	“And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.”	“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”

Many writers in the early church would wonder about the significance of the dove. Perhaps it is because doves are symbols of innocence (cf. Matt. 10:16) or purity or peace, or maybe it has something to do with Noah, who was brought an olive branch by a dove to let him know the flood was over (Gen. 8:8–11). But Ambrose wanted to make clear that it wasn't a *real* dove (see below)!

Gregory Thaumaturgus (213–270):

God opened the gates of the heavens and sent down the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, lighting upon the head of Jesus, pointing him out right there as the new Noah, even the maker of Noah, and the good pilot of the nature [that is, of humanity] which is in shipwreck. (*The Fourth Homily, On the Holy Theophany, or Christ's Baptism*)¹

Origen (185–ca. 254):

A dove—a tame, innocent and simple bird. Hence we are taught to copy the innocence of doves.

Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 220):

The Holy Spirit came in the form of a dove in order that the nature of the Holy Spirit might be made plain by means of a creature of utter simplicity and innocence. For the dove's body has no gall in it. So after the deluge, by which the iniquity of the old world was purged away, after, so to speak, the baptism of the world, the dove as herald proclaimed to the earth the tempering of the wrath of heaven—sent forth from the ark and returning with an olive branch, which is a sigh of peace among the nations.

(*On Baptism* 8)²

John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407):

But why in the form of a dove? The dove is a gentle and pure creature. Since then the Spirit, too, is “a Spirit of gentleness,” he appears in the form of a dove, reminding us of Noah, to whom, when once a common disaster had overtaken the whole world and humanity was in danger of perishing, the dove appeared as a sign of deliverance from the tempest, and bearing an olive branch, published the good tidings of a serene presence over the whole world. All these things were given as a type of things to come. . . . In this case the dove also appeared, not bearing an olive branch, but pointing to our Deliverer from all evils, bringing hope filled with grace. For this dove does not simply lead one

family out of an ark, but the whole world toward heaven at her appearing. And instead of a branch of peace from an olive tree, she conveys the possibility of adoption for all the world's offspring in common. (*The Gospel of Matthew* 12.3)³

The Venerable Bede (672–735):

The image of a dove is placed before us by God so that we may learn the simplicity favored by him. So let us meditate on the nature of the dove, that from each one of its features of innocence we may learn the principles of a more becoming life. The dove is a stranger to malice. So may all bitterness, anger and indignation be taken away from us, together with all malice. The dove injures nothing with its mouth or talons, nor does it nourish itself or its young on tiny mice or grubs, as do almost all smaller birds. Let us see that our teeth are not weapons and arrows.⁴

Ambrose (347–397):

The Holy Spirit descended as a dove. Not “a dove descended,” but “as a dove.” (*The Sacraments* 1.6)

1. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885–96), 6:70–71.
2. H. D. Smith, ed., *Ante-Nicene Exegesis of the Gospels*, 6 vols. (London: SPCK, 1925), 1:304.
3. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 10:77.

4. The Venerable Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. L. T. Martin and D. Hurst
(Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 1.12.