

JUST WHAT IS SACRIFICE?

I grew up believing that the Mass is the centre of Christian life. I have never lost this conviction. This book I have written about the Mass is an attempt to share with you why I think that, as we used to put it, 'It is the Mass that matters.' The key word is, of course, Sacrifice. In Mass we are united with Jesus in his Sacrifice. But for that to make sense, we have to be clear what we mean by Sacrifice.

A bit of trivia. Once, in my younger days I heard about a grade 6 girl who had asked her teacher, 'What do we mean by 'The Sacrifice of the Mass?' The answer the girl received was, 'It means giving up an hour a week to God on Sunday.' That answer was quite coherent. It provided a reasonable justification for expecting Catholics, young and old, to go to Mass each Sunday. But it was very wide of the mark as far as explaining what we mean when we talk about the Sacrifice of the Mass. By the way, that was all in the days of the old catechism and the old ways of teaching religious education.

I have written my little book - it is only 90 pages - for teachers first of all. They need the answers. But I hope others will learn at least something helpful from reading it. The big problem with explaining Sacrifice is that, in everyday parlance, sacrifice means *giving up*. It has a very negative tone. But in religious practise, sacrifice means *giving*, which is something quite positive.

So, in my book, I finish the introduction by stating in a couple of paragraphs what the Sacrifice of Christ means. Next I have a chapter that looks first at the secular meaning of sacrifice and then the religious meaning of sacrifice. I explain in this chapter the meaning of altar, priest, victim, killing, burning, pouring, the various aspect of ritual sacrifice.

From then on, I simply use the accounts of the Last Supper to provide the chapter headings. We recite in the Eucharistic prayer these various elements. So, I have a chapter on Covenant, a chapter on 'he took, he blessed, he broke, he shared.' Another chapter deals with 'Do this in memory of me', the paschal meal. I have two chapters on 'for the forgiveness of sins' because I try to kill off that explanation of how we are redeemed by Jesus' death that is termed, 'the Pound of Flesh' theory. I have a chapter on the fact that Christians have only one Sacrifice, the Sacrifice of Christ, and yet we have many sacrifices, too. I finish with a chapter on 'Who offers the Mass.'

If the title of the book is a bit strange, there was a strange journey towards it. I started the book about fourteen years ago. For various reasons, I had to, several times, tear the book up and start again. About two years ago, the book was ready to appear in print - I had actually corrected the proofs - when the publisher, Mosaic Resources, turned up its toes. I then had to try to find another publisher. Very graciously, St Pauls decided to risk it. As always happens with the publishing of a book, they appointed a sub-editor. The sub-editor thought the book would read better if it were a series of Questions and Answers. Naturally, I accepted her advice. She did most of the work of rewording it in a Q&A format herself. My contribution was to make the title a question, too. Hence, 'Just what is Sacrifice?'

