



## Human Sacrifice

In the U.S., we too often take freedom of the press for granted, but not so in certain Latin American countries where expressing an opinion can be dangerous. Last year I was invited to join an international group of political cartoonists in Mexico City to discuss such issues. I enjoyed seeing old colleagues, getting to know new ones and desperately trying to recall the Spanish I learned 50 years ago.

Between meetings, we explored cultural and archaeological treasures of the city. I was astounded by its art, museums, restaurants, architecture and robust economy. I was fascinated by the rich history that lay everywhere under our feet. Central Mexico City is literally built on the foundations of the Aztec (Mexica) capital of Tenochtitlán. Many of the streets we walked follow those laid out in 1325 by brilliant Aztec engineers.

Even in 1519, when conquistador Hernán Cortés and his soldiers arrived in Tenochtitlán, they were amazed by the city's size and vibrancy—beyond anything they had known in Europe. But, brutal warriors though they were, they were horrified by what they witnessed at the Aztecs' great temple: human sacrifice and ritual consumption of the flesh/blood of victims.

Human sacrifice made perfect sense to the Aztecs. The gods had sacrificed to create the world, so it was only proper that humans should be sacrificed for the nourishment of the gods. Without a constant supply of human blood, the world would be plunged into eternal darkness and everyone would die. Since the Mexica ruled a vast empire, there was no shortage of sacrificial victims in the form of criminals and prisoners of war—although good citizens were honored to present themselves as sacrifices. Suffering, they were taught, would gain them admittance to heaven.

Not all the Aztecs' oppressed neighbors shared this perspective, and Cortés took advantage of that fact to supplement his army from disgruntled Central American tribes. Tenochtitlán eventually fell, temples were razed and great churches were built in their place using some of the same blood-soaked stones.

It took me less than three minutes to step

across a small plaza from the ruins of the ancient Templo Mayor to the huge Metropolitan Cathedral and Tabernacle. Five hundred years ago, natives who were forced to make the same walk discovered that institutional Christianity held similarities to their old religion. The Roman Catholic heaven and hell seemed to echo those of the Aztecs. Even Jesus struck a chord in that he was a sacrificed God whose flesh and blood were ritually consumed.

There were major differences however. Few if any Aztec gods demanded sacrifice for personal misbehavior—or sin. That was the main feature of biblical sacrifice. Yet Scripture states **that not only does God prohibit human sacrifice** (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31), **he disdains blood sacrifice in general** (Psalm 51:16-17; Isaiah 1:11; Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13). Such sacrifices are powerless to forgive misbehavior (Hebrews 10:4,11). At best they are metaphors. Were the newly Christianized Aztecs confused? Maybe. Like many in institutional religion, they just went with the flow.

The assumption behind all humanly-initiated sacrifice is that God needs something—and we can make a deal with him to obtain something for ourselves. Depending on what we've been told, we might think he needs our money, our time, our livestock or even our blood. In return we might expect forgiveness, prosperity, a happy afterlife or simply assurance that the universe is going to keep running.

**We are not in a position to make any deals.** That's why Jesus' sacrifice is the only one that really counts. At once human and God, he not only remedies human sin, he establishes God's acceptance and love for every human being who has ever lived. That includes brutal conquistadors, bloody Aztec priests and poor sacrificial victims. Further, he invites us all to join him as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). Since there is no longer a need for humans to attempt the impossible task of reconciling themselves to God, Jesus' resurrection permanently pulls the plug on all other sacrifice—and on all religion. □

—Monte Wolverton