

Indulgences - What Are They?

Light on a much misunderstood subject

Rev. John A. O'Brien, Ph.D.

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1338 (1960)

Some time ago Professor L. M. Larson, the distinguished head of the department of history at the University of Illinois, called upon the writer and thus stated the object of his visit. "Father," he said, "I am writing a history of England. I have encountered so many different and conflicting statements of historians as to the nature of an indulgence, that I have come to you, as a representative of the Catholic Church, to find out what an indulgence really is. I want to know the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church on this subject, so that I can present the doctrine truthfully and accurately to my readers, instead of merely repeating the confusing statements of second-hand authorities who have never understood what the Church really means by an indulgence."

It is because many other writers have been less careful than Professor Larson, and have taken their idea of indulgences from the caricatures drawn by misinformed or prejudiced sources, that there prevail among our non-Catholic fellow-citizens to this very day many grotesque misconceptions as to the meaning of an indulgence. Many consider it a pardon of past sin, others regard it as a licence to commit future sin. Some think of it as an exemption from a law or duty which binds other Christians. In some histories it is depicted as a sort of magical lever that lifts a soul from Purgatory. (All of these ideas, as we shall see, are inaccurate.)

Indulgences for Sale?

Colouring all these notions is the idea that, whatever the kind of indulgence, it may be purchased at a stipulated price. They are all for sale, and the lust for money is at the root of the whole business. The term "indulgences" has thus come to stand in the minds of our separated brethren as the symbol of mercenary fraud and corruption in the Church of Rome. It is regarded as the match that kindled the flames of Luther's revolt against the most repugnant elements of the superstition and humbuggery of the Roman system.

May I ask our dear non-Catholic reader to follow the example of Professor Larson, whose insistence upon going to the original sources to find the real facts in the case, has enabled him to achieve world eminence in his field. In so doing they will get an insight into the true meaning of an indulgence. They will then see that what they fight against is not the Catholic doctrine of indulgences, but the grotesque caricatures drawn either by the misinformed or by the Church's antagonists.

I do not hesitate to say that if an indulgence were really the mercenary fraud commonly imagined by non-Catholics, I, too, would rebel against it with vehemence not less than theirs. It is only because I know the authentic teaching of the Church on this subject that I see in indulgences an incentive not to evil, but to deeds of virtue and holiness. Here again I would ask of our non-Catholic reader but one favour - an open mind.

In return, I give the assurance that instead of playing the role of an attorney, glossing over all the hostile evidence and playing up only that which is favourable, I shall essay the role of the historian, recording with impartial hand the abuses as well as the wholesome fruits of the practice of indulgences.

The Real Meaning

What is the real meaning of an indulgence ? It is simply the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, after the sin itself has been forgiven. The one phrase in the above definition that may not be entirely clear to our non-Catholic reader is "temporal punishment." To understand that, one must first understand that, according to the Catholic Church, every sin, especially grievous sin, has attached to it a two-fold penalty - an eternal punishment to be undergone in the next world, and a temporal punishment, which is suffered either in this world, or in Purgatory, or partly in both.

The guilt, with its eternal punishment, is always forgiven in a good confession. The temporal punishment may or may not be remitted in confession, depending upon the quality of the contrition. If it is not remitted, it may be remitted: (1) through the propitiatory efficacy of deeds of penance and virtue; and (2) through the gaining of indulgences attached by the Church to certain works of charity and piety.

Basic, in this whole conception, is the idea that even after the eternal punishment attached to mortal sin, or venial sin, is remitted, there may still remain some temporal punishment. While this idea does not seem to be familiar at the present time to those outside the Catholic Church, it is nevertheless rooted in the Scriptures. Thus Moses, even though he was forgiven his transgressions by God, was nevertheless punished by not being permitted to enter the Promised Land, being allowed to view it only from the distance of Mt. Nebo.

Temporal Punishment

David was forgiven for his double crime of murder and adultery, but was compelled to suffer a temporal punishment in the violent death of his son, Absalom (and Ammon) and the death by illness of Bathsheba's child. "The Lord also has taken away your sin," said the prophet Nathan, "nevertheless, because you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, for this thing the child that is born to you shall surely die." (2 Sam 12:13-14) Here is a clear instance of a temporal punishment remaining after the eternal guilt has been remitted. To satisfy the requirement of God's justice for such temporal punishment, and thereby to remit it, is the function of indulgences.

Let me endeavour to make still clearer to my dear non-Catholic readers the meaning of temporal punishment, so essential to the understanding of indulgences, by the following illustration. Suppose Tom Smith is guilty of stealing a hundred pounds from the home of his neighbour, John Brown. The culprit is arrested and the judge pronounces him guilty and sentences him to prison for a year by way of punishment.

While in prison Mr. Smith comes to realize the grievous injustice he inflicted upon his neighbour by his theft, and is thoroughly repentant. He writes to Mr. Brown, humbly asks his forgiveness and assures him that as soon as he earns a hundred pounds after he is out of prison, he will repay him. Touched by the evident sincerity of the prisoner's contrition and purpose of amendment, Mr. Brown asks the governor to pardon him. Upon investigation, the governor finds that the prisoner has served four months of his sentence and has a record of good behaviour during this period. Because of this

fact and because of the circumstances mentioned by Mr. Brown, the governor remits the remaining eight months of imprisonment and releases the prisoner on parole.

The sentence to serve a year's imprisonment may be said to represent the temporal punishment due to sin even after the sinner has repented and the formal guilt of the sin has been remitted. The remission of the remaining eight months of the sentence may be said to represent an indulgence. The illustration also serves to show the wholesome effect that the temporal punishment is likely to have upon the penitent sinner.

Power to Grant Indulgences

Granting, then, the fact of a temporal punishment, what is the evidence that the Church possesses the power to remit it ? This is to be found in the authority vested by Christ in His Church when He said to Peter: "I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever you shall loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt. 16: 19). From these words of Christ it is clear that no limit was placed upon the power of the Church to loose from any and all bonds of sin - from the temporal as well as from the eternal punishment. Indulgences constitute, therefore, a supplement to the Sacrament of Penance, (or Reconciliation) removing every obstacle that separates the creature from the friendship of his God.

Indulgences are of two kinds: partial or plenary. A partial indulgence remits a portion of the temporal punishment, while a plenary one remits all of it.

Transfer of Indulgences

In addition to being applicable to the living, some indulgences are likewise applicable to the souls in Purgatory. To understand the possibility of such a transfer of indulgences, it is necessary first to understand these three teachings of Christ and of His Church:

(1) The Communion of Saints. This means that the members of Christ's Church, whether on earth, in heaven, or in purgatory, are all members of Christ's mystical body and are all capable of assisting one another by their prayers and good works. "We being many," says St. Paul, "are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom. 12: 5).

(2) The Principle of Vicarious Satisfaction. To every good action of the just man there is attached a twofold value: merit and satisfaction or atonement. Merit is personal and cannot be transferred. Satisfaction, however, can be applied to others. This truth St. Paul thus communicates to the Colossians: "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the Church" (Colossians 1: 24). Moreover, all Christians admit that we have been redeemed through the propitiatory sufferings and death of Christ. This principle of vicarious atonement; lies, therefore, at the very heart of the Christian faith.

(3) The Spiritual Treasury of the Church. Since Christ suffered far more than was necessary to redeem us, and since there resulted from His death a fund of infinite satisfaction, it follows that there has been created a vast and inexhaustible treasury which the Church may draw upon in payment of temporal punishment. This spiritual treasury has been increased by the superabundant satisfaction of the Blessed Virgin and of the saints. "All the saints," says St. Thomas, "intended that whatever they did or suffered for God's sake should be profitable not only to themselves but to the whole Church" (Quodlib., Book II., question vii., article 16, by St. Thomas Aquinas).

The existence of an infinite treasury of merits in the Church was formally set forth by Pope Clement VI in 1343. "Upon the altar of the Cross," says the Pope. "Christ shed of His blood not merely a drop, though this would have sufficed. by reason of the union with the Word, to redeem the whole human race, but a copious torrent - thereby laying up an infinite treasure for mankind. This treasure He neither wrapped up in a napkin nor hid in a field, but entrusted to Blessed Peter, the key-bearer, and his successors, that they might for just and reasonable causes distribute it to the faithful in full or in partial remission of the temporal punishment due to sin." Hence - when Luther asserted that "the treasures of the Church from which the Pope grants indulgences are not the merits of Christ and the saints," the statement was promptly condemned by Leo X.

For, without such a spiritual treasury for the Church to draw upon in payment of temporal punishment still due by her children, indulgences would be both ineffective and meaningless. It is part of the authority committed by Christ to Peter and his successors to specify to what extent, and under what conditions, the funds of this common treasury shall be made available to the individual members.

An Ancient Doctrine

As the concept of a common spiritual treasury, consisting of the inexhaustible merits of Christ and the superabundant satisfaction of the saints, while essential to the understanding of indulgences, is unfamiliar to those outside the fold, it may be helpful to show how deeply imbedded in the Christian faith was this doctrine. centuries before the birth of Protestantism. Back in the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas bears witness to the universal belief of Christians in the existence of such a treasury and in its availability to remit temporal punishment.

"All this treasure," says St. Thomas, "is at the dispensation of the chief rulers of the Church, in as much as Our Lord gave the Keys of the Church to Peter. When, then, the utility or necessity of the Church requires it, the chief ruler of the Church can draw from this infinite store of merits to communicate to any one who through charity is a member of the Church as much as he deems to be opportune, whether it be such as will suffice for the total remission of his punishment, or up to a certain portion of the whole; in such wise, namely, that the Passion of Christ (through Whom alone the merits of the others have efficacy) and the other saints may be imparted to him just as if he himself had suffered what was necessary for the remission of his sin - as happens when one person satisfies for another" (op. cit.).

These, then, are the three basic truths, the communion of saints, the principle of vicarious atonement, and the common treasury of the Church, upon which the doctrine of the applicability of indulgences to the souls of the faithful departed, as well as to others among the living, rests. The authority to grant indulgences, as has been indicated, flows from the power of the keys, the unlimited power of binding and of loosing, conferred by Christ upon St. Peter and his successors.

An Important Difference

There is an important difference in the application of indulgences to the living and to the dead. The living are subjects of the Church's immediate jurisdiction; the deceased are not. To the former she grants an indulgence as an exercise of her judiciary authority. To the latter she makes an indulgence available by way of suffrage. That is, she petitions God, under whose sole jurisdiction the deceased are, to accept the works of satisfaction, and in consideration thereof to mitigate the sufferings of the souls in purgatory.

Can we say, therefore, that an indulgence gained by the living for any individual in purgatory will be applied with infallible certainty to the particular soul ? While we piously believe that the individual soul will be benefited to some degree, we cannot say with certainty that it will be applied in its entirety to that particular soul. That lies within the jurisdiction of Almighty God, and we rest content with the knowledge that the case is in the hands of a Father Who is both infinitely just and infinitely merciful.

It is well, too, to remember that there are some veils that cannot be penetrated this side of eternity. The effort to do so usually results in fine-spun speculations and subtleties, which do not carry conviction, and which are usually less satisfactory than the humble acknowledgement that we simply do not know. The answer to this question is one of the many, then, that we leave with content to the wisdom of our heavenly Father.

A Glossing Over?

"Is not an indulgence," queried a non-Catholic friend recently, "a mere glossing over of sin, a lazy man's method of getting his punishment remitted instead of the normal time-honoured method of repentance and amendment? I do not see any need for indulgences," he continued, "as long as Christ has pointed to repentance as the way back to His love and friendship. 'Much is forgiven her because she has loved much. Go now and sin no more.' This was the burden of Christ's message to mankind. It seems to me that indulgences are morally unwholesome because they lessen the need for such interior repentance and amendment."

Such is the common view of our non-Catholic friends. It overlooks, however, an essential condition for the gaining of an indulgence. For the latter is not a glossing over of sin. It does not touch the guilt of sin in any way. In fact, an indulgence cannot be gained unless the guilt of mortal sin has been first removed by the Sacrament of Penance, of which true interior contrition and purpose of amendment are indispensable requisites. Therefore, an indulgence can be gained only by a person who is already in the friendship and love of God.

Instead of lessening the need for genuine repentance and amendment, indulgences emphasize their imperative necessity. For without such repentance there can be no indulgences, and no forgiveness of sin, either by the Church through the Sacrament of Penance or directly by God. No person or institution in the world insists more strongly upon the unescapable necessity of genuine and not feigned repentance for the obtaining of forgiveness of sin than the Catholic Church. The picture, then, of a man wallowing in the mire of sin and gaining an indulgence through the offering of an alms to spare himself the trouble of repentance and amendment does not reflect the teaching of the Catholic Church. It exists only in the imagination of our separated brethren, and is traceable to the widespread misrepresentation of the nature of an indulgence.

No Forgiveness of Guilt

Do not some writs of indulgence, however, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, contain the expression "from guilt and punishment" (*a culpa et a poena*)? Does this not show that an indulgence was regarded as a pardon of sin ? It is true that this medieval formula was often used, though rarely by the Roman chancery. But it was never used in the sense ascribed to it by Protestant writers, as meaning the remission of the guilt of sin through an indulgence. Addressed to Catholics who understood the meaning of an indulgence, the formula always implied the previous remission of the guilt of sin through the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

In order that I may not appear to be asking our non-Catholic reader to accept this explanation on my authority, I shall cite the words of a contemporary of Luther. While I have before me the writings of over a dozen authors of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries explaining the writs of indulgences in the sense just mentioned, I shall quote but one, allowing him to speak for all. I choose John of Palts, for the threefold reason that he was authorized to preach the jubilee indulgence under Pope Alexander VII, because he was a fellow religious of Luther, and because his explanation is accepted as correct even by Brieger, one of the most hostile of all Protestant writers on the question of indulgences.

"Properly speaking," writes Palts, "in virtue of an indulgence no one is ever absolved from punishment and guilt, but from punishment only. However, it is commonly said that during the jubilee one is absolved from both - a poena et culpa. And that saying is true, because a 'jubilee is more than a mere indulgence; it includes authority to confess and absolve and together with this power to remit punishment by way of indulgence. In this way it includes the Sacrament: of Penance and together with it an indulgence properly so called. For the clearer understanding of the aforesaid, it must be noted that the term indulgence may be taken in one of two ways. In one way, in so far as it properly signifies the mere remission of punishment, and in this sense it does not imply the remission of guilt; and in another way, in as much as in a wider sense it stands for the jubilee, or for the letter including the jubilee, and then it extends itself to the remission of sin. And the reason is that usually when the Pope grants a jubilee, he does not concede a simple indulgence, but also the faculty of confessing and absolving from all sins. And in this way the guilt is taken away by the Sacrament of Penance, which there intervenes; while the punishment is cancelled by the indulgence, which is there granted" (Brieger, p. 88).

The alleged sale of indulgences, the numerous abuses which grew up around them, and their bearing upon the religious upheaval of the sixteenth century are questions which demand fuller treatment than is possible within the limits of this article. They, along with the historical origin of the practice of indulgences, are discussed in another pamphlet.

Suffice it to say here that the doctrine of indulgences, while perhaps not explicit in Holy Scripture, is at least implicit therein. It is likewise in accordance with reason. Far from being subversive of true repentance and purpose of amendment, it stimulates the arousal of these subjective dispositions by stressing their necessity for the gaining of an indulgence.

An Incentive to Virtue

The official teaching of the Church on the subject is thus expressed by the Council of Trent: "Since," says the Council, "the power of conferring indulgences was granted by Christ to the Church, and she has, even in the most ancient times, used this kind of power, delivered unto her of God; the Sacred Holy Synod teaches and enjoins that the use of Indulgences, for the Christian people most salutary and approved of by the authority of Sacred Councils, is to be retained in the Church; and it condemns, with anathema, those who either assert they are useless, or who deny that there is in the Church the power of granting them" (Sess. XXV).

It is to be noted how moderate and restrained is the official statement of the Church's teaching. It simply affirms two truths, namely, that the Church has the power to grant indulgences, and that their use is salutary. Thus it is evident that the Church does not crowd them upon any of her children. If one will appraise the doctrine of indulgences, not as caricatured by her enemies but as actually taught by the Church, he will come, I think, to the two following conclusions:

(1) Indulgences constitute a powerful incentive to deeds of virtue, piety, and charity, quickening man in his love of God and in his service to his fellow man.

(2) Indulgences are a beautiful dispensation of Divine Providence emphasizing the social solidarity of our race and binding us all together as members of the mystical body of Christ by the golden ties of love and prayer.

We do not struggle as solitary, lonely wayfarers, climbing slowly up life's rough mountain-side, with no one to cheer or help us when we falter on the way. We travel as pilgrims in a goodly company, and as soldier in a mighty army, with the hands of angels stretched down to help us when we stumble, with the prayers of the faithful pleading for us before the Throne of the Most High, and with the sacrifices and good deeds of our brothers-in-arms to hearten us when we weary on the way. The gaining of indulgences for one another is, therefore, but an integral part of that consoling doctrine of the communion of saints, the sweet reasonableness of which is so beautifully portrayed in the words of Tennyson:

"For what are men better than sheep or goats That nourish a blind life within the brain, If knowing God they lift not hands of prayer Both for themselves and those who call them friends ? For so the whole round earth is every way Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

Nihil Obstat: BERNARD O'CONNOR. Diocesan Censor. Imprimatur: + DANIEL MANNIX, Archiepiscopus Melbournensis. June 6th, 1960
