

Are Indulgences For Sale?

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FOREWORD.

I know you will not expect Father Charlie, the priest that you will meet in these pages, to have the time to spare from his many parish duties in order to give his friend Doctor Bill a complete and systematic exposition of the doctrine of indulgences. Other scholars have done that; and Doctor Bill could get as detailed information on this or any other question of theology as he might wish from Father Charlie's library.

Anyhow Doctor Bill is busy too and hasn't the time to listen to long explanations and proofs. His interest is in finding out as briefly as possible just what the Catholic Church does teach about some of the questions he has heard his Protestant friends raise concerning Catholicism. He is a reasonable man, and he knows that his boyhood chum, Father Charlie, is reasonable too; so he wisely does not accept stories he hears about Catholic teachings which run counter to reason. Instead, he checks upon the accuracy of what he hears by asking Father Charlie, who, he knows, will not mislead him.

You may not have, like Doctor Bill, a boyhood friend who is a priest. But no farther from you than your telephone or your letter box is any priest you may wish to question. If you live near a Catholic Church, nothing else would please the parish priest more than to have you call in person and ask him any question you like. Like Father Charlie, he has spent many years of his life in the study of philosophy and theology. He knows better than any Protestant friend of yours could be expected to know — no matter how scholarly — just what the Catholic Church believes and practises. He will answer your questions truthfully and accurately without making any attempt to proselytise you.

If you don't believe me, try talking to him and see.

DOCTOR BILL was occupying his favourite chair on Father Charlie's front porch one afternoon, his host sitting opposite at a table on which were a large plate of varied sandwiches and a glass of beer. Both men were too busy demolishing the refreshments to engage in much conversation until finally Doctor Bill leaned back in his chair with a comfortable sigh, wiping the crumbs from his mouth.

"That cook of yours is a marvel, Charlie," he declared. "I haven't eaten a sandwich to equal hers since I left home."

"She is good," Father Charlie said, a little complacently. "I confess that she's better with a stove than with a dustpan. But nobody can be perfect. On the basis of the meals she serves, I can afford to be indulgent with her few shortcomings."

"Indulgent..." said Bill. "That reminds me. I've been meaning to ask you about indulgences. I've heard all sorts of stories about them, but I've never really known what an indulgence is. How about giving a little information?"

MYSTERIOUS? ...SINISTER?

The two men — priest and doctor — had been reared together as boys, had played together, and had attended the same prep school. Although Bill was not a Catholic, their friendship had been close, and it had continued after they had gone their separate ways to college, to the seminary, to medical school. Both of them considered it a great stroke of fortune that their vocations had brought them to the same small southern city, and they lost no opportunity to take up and continue their association as far as their duties would permit.

Bill had a keen mind, which frequently challenged the priest's. But underneath the doctor's banter and his air of easy familiarity was a deep respect both for his friend and his office.

Father Charlie lit his pipe and settled back in his chair. "There is nothing either mysterious or sinister about indulgences, but the term does need a bit of explaining," he admitted.

"You're telling me?" grunted Bill. "One of my patients ran up an awful blood pressure the other day, proving to me that you give your parishioners permission to commit any sin they want to for a certain length of time. Showed me a little card he'd got some place ...had a prayer and picture of some saint on it. Underneath the prayer it said, "300 Days Indulgence." Had the goods on you."

"Dear me," exclaimed Father Charlie, mildly. "What did you say to that?"

"Gave him a bromide and told him to lie down and rest for a couple of hours," replied Bill, matter-of-factly.

MISLED.

Father Charlie laughed unrestrainedly. "You may have the right approach to religious controversy, Bill," he said, good-humouredly. "Sometimes I'm tempted to try something like that myself. But seriously — I know that many good people are misled by the term indulgence — although they could easily find out what the Church means and does not mean by it if only they would follow your example and ask a priest or read some Catholic book on the subject."

"Well, so far I haven't got very far with the first of those methods," growled Bill, with assumed severity. "Stop beating around the bush and come to the point. I can take it."

"All right." His friend smiled. "Since you want to get technical, here's the official definition: "An indulgence is a remission, in whole or in part, of the temporal punishment due to sin." How's that?"

"Perfect!" declared Bill, airily. "Reminds me of our English classes under Skinny Peterson. He always made us look up the definitions of words we didn't know the meanings of, and then all we had to do was look up the definitions of the words in the definition. It got monotonous. All right. I'll be good. Tell me in your own way."

Father Charlie puffed his pipe for a few moments. "Bill," he began, "do you remember when we were in second year in prep school and I shot you in the eye with a marble during study hall?"

REMINISCENCES.

Bill chuckled. "Do I!" he exclaimed. "I'll never forget how surprised I was. I let out a yell that brought down the plaster."

Father Charlie smiled ruefully. "I didn't mean to hit you in the eye," he said. "You turned around just as I let go."

“That’s fine, Charlie,” said Bill, generously. “It’s so consoling to know that you intended only to knock a hole in the back of my head.”

Both men laughed. “Do you recall what happened when you let out your yell?” asked Father Charlie.

“Well, let’s see,” mused Bill. “There was a good deal of excitement, of course. I was pretty frightened and didn’t notice much of anything. But I remember that Mr. Benson was keeping study hall, and he didn’t see you do it. He never asked who did anything if he didn’t see it done — and he didn’t see much. So I expect he just said as usual that he felt sure the guilty person would report his act to the principal after school. Funny thing — lots of fellows did that too.”

“I did anyhow,” Father Charlie said. “They hurried you off to the doctor to see how badly you were hurt, and I was scared to death. As soon as school was out, I went directly to Mr. Williams’ office and told him what I had done.”

“I don’t remember, but I’ll bet he gave you plenty of detention after school,” Bill grinned.

TWOFOLD OFFENCE.

“Ten hours,” said Father Charlie. “But first he talked to me about how serious my act had been. He reminded me that you might even be blinded. I was saying ‘Hail Marys’ so fast to myself that I had trouble listening to Mr. Williams. But I do know he said that my offence had been against both you and the school, that I must ask your pardon, and that I should also pay your doctor’s bill from my pocket money since it was all my fault. I agreed fervently and told him that if he’d only forgive me I’d never shoot another marble from a rubber band as long as I lived. He saw how sorry I was, so he said he’d forgive me but that I must still be punished. That’s when he said ‘Ten hours detention — an hour a day after school’.”

“I’d forgotten most of that,” said Bill. “But I do remember your abject apology to me. I never held it against you — though I should have, you heel! Bill looked at the priest affectionately.

“Detention hall was tough in those days,” Father Charlie recalled. “The study hall overlooked the playing field, you know, and the sight of the lucky fellows at practice was really hard to take.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” Bill spoke feelingly. “Mr. Williams was a pretty wise old bird; I’ll bet he put detention hall in that room to make our punishment worse.”

CANCELLED HOURS.

“I’m sure he did,” agreed Father Charlie. “But he was a nice fellow too. Sometimes we thought he was strange because of some of the things he made us do; but I can see now what he was after in most cases. One good thing he did do: he saw that everybody memorised some good literature.”

Bill rose to his feet and struck a pose. “Yes, ‘to be, or not to be — that is the question: Whether ‘tis nobler...’.”

“That’s what I mean,” interrupted Father Charlie, hastily. “I can do that too — after twenty years. He was always offering rewards for learning the Declaration of Independence or some other such thing that we thought dry and uninteresting but that I am very glad now that I learned.”

“So am I,” said Bill, sourly, resuming his seat reluctantly. “...even though now every time I try to use what I learned somebody stops me.”

The priest smiled at Bill's air of injury. "One day while I was serving my ten hours' detention," he continued, "and had got off three or four of them, Mr. Williams came into detention hall. Looking us over with that half-smile of his, he asked how many of us would like to have three hours taken off our time. Of course, everybody shouted at once. Mr. Williams' smile broadened as he said, "Then learn Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty' by morning and recite it to me."

"Sounds just like him," Bill said.

"Naturally there were groans as Mr. Williams left the room; but I learned the piece in an hour or so that afternoon, and that put me three hours nearer the fun outside."

WORK AND FREEDOM.

"In a couple of days he was back in detention hall. In his usual abrupt way, he said he hated to see us cooped up in a hot room when it was so much fun to be outside. All of us gave a roar at that, for he was the one who put us there. But I know now he meant it.

"He went on to say that he was going to give us a chance to cut our time short. Some prominent men were going to visit the school in a couple of days, and he was eager to have the grounds in good shape — the grass mowed, the weeds cut, the flagpole painted. Anyone who would turn out next afternoon and work till everything was done would have the rest of his time in detention hall cancelled.

"Did we applaud at that! It was fun working for Mr. Williams. Likely as not he would bring us cakes from the corner shop, we thought. And anyway, it was good to be out in the sunshine, doing something. Mr. Williams left detention hall and the boys all felt good — till we thought of Benny Griscom."

BENNY GRISCOM AND INDULGENCES.

Here Bill began squirming in his seat, the red creeping up his neck. Father Charlie seemingly didn't notice.

"Benny was crippled from infantile paralysis and couldn't do the work that had to be done. Mr. Williams didn't think of him, or he would have let him do something else to get free from detention. And, of course, Benny wouldn't squawk. But a certain boy in school heard of Mr. Williams' proposition and knew that Benny couldn't take advantage of it. So he went to the principal and offered to work in Benny's place to let Benny off. That was the time Mr. Williams had his famous coughing fit and blew his nose so long before he could talk. But he accepted the boy's offer, the boy worked, and Benny got his time off. Do you remember?"

"Oh, well," muttered Bill, uncomfortably, "I had to do something to get in with the principal. Benny helped me with my algebra too. He had brains, and I had brawn. What's the big idea of bringing up all that anyhow?"

The priest looked softly at his friend. "I have just explained indulgences to you," he replied, relaxing in his chair and re-lighting his pipe, which had gone out while he had been talking.

"I know," Bill said, "but..." He broke off abruptly and glared at Father Charlie, who sat contentedly blowing smoke rings. "You have just done what?"

NO MYSTERY.

“Explained indulgences,” repeated Father Charlie. “What I have just recalled to you is a good illustration of what indulgences are and the conditions under which they may be gained.”

“All right,” sighed Bill, resignedly. “So it’s simple. But I’m simple too. You couldn’t elaborate just a trifle, could you?”

“Surely,” agreed Father Charlie. “Listen carefully now, and you’ll see that indulgences are no more mysterious than Mr. Williams’ giving us time off from detention hall.”

“Shoot,” invited Bill, wriggling into his cushion.

“When a Catholic commits a grave sin — called in theology a mortal sin to distinguish it from lesser offences, which are termed venial sins — he is under obligation to confess that sin to a duly authorized priest. Before his confession is held by the Church to be of any value, however, he must be truly sorry that he committed the sin, he must resolve not to repeat it, he must agree to make restitution to any person that his sin may have injured, and he must be willing to accept the penance imposed by the priest. When these conditions obtain, and he makes his confession, the priest gives him absolution. This means that the priest, acting as God’s representative, forgives him in God’s Name for the offence against God.”

“You told me about that once,” assented Bill:

“I know,” said Father Charlie, “but I wanted to show you how this much is analogous to the marble-shooting episode. Let me make a rough sketch for you to see.”

ANALOGY.

He wrote rapidly on a scratch-pad, while Bill peered interestedly over his shoulder.

1. I shoot the marble.
2. I am sorry for my act and resolve not to repeat it.
3. I admit my act to the principal, who has authority from the school managers to dispose of the case.
4. I promise to apologize to you and to pay your doctor’s bill.
5. I accept the principal’s sentence to remain ten hours after school.
6. The principal forgives me in the name of the school.

“Looks reasonable to me,” said Bill, after he had read the outline carefully

OFFICIAL TEACHING.

“Now to get specifically to the question of indulgences,” said Father Charlie. “The official teaching of the Church is that after a person has made a good confession and received absolution there still remains what is known as the temporal punishment due to sin. In other words, God’s justice demands that we suffer the consequences of our having offended against His laws. The priest’s penance helps to do this. Moreover, we often observe that people suffer at least a part of this punishment in other ways while they are still on earth. For example, a man who has led an immoral life and then reforms may still have a weakened body in spite of his change of heart.”

“But we also know that there are many people who do not seem to receive during their lifetime the just punishment for their sinful deeds. Perhaps a person repents on his deathbed and has no time

before his death to make satisfaction for his offences. Such persons, still not ready to enter the presence of God, have had a place mercifully prepared for them where they can have their souls cleansed from all the results of their sins and thus be fit to enter heaven. This place is called purgatory."

"In other words, that's where you stay in after school," interposed Bill.

PART ...AND WHOLE.

"Exactly," smiled the priest. "The difference is, of course, that a boy might be kept after school and still be unrepentant but no unrepentant soul goes to purgatory. Only those whose sins are forgiven and who will go to heaven have that privilege; others go to a place of everlasting punishment."

"I believe I'm beginning to see where your indulgences come in," broke in Bill. "When Mr. Williams offered you three hours off if you memorized Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty' he really offered you an indulgence, didn't he?"

"That's right," Father Charlie assured him. "Since that was only a part of the time that some of us had to stay in, that was for us what the Church calls a partial indulgence. Mr. Williams had the authority to change a part — or all — of our punishment to a lighter one because of his official position. Through the power given the first Pope, Peter, to 'bind and loose,' the Holy Father, as head of the Church on earth, has the authority to do the same thing with regard to the punishment due our forgiven sins. You remember that Our Lord told him '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'."

"Mr. Williams' cancelling all our detention after school," continued Father Charlie, "is what we call a plenary indulgence. Both partial and plenary indulgences may be published by the Church and gained by penitents if they fulfil the required conditions."

IMPERFECT ANALOGY.

"I hate to mention this," said Bill, "but where does Benny come in?"

"In a very important place," said the priest, emphatically. "My analogy of the instance of staying after school is, like all analogies, imperfect. In purgatory, a soul can no longer make satisfaction for the sins it committed on earth, since its period of probation ended at death. We boys who had to stay in after school could still do works for ourselves — with the permission of the principal — to shorten our time of punishment. That is where the analogy is imperfect. Benny could not do the work authorized by Mr. Williams, so in that respect he was really the only one of the group like the souls in purgatory."

"Are you going to say that people on earth can gain indulgences for the souls in purgatory just as I gained Benny a plenary indulgence?" asked Bill.

"Just that!" exclaimed Father Charlie, admiringly. "You're a lot smarter than you used to be in school."

"Goodness knows you are too," retorted Bill, quickly, "or you couldn't possibly have explained the thing so that I could understand it."

"Check!" laughed Father Charlie. "Now that the usual insults have been exchanged, we can go on with our conversation."

THE CONDITIONS.

“What I’d like to know,” Bill said, after a pause, “is how indulgences are gained anyhow. Just what are the conditions?”

“The conditions vary,” replied Father Charlie. “Indulgences have been attached to many prayers and good works. But it is always required that a soul be in the state of grace — that is, all mortal sins forgiven — before an indulgence applies. Frequently a condition is to go to confession and Holy Communion within a certain period. And sometimes certain prayers must be offered for the intention of the Holy Father.”

Bill thought for a few minutes and then spoke with some embarrassment. “There’s one thing, Charlie, that I’d like to ask — and I apologize in advance for asking it. Among those who know nothing of the Church there’s so much talk about the sale of indulgences. I’d like that cleared up as we go along. You know how many people believe that priests charge a definite sum to get a soul out of purgatory. I don’t believe it. But you don’t think I’m impertinent to bring it up, do you?”

Father Charlie grinned. “I’ve been asked that question so much more impertinently that I’m not even a little offended at your question. To answer you directly: No money is ever charged for an indulgence of any sort. All Catholics know that even the attempt to do so would be a grave sin and that an indulgence purportedly sold would be valueless. Usually indulgences are gained by the devout recitation of certain prayers with the intention to gain the indulgence. Sometimes the performance of some other pious work is part of the conditions. In that connection, the Church has at times permitted the giving of alms for some worthy purpose as one of the conditions for the gaining of an indulgence. But when she has permitted this, she has always made it possible for poor people to substitute other good works for the almsgiving. No money is ever required to gain an indulgence.

SALE OF INDULGENCES?

“As for the old story that priests promise to free a soul from purgatory upon any conditions whatsoever, there is absolutely nothing to it ...No person on earth — not a priest any more than a lay person — knows whether or not a particular soul is in purgatory. The Church teaches that there is a purgatory and that those who die with unforgiven venial sins or without having satisfied for their mortal sins on earth go there until the effects of their sins are purged away. The Church teaches, as I have indicated, that souls in purgatory can be aided by the prayers and good works of those who are still on earth, since the souls in purgatory are, with us, a part of the Mystical Body, of which St. Paul speaks, and can therefore benefit by the good works of other members of that Body. Hence, it is a charitable thing to remember the souls in purgatory in our prayers and good works and to gain for them whenever possible indulgences that are applicable to them. But it is left to God to distribute the effects of our suffrages as He wills. And only He knows how they are applied.”

“I believe you.” Bill spoke simply. “There is only one more thing I want to know now: What about the card my patient had which said, ‘300 Days Indulgence’? What does that mean?”

“That’s a reasonable question,” replied Father Charlie. “The term ‘300 Days Indulgence’ does not mean that three-hundred days are taken off the time that a soul must remain in purgatory, since days are units of earthly time.

ORIGIN.

“The custom of using the term days to evaluate partial indulgences arose from a practice that was prevalent in the early Church. In those times, it was common to give much more severe penances than are given now. Sometimes a penitent would have to say certain prayers publicly or do some other public penance for quite a long period of time. So now, when the Church publishes an indulgence of three-hundred days for the recitation of a prayer such as was on the card that your scandalized patient had, the Church means that the recitation of this prayer under the usual conditions makes as much satisfaction for sin as would a penance of three-hundred days’ duration in the early days. The Church does not claim that this method of measuring indulgences is precise; it only offers a convenient way by which to indicate the comparative value of various indulgences.”

“And by the term ‘usual conditions’ you include being in a state of grace, is that it?” asked Bill.

“Absolutely,” said Father Charlie, emphatically. “One of the chief values attached to the gaining of indulgences — aside from the primary value of making satisfaction for the results of our sins — is that the attempting to gain them causes us to go more often to confession and Holy Communion and thus makes us better Christians while we are still on earth.”

“Well,” said Bill, rising to take his leave, “there’s one thing certain: somebody’s going to have to gain a lot of indulgences for that cook of yours after she dies or she’ll have a long time in purgatory.”

“How’s that?” questioned Father Charlie.

“Tempting folks like me to make pigs of themselves,” said Bill, opening his mouth to cram down the last crumbs of the sandwiches.

Father Charlie laughed. “You may be right, Bill. But I should like to call your attention to the fact that if you took the proper steps you might be able to gain some indulgences for her and thus repay her for some of the pleasure her cooking has given you. That’s the Catholic system, you know — sacrifice for one another.”

Bill’s face kept its grin, but his answer was thoughtful. “Stranger things have happened,” he said, making his usual abrupt departure.

“Stranger things indeed,” murmured Father Charlie to himself as he watched Bill’s car disappear up the street.

[Postscript: Since the reforms of Vatican II, the Church has decreed that there are two types of Indulgences – Plenary and Partial – and their meaning has been explained in the pamphlet. However, the Church no longer employs the custom of assigning numbers of ‘days’ to Partial Indulgences, but merely declares them to be ‘Partial Indulgences’.]
