

Why does the Catholic Church believe in “indulgences”?

By Graham Osborne

Indulgences are probably one of the Catholic Church’s most misunderstood and controversial teachings, and were a source of real discord during the Protestant Reformation as well. Some even wonder if they are still part of Catholic teaching today. So let’s add some needed clarity to this important Catholic doctrine.

Many associate indulgences with the buying and selling of forgiveness of sins, or even with “buying entrance into heaven”, but nothing could be further from the truth. Let me explain. Every sin we commit has a just consequence or punishment attached to it. And while we may in fact be truly sorry for that particular sin, and perhaps go to confession and have it forgiven, there can still be an effect to that forgiven sin that still remains. Sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution in confession forgives sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused [CCC 1459]. When King David sinned with Bathsheba, and then had her husband, Uriah, murdered, the prophet Nathan condemned David for this [2 Sam 12:13-14]. David truly repented of this sin, and Nathan said that God indeed had forgiven him, but there were punishments that would remain: the child from the union would die, David’s wives would be publicly “shamed”, and “the sword would never leave his house”.

Let me give another example. Your son carelessly throws a rock through the neighbour’s window. Afterwards, he is truly sorry for doing this and confesses to your neighbour. Your neighbour forgives him, but nevertheless, the restoration of the damaged window remains, and that comes out of your son’s own pocket.

Indulgences have nothing to do with the forgiveness of sin, but everything to do with the removal of a particular punishment or consequence attached to that forgiven sin. The Church’s term for this consequence is “temporal punishment”. The Church also teaches that sin can have both eternal *and* temporal punishment attached to it, depending on how serious it is –whether it is grave/mortal or venial. The eternal punishment attached to mortal sin can normally only be forgiven or remitted in Sacramental Confession [there are exceptions, see Catechism 1451-1452]. But the temporal punishment remaining after any sin is forgiven can only be removed or purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory [see my last month’s article on Purgatory].

This is where indulgences fit in. God, in His mercy, has made it possible for this temporal punishment to be removed by an “indulgence”, a remission or removal before Him of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has *already been forgiven*. And to be crystal clear, an indulgence does not gain *forgiveness* for sins. And a person cannot receive an indulgence for sins not yet committed either. And the Church certainly does not teach that you can buy your way out of Hell with an indulgence, or into Heaven for that matter. And they can never be “sold”.

The Church teaches that this “remission” is done through the authority that Jesus Himself gave to it in Matthew 16:19, where He said: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven... *whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*” [also Mat 18:18]. The Church has always understood that

this power to bind and loose includes the power not only to forgive sins in the Sacrament of Confession, but also to release any punishment due to these forgiven sins that still remains through what it terms an indulgence. And it does this by drawing on the great treasury of rewards/merits that have been won for us by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, and by the merits gained by the saints as well, united with Jesus' sacrifice [CCC 1475-77]. It makes this treasury available to those who desire to avail themselves of it, allowing it to be mercifully accessed and applied to them to help make satisfaction or expiation for the "damage" or temporal punishment that can still remain after their sins are forgiven.

The format for an indulgence offered by the Church usually includes prayer, the performance of specified acts, sacrifices and good works, along with the reception of the Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist, all with a proper intention of repentance and detachment from sin. Sometimes it might involve a pilgrimage to a holy site, or perhaps a period of specific prayer, or something similar.

Additionally, an indulgence can involve either a partial or total [plenary] remission of temporal punishment, as determined by the Church. It can also be received for and applied to someone who has died and is potentially in need of further purification "in" Purgatory [incidentally, someone in Hell cannot be helped by an indulgence, and someone in Heaven has no need of this help]. But in all cases, there is an emphasis on penitence, sorrow for sin, a desire to make expiation for the damage done by one's sins, and a desire to turn away from sin and grow in holiness. This is not "magic", it is the practical application of God's loving mercy, done through the authority of the Church He has left us. Indulgences are an incredible, merciful gift of God, and nothing less. And it's interesting that some Protestants have such an issue with it, because most wouldn't even balk at the idea of consequences for sin being forgiven simply through prayer! The concept of an indulgence is the same.

But what about abuses? Yes there have been abuses, particularly around the time of the Reformation. There has never been a problem with the actual doctrine of indulgences. It is part of the infallible doctrine of the Catholic Church, and has never changed and never will. But good things can sometimes be abused. There were people who had warped the understanding and proper application of indulgences, even clergy –some even "selling" indulgences and misrepresenting their benefits. And this abuse scandalized many. While there was a gross misapplication of this doctrine in limited situations, this abuse still did not render the teaching itself invalid. Shortly after this, the Church made provisions to ensure that such abuses would never happen again, clarifying the proper application of indulgences, but the doctrine itself remained unchanged.

So was Martin Luther right in condemning the abuse of indulgences? Yes he was. If his work to reform the practice of certain individuals in the Church had ended there, his efforts may have ultimately been praiseworthy. But in the end, where he erred grievously was to then attack the Church's actual teachings and authority –first attacking the specific doctrine of Indulgences, rather than just their abuse, and then denying other teachings after that. Eventually, he would radically and completely reject the authority of the Catholic Church, and in its place, adopt the novel idea of the authority of the "Bible Alone" in guiding the believer. It would be this fatal error that would result in the greatest fracturing of Christianity that the world has ever seen. We are still reeling from its effects today. "There are as many beliefs as there are heads", Martin Luther would ultimately lament in his old age... And it all started with indulgences...