

The German Reformation and the Issue of Indulgences

Martin Luther OSA (1483 – 1546) was a German Augustinian monk, Catholic priest, professor of theology and seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation in Germany. He strongly disputed the claim that freedom from God's punishment for sin could be purchased with monetary values. He confronted indulgence salesman Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar, with his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517.

His refusal to retract all of his writings at the demand of Pope Leo X in 1520 and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms in 1521 resulted in his excommunication by the Pope and condemnation as an outlaw by the Emperor.

Indulgences

One of the tipping points for Martin Luther was the “sale of indulgence” by the papal-appointed Dominican Friar, Johann Tetzel, In his 95 Theses Luther strongly disputed the claim that Indulgences could provide freedom from God's punishment for sin much less be purchased. The idea of Indulgences is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of Catholic thinking – by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. There have been and still are non-Catholic advocates that assert the Catholic position on Indulgences is that you can get a license to sin because you “store up” forgiveness, you subvert the work of Christ’s sacrificial and atoning death on the Cross, and – if you believe in Purgatory – you can reduced the amount of time served. The list of such claims is lengthy. But then again, when you ask Catholic about indulgences, you sometimes get these same claims.

In the context of the Reformation, it is necessary to understand indulgences. Rather than simply define “What is an Indulgence” let us consider the milieu of sin, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, penance, punishment, Purgatory, and the history of Indulgences. By the way, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1471), “An indulgence is a remission of the temporal punishment of sins that have already been forgiven in the sacrament of Confession.”

The temporal punishment of sins consists in a satisfactory penance.

Sin, Forgiveness and Consequences

What is true is this: only God can forgive sins. What the Catholic Church holds true is that through Christ, God’s forgiveness is made available through the ministry of the Church in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Here are the words the priest says at the end of the sacrament: “*God the Father of Mercy, through the death and resurrection of His Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit into the world for the forgiveness of sin. Through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*” In the confessional, the priest forgives sins ministerially, as representatives of Christ (cf. John 20:23) and also absolve sins as ministers of the Church (Matt 16:17).

Forgiveness means that God Himself has pardoned a sin. And while that forgiveness is available in ways other than the Sacrament of Reconciliation, even in the sacrament, the forgiveness comes from God. Absolution is the juridic act of the Church by/through which sins are remitted/removed and/or the punishment due to sin is likewise removed. So... what are the “punishments due to sin?”

“*Because God will bring to judgment every work, with all its hidden qualities, whether good or bad.*” (Eccl 12:14). That divine judgment includes the punishment for the bad work – sins. Within the Catholic understanding of sin there are two terms that are important to understand when the church speaks of the “punishments of sin”:

- “Eternal punishment” – the loss of eternal life with God, and the eternal death of hell; this is associated with mortal sin

- “temporal punishment” – even venial sin involves some degree of turning away from God and involves an attachment to transient things that do not aid one in the fullness of relationship with God. Temporal punishment is focused on helping to break these attachments.

The former (eternal punishment) is removed by the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is the second item (temporal punishment) that is impacted by Indulgences. A simple example of temporal punishment is the first sin of Adam and Eve. They were reconciled to God, but still left with the consequences: hard labor for each – neither of which was necessary in the Garden of Eden. Another temporal punishment of the original sin is that through this death entered the world. In other words, there are some “punishments of sin” that linger as a consequence of our concupiscence and the less-than-perfect world in which we live.

Perhaps closer to home, even as children we understand that after our apology for wrong doing, after receiving mom’s forgiveness, there are still consequences and punishments. The punishments are aids in breaking our attachments that lead us to sin in the first place. In the Confessional, penances are meant to help the person – whose sins are already forgiven – to begin to shed the attachments to sin.

Think about the “attachments” that lead you to sin, again and again. Maybe it is pride that leads you to continue to fabricate your accomplishments in what you say to others; some days we control that pride better than others – but it lingers. How long? Perhaps up to the doorway of death. Then what? Any last attachments that are barriers to a full relationship with God will be purified in Purgatory.

The area of “temporal punishments” is one that is the most subtle. We sin, we confess our sin, we make restitution if needed, we commit with God’s help and grace to sin no more, and yet, there is the attachment to sin. And we join St. Paul is asking why we do the things we do not want to do and do them still? “An indulgence is a remission of the temporal punishment of sins that have already been forgiven in the sacrament of Confession.”

And this is where we need to understand the history of indulgences. But as regards the history and operation with the Catholic Church in the 70 years before the Reformation, you can see how all the elements are in place: sin, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, penance, temporal punishment, indulgences and Purgatory

A Short History of Indulgences

In the early church, especially from the third century on, ecclesiastical authorities allowed a confessor, that is a Christian awaiting martyrdom because they confessed their faith in Christ during one of the Roman persecutions, to intercede for another Christian in order to shorten the other's canonical penance. The thinking was not “let this be a favor to the one who is about to be martyred” but rather a recognition of the holiness of the would-be martyr and the thought that at their death there would be this unused “merit”, when combined with the “merit” of other saints and most especially with the life and death of Christ, could form a “Treasury of Merit.” It is from this “storehouse” that the Church draws upon to shorten the canonical penance.

The Treasury of Merit

Even from the early centuries of the Church, the patriarchs looked to two passages from Scripture:

1. *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.”*
(Matthew 6:19-21)
2. *“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church, of which I am a minister in*

accordance with God's stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God" (Colossians 1:24-25)

Of this latter verse, Michael J. Gorman has written: "Just as Paul constantly reminds his readers that Christ (suffered and) died for them, he now reminds them that he suffers for them, for Christ's body. His role of suffering servant is complemented by his preaching and teaching ministry (1:25) in which he participates in the full revelation of God's mystery to those who believe the message (God's "saints"), especially among the Gentiles (1:26–27)."

It is these same passages to which St. Thomas Aquinas appealed when he argued that the saints performed their good actions "for the whole Church in general, even as the Apostle declares that he fills up 'those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ ... for His body, which is the Church' to whom he wrote. These merits then are the common property of the whole Church. Now those things that are the common property of a number are distributed to the various individuals according to the judgment of him who rules them all. Hence, just as one man would obtain the remission of his punishment if another were to satisfy for him, so would he too if another's satisfactions be applied to him by one who has the power to do so."

Early Church History

Certainly many good Christians would argue against the whole proposition of the Treasury of Merit. Be that as it may, it is clear that this idea was operative in the ancient Church. During the times of Roman persecution there were a number of Christians who were considered apostates, having denied the faith. When the particular period of persecution was over, the Church had to reconcile the apostates who desired full communion. This was the problem of the *lapsi*.

Those who on the contrary confessed their faith in Christ and were therefore condemned were referred to as confessors. If put to death on that charge, they were called martyrs. "The martyrs' and confessors' sufferings were credited with the power of compensating the sin of the *lapsi*. It was to the confessors that the *lapsi* turned to obtain speedy reconciliation, utilizing for their benefit the merits accumulated by the heroism of the confessors. The Church authorities, especially from the 3rd century on, allowed the intercession of confessors to shorten the time of penance to be undergone by those who sought forgiveness. A priest or deacon could reconcile *lapsi* in danger of death on the basis of a martyr's letter of indulgence, but in general the intervention of the higher church authority, the bishop, was required.

Once the age of persecutions was over, reconciliation was achieved through sacramental confession and a very public penance, sometimes very severe penances. The Council of Epaone (a local French council) in 517 reduced to two years the penance that apostates were to undergo on their return to the Church, but obliged them to fast one day in three during those two years, to come to church and take their place at the penitents' door, and to leave with the catechumens. Given that level of penance, one sees why an indulgence would be attractive. And, given human nature, it is also possible to see why it can be open to abuse.

It became customary to commute penances to less demanding works, such as prayers, alms, fasts and even the payment of fixed sums of money depending on the various kinds of offenses (tariff penances). By the tenth century some penances were not replaced but merely reduced in connection with pious donations, pilgrimages and similar meritorious works. Then, in the 11th and 12th centuries, the recognition of the value of these works began to become associated not so much with canonical penance but with remission of the temporal punishment due to sin.

And this is when indulgences began to replace things such as the meritorious action. What was in peril of being lost was the idea that the performance of the meritorious action (e.g.) lead to a conversion of heart which countered the attachment to the things that would lead us away from God.

Late Medieval Abuses of Indulgences

There are episodes in history when – with and without the cooperation of the hierarchy of the Church – you could hire someone to fulfill the public portion of an assigned penance. There are times when you could “buy down” the penance or buy your way out of it all together. There was always a veneer of acceptability about: a donor provides a gift, the pastor of the church gives an indulgence. But eventually, it became a transaction with purchase and indulgence duly documented. In the midst of all this one can see how the contritional and penitential aspect is lost among the mercantile and barter elements.

Indulgences became increasingly popular in the Middle Ages as a reward for displaying piety and doing good deeds, though, doctrinally speaking, the Church stated that the indulgence was only valid for temporal punishment for sins already forgiven in the Sacrament of Confession. The faithful asked that indulgences be given for saying their favorite prayers, doing acts of devotion, attending places of worship, and going on pilgrimage; confraternities wanted indulgences for putting on performances and processions; associations demanded that their meetings be rewarded with indulgences. Good deeds included charitable donations of money for a good cause, and money thus raised was used for many righteous causes, both religious and civil; building projects funded by indulgences include churches, hospitals, leper colonies, schools, roads, and bridges. One can see the seeds being planted for later, potential abuse.

The later Middle Ages saw the growth of considerable abuses. Greedy commissaries sought to extract the maximum amount of money for each indulgence. Professional "pardoners" (*quaestores* in Latin) - who were sent to collect alms for a specific project - practiced the unrestricted sale of indulgences. Many of these *quaestores* exceeded official Church doctrine, whether in avarice or ignorant zeal, and promised rewards like salvation from eternal damnation in return for money – which was never part of the understanding of indulgences, but all the elements were ripe for the “sale” of indulgences to be perceived exactly that way.

With the permission of the Church, indulgences also became a way for Catholic rulers to fund expensive projects, such as Crusades and cathedrals, by keeping a significant portion of the money raised from indulgences in their lands. There was a tendency to forge documents declaring that indulgences had been granted. Indulgences grew to extraordinary magnitude, in terms of longevity and breadth of forgiveness.

The Threshold of the Reformation

The scandalous conduct of the "pardoners"/*quaestores* was an immediate occasion of the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, Pope Leo X offered indulgences for those who gave alms to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The aggressive marketing practices of Johann Tetzel in promoting this cause provoked Martin Luther to write his Ninety-Five Theses, condemning what he saw as the purchase and sale of salvation. In Thesis 28 Luther objected to a saying attributed to Tetzel: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs". The Ninety-Five Theses not only denounced such transactions as worldly but denied the Pope's right to grant pardons on God's behalf in the first place: the only thing indulgences guaranteed, Luther said, was an increase in profit and greed, because the pardon of the Church was in God's power alone.

The Counter-Reformation

On 16 July 1562, the Council of Trent suppressed the office of *quaestores* and reserved the collection of alms to two canon members of the chapter, who were to receive no remuneration for their work; it also reserved the publication of indulgences to the bishop of the diocese. Then on 4 December 1563, in its final session, the Council addressed the question of indulgences directly, declaring them "most

salutary for the Christian people", decreeing that "all evil gains for the obtaining of them be wholly abolished", and instructing bishops to be on the watch for any abuses concerning them. A few years later, in 1567, Pope Pius V canceled all grants of indulgences involving any fees or other financial transactions

The Legacy Today – Myths about Indulgences

Myth 1: A person can buy his way out of hell with indulgences – sorry, only God can forgive sins

Myth 2: A person can buy indulgences for sins not yet committed – sorry, only God can forgive sins

Myth 3: A person can "buy forgiveness" with indulgences – see the above

Myth 4: Indulgences were invented as a means for the Church to raise money – indulgences were operative in the Church almost 1,000 years before fund-raising became attached to it,

Myth 5: An indulgence will shorten your time in purgatory by a fixed number of days – you can see where this idea might have had foundation back in the early Church when numbers of days of penance were indeed reduced. Add to it that in the Catholic tradition that we do believe in the value of prayers for the dead and in Purgatory. Combine the two and you get “reduced your days in Purgatory” – but that has never been the teaching of the Church. (But I will admit having been taught that by overly pious and well-intended people)