

INDULGENCES

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DOCTRINE of the Catholic Church often greatly misunderstood both by non-Catholics and Catholics is that of Indulgences. As a result of these misunderstandings many erroneous opinions have been set forth on the matter, resulting in countless attacks being made upon the Church by her adversaries.

The word indulgence, from the Latin *indulgere*, originally meant complaisance, mercy or favor. Later in post-classical Latin it came to mean the remission of debts or punishments, while in Scripture and Roman Law the term was generally used to designate the release from captivity or punishment. In early ecclesiastical usage the word had almost as many meanings as it had in profane use. Gradually, however, its meaning came to be restricted, so that in the twelfth century we find an indulgence meaning the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin. This same meaning is preserved in the New Code of Canon Law where we find an indulgence defined as "the remission before God of the penalty due to *sin already forgiven*, which the ecclesiastical authority grants out of the treasury of the Church, to the living by way of absolution, to the dead by way of suffrage."¹ From this authentic definition of the Supreme Legislator of the Church, it is apparent that an indulgence is not a license to commit sin nor a pardon for future sins. Neither is it the remission of the eternal punishment due to sin.

In the commission of every sin a two-fold wound is inflicted upon the soul, first, the stain of guilt, *reatus culpae*, which consists in turning away from God and the turning towards creatures. If this turning away from God and turning towards creatures is complete, the bond of charity existing between God and the soul is broken, the soul loses sanctifying grace and incurs spiritual death. Such is mortal sin. On the other hand, if our aversion from God is not complete, the soul does not incur this

¹ *Codex Juris Canonici*, Can. 911.

spiritual death. In addition to the guilt of sin, there is also a debt of punishment, *reatus poenae*. Saint Thomas teaches that because mortal sin consists primarily in the aversion from God and secondarily in the conversion to creatures, and is, therefore, a complete rebellion against the Creator, it deserves eternal punishment. But venial sin, being only a partial aversion from God, deserves only a temporary punishment since the soul still remains in the state of sanctifying grace.²

It has always been the teaching of the Church that mortal sins committed after the reception of Baptism may be forgiven only by the Sacrament of Penance, or if this is impossible by an act of perfect contrition with the intention of confessing as soon as possible. Although by this act mortal sin together with the aversion from God and the eternal punishment are remitted, nevertheless, there is still due a debt of temporal punishment, since the conversion to creatures still remains.

Such however, is not the case in the matter of venial sins. The Council of Trent³ teaches "by these sins we are not excluded from the grace of God, although they may rightly and profitably, and without presumption be declared in confession, yet they may be omitted without guilt, and be expiated by other remedies." The most common of these remedies are the reception of the Holy Eucharist, acts of contrition and the use of the sacramentals.

Since as we have seen, an indulgence is not the remission of sin, the question might be asked how certain formulae of earlier days are to be understood where indulgences are granted *a culpa et poena*, i.e. from guilt and punishment. Certain theologians have taught that this phrase *a culpa et poena* is to be understood in the following manner: the indulgence presupposing the reception of the Sacrament of Penance on the part of the penitent who is thus freed from the guilt of sin, now releases him from the temporal punishment due to sin.⁴ It is the accepted opinion of most theologians that this form signifies nothing else than the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, for the eternal punishment due to sin is always forgiven with the guilt of sin. That this form of granting indulgences did not meet with the approval of the Church is evident from the fact that the Council

² St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa q. 86 a. 4.

³ Sess. XIV, Ch. 5.

⁴ W. H. Kent, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York, 1913), p. 783.

of Constance in 1417 revoked all indulgences in which this formula occurred.

That the Church has the power of granting indulgences is a matter of faith since this declaration was made by the Council of Trent⁵ in the following words: "Since the power of granting indulgences has been given to the Church by Christ, and since the Church from the earliest times has made use of this divinely given power, the holy synod teaches and ordains that the use of indulgences, as most salutary to Christians and as approved by the authority of the councils, shall be retained in the Church, and it further pronounces anathema against those who either declare that indulgences are useless or deny that the Church has the power to grant them." Likewise this prerogative of the Church may be proved from the words of Holy Scripture,⁶ "And whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven." As a consequence of Our Lord's words this power of loosing is not restricted to sins, but extends to any bond which is able to prevent man from attaining his ultimate end. Moreover this power of remitting sins which is in the Church involves the power of conceding indulgences, since a power of this kind ought to be able to remit also the punishment remaining after the guilt has been wiped away.

In order that the Church have this power of granting indulgences two things are necessary and suffice, namely, that the Church have a spiritual treasury from which satisfactions for temporal punishments due to sins may be drawn; secondly, that there be for the faithful the possibility of satisfying for this temporal punishment. In the Bull *Unigenitus* published by Pope Clement VI,⁷ His Holiness has defined that such a treasury exists in the following words, "Christ shed of His blood not merely a drop, though this would have sufficed, but a copious torrent, thereby laying up an infinite treasury for mankind." In addition there are the works of the Blessed Virgin who was without sin and consequently was not bound by any debt of temporal punishment. To these may be added the sufferings and penances of the saints and martyrs which were far greater than the temporal punishments they incurred. The second condition required that the Church have this power of conceding indulgences is found in the Communion of Saints. By this union, all of the faithful

⁵ Sess. XXV. Ch. 21.

⁶ Matt. xviii, 18.

⁷ Pope Clement VI, *Unigenitus Dei Filii*, Jan. 25, 1343. (*Denziger*, 550.)

are so intimately joined under one head, Christ, as in a body, that all the good works of the just become as it were the property of each one and accrue to the profit of each.

According to the teaching of the Church, the source of indulgences is this spiritual treasury in which are contained all the merits of Christ, the Blessed Mother and the Saints. The custody of this treasury is given over to the Church which acts as the administrator in dispensing these spiritual riches to the faithful. This power She has exercised even in the earliest times as is evident from the words of St. Paul in writing to the Corinthians,⁸ "And to whom you have pardoned anything, I also: for, what I have pardoned, if I have pardoned anything, for your sakes have I done it in the person of Christ." It is true that the form of indulgences as they exist in the Church today differ from the form in earlier days. These differences however, are merely accidental and in no way effect the essentials which have always remained unchanged.

Although all indulgences are essentially the same, by reason of the effect produced in the soul of the recipient they are divided into plenary and partial. The first as its name signifies remits the entire temporal punishment due to sin. "Unless it has been expressly stated to the contrary a plenary indulgence may be gained only once in the same day, although the same work may be performed many times."⁹ There are, however, some notable exceptions to this law in the *toties quoties* indulgences granted to all the faithful who visit a Franciscan Church on the Feast of Portiuncula,¹⁰ to all who recite one third part of the Rosary in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament,¹¹ the indulgence granted to all the faithful who visit a Church of the Rosary Confraternity from noon on the Saturday preceding the feast of Rosary Sunday to midnight of the feast itself,¹² and the indulgence granted to all who visit any Church from noon on the Feast of All Saints Day to midnight of the Feast of All Souls.¹³ The first three of these indulgences are applicable to both the living and the dead, while the last may be applied only to the souls in Purgatory. On the other hand, a partial indulgence is one which remits only a portion of the temporal punish-

⁸ II Cor. ii, 10.

⁹ C. I. C., Can. 928.

¹⁰ S. C. Indulgences, August 17, 1892.

¹¹ Cong. S. O., (Sectio De Indulgentiis) Sept. 4, 1927.

¹² S. C. Indulgences, July 7, 1885.

¹³ Cong. S. O., (Sectio De Indulgentiis) June 25, 1914.

ment due to sin. It may be partial either by reason of the manner granted, e.g. an indulgence of seven years, or because of the defect of disposition on the part of the recipient. A partial indulgence of this latter sort is one which is converted from a plenary into a partial, because the subject, on account of his imperfect disposition is unable to gain it as a plenary indulgence. As a matter of fact, the gaining of a plenary indulgence is very difficult, since, according to the common teaching of theologians, a prerequisite is that the subject be free from all sin and affection to even the slightest venial sin. The entire effect of the indulgence would not be lost, because, it is explicitly stated in the Code, "a plenary indulgence is understood as granted in such a way, that if anyone is not able to gain it fully, nevertheless, one may gain it partially according to the disposition one has."¹⁴

By reason of its duration an indulgence may be either perpetual or temporal. Perpetual are those which are conceded without limit of time in perpetuity or until their revocation. Temporary are those which have been given for a determined period, e.g. for three years, and this time having elapsed, the indulgence ceases. By reason of the manner of gaining them, an indulgence may be local, personal or real. Local indulgences are those which are affixed to a determined place or thing in a determined place, e.g. to a church, altar, or a statue permanently located in a church. Real indulgences are those annexed to some movable thing, e.g. to rosaries, medals and the like. Indulgences of this sort differ from local indulgences in this that they are attached to some movable thing, whereas, local are attached to some immovable thing. Thirdly, personal indulgences are those conceded to certain individuals or moral persons without any determination as to place.

Lastly, indulgences may be either general or particular, according as they are granted to all the faithful or are limited to certain classes of persons. Likewise they may be divided into those which are applicable to the living, to the dead and to both the living and the dead. Indulgences granted to the living are granted *per modum absolutionis*. Every living member of the church is subject to its jurisdiction. Consequently when the Church grants an indulgence to one of the faithful, it exercises that power given to it by Christ. Hence, it is certain that the full affect of an indulgence is produced, provided all the requisite

¹⁴ C. I. C. Can. 926.

conditions are fulfilled. It is not to be presumed because of this that the Church allows the penitent to disavow the debt he owes to Almighty God. Rather, as St. Thomas says, "He who gains an indulgence is not thereby released outright from what he owes as a penalty, but is provided with the means of paying it."¹⁵ When the Church grants an indulgence applicable to the souls in Purgatory, She does so *per modum suffragii*, i.e. She offers to God a portion of this spiritual treasury entrusted to Her care, and asks Him to apply it to this or that particular soul, and thereby shorten its punishment in Purgatory. It should be noted here that all indulgences contained in the *Raccolta* are, by a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences, September 30, 1852, applicable to the souls in Purgatory. Moreover, according to Canon 930 of the Code, all indulgences granted by the Roman Pontiffs may be applied to the faithful departed.

The power of granting indulgences resides principally in the Pope, because as St. Thomas tells us, "the power of granting indulgences is given to him who presides over the Church."¹⁶ This teaching of the Angelic Doctor has been embodied in the Code²⁷ where it is stated: "Besides the Roman Pontiff to whom the distribution of the entire spiritual treasury of the Church has been entrusted by Christ, the Lord, those only are able to grant indulgence to whom it has been expressly conceded by law." Those enumerated in the law as having this power are Cardinals¹⁸ who have the faculty of granting an indulgence of two hundred days *toties quoties* to persons in places or institutes under their jurisdiction. Should this indulgence be granted outside of their jurisdiction it may be gained only by those present. Metropolitans¹⁹ may grant an indulgence of one hundred days in their own and in the dioceses of their suffragans. Residential Bishops²⁰ and Vicars and Prefects Apostolic²¹ even though these latter lack the episcopal character are empowered by law to grant an indulgence of fifty days within the confines of their respective territories. In order to prevent abuses which might arise, the Code²² further states that inferiors of the Roman Pon-

¹⁵ St. Thomas, *Suppl. Q.* 25, a. 1 ad 2um.

¹⁶ St. Thomas, *Quodlibetales*, 2, a. 16.

¹⁷ C. I. C. Can. 912.

¹⁸ C. I. C. Can. 234 § 4, no. 24.

¹⁹ C. C. C. Can. 274 § 2.

²⁰ C. I. C. Can. 349 § 2, no. 2.

²¹ C. I. C. Can. 294 § 2.

²² C. I. C. Can. 913.

tiff are unable to grant to others the faculty of conceding indulgences they have received from the Holy See, without an express indult to that effect; they may not grant indulgences applicable to the souls in Purgatory; they can not grant additional indulgences to an object, an act of piety or a confraternity to which the Holy See or some one else has attached indulgences, unless new conditions are prescribed. Although the Pope as head of the Church is the grantor of these indulgences, it has been customary for him to delegate this power to one of the Congregations. During the course of time this delegation has been transferred to various congregations. Due to changes of recent years, the faculty of granting indulgences was entrusted by Pope Pius X to the Sacred Penitentiary, while it remains the duty of the Holy Office to decide all questions concerning the doctrine of indulgences. In order to prevent the spread of apocryphal indulgences the Code decrees²³ that all who have received concessions for all the faithful, are bound under pain of nullity of the favors received of sending an authentic copy to the Sacred Penitentiary.

Certain conditions have been laid down in the Code for the gaining of indulgences. Canon 925 No. 1 declares who are capable of gaining indulgences, while the second section of this same canon sets forth the necessary conditions for the actual gaining of them. Hence to be capable of gaining an indulgence for oneself one must be baptized, not excommunicated and in the state of grace for at least the last work prescribed and be a subject of the grantor. The second requirement of this section states that the person must be in the state of grace at the time the last work is performed. Thus, should a person fall into mortal sin while performing the necessary exercises, he would not lose the indulgences if before the exercises are completed, he again regained sanctifying grace either by Confession or making an act of perfect contrition. In connection with the last condition, it should be noted that unless stated otherwise, *peregrini, vagi* and those living in a territory may gain the indulgences granted for that territory, provided, these indulgences have not been restricted to a particular class of persons.²⁴

The second section of this canon treats of the requirements necessary for the actual gaining of indulgences. They are as follows; one must have at least a general intention, and the

²³ C. I. C. Can. 920.

²⁴ C. I. C. Can. 927.

stated works must be fulfilled in the time and manner prescribed. It seems sufficient that this intention be at least habitual. Any notable change or omission of the works invalidates the gaining of the indulgences. These works must, with the exception of giving alms, be performed personally, and should also be of supererogation, unless he who concedes the indulgence decrees otherwise.²⁵

Often times certain particular works are accustomed to be prescribed for the gaining of an indulgence. Briefly they are Confession, Communion, Prayers for the intention of the Pope and visits to some church. The confession may be made within the eight days preceding the feast or within the octave.²⁶ Communion may be received on the day before the feast or within the octave. For the intention of the Pope it is customary to recite five *Paters* and *Aves* for the fulfillment of this requirement. These prayers must be said orally however, as mental prayer does not suffice.

²⁵ Raccolta, P. VIII.

²⁶ C. I. C. Can. 931.

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