

THE RANSOM FROM PURGATORY

Among the articles of faith which the Holy Catholic Church proposes for our belief, the doctrine of indulgences holds a unique place. To the enlightened Catholic mind it has always appeared clear, reasonable and most consoling. Protestants, on the other hand, look upon it not as truth but as something absurd, erroneous and thus contrary to Sacred Scripture. In fact, since the days of Martin Luther all the reformers have found in the Church's teaching on indulgences an occasion for perpetuating one of the greatest religious controversies known in the history of Christendom. It is not the purpose of this article, however, to treat of the causes which gave rise in the sixteenth century to that unprecedented theological discussion concerning indulgence preaching, but to expose and explain the doctrine of indulgences as it is taught by our Holy Mother the Church, through St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor.

Although it may be said that the dogma of faith concerning indulgences stands by itself, nevertheless it is closely connected with several other great truths of our religion and consequently in order to understand the doctrine of indulgences rightly an accurate knowledge of those other truths is necessary. To begin with we must consider the nature of sin and its consequences. Sin is nothing else than a morally bad act, an act not in accord with God's law. A mortal sin is a serious transgression of the Divine law. It consists in a total aversion of the soul from God and a complete severance of the bonds of charity by which the soul is united to its Creator. By a venial sin man does not offend God grievously, because he does not break the bonds of friendship or deprive the soul of sanctifying grace. However, by every sin, whether venial or mortal, the soul contracts a twofold burden, that of guilt and that of punishment.

There exists a distinction between what we call the guilt of sin and the stain of sin. The former is contracted by every sin whether venial or mortal. The latter, which St. Thomas takes to mean the privation of grace (Ia IIae, Q. 86, a. 1), is produced only when mortal sin is committed. Occasionally in his works the great doctor refers to venial sin staining the soul but this is only in a restricted sense, in so far as it lessens the lustre of virtue. (I-II Q. 89, a. 1.)

In the eighty-seventh question of the First of the Second Part of the Summa, St. Thomas exposes the Catholic doctrine concerning the second effect of sin, namely, the debt of punishment. Since punishment is proportionate to sin, it follows as a consequence that in so far as mortal sin turns man completely away from God, the immutable Good, it carries with it the penalty of eternal punishment. When venial sin is committed the soul averts from God to creatures not indeed totally, but only partially and therefore such an act places upon the soul the obligation of a certain amount of temporal punishment to be undergone in this life or in the next.

Although we should always remember that Almighty God is infinitely just, nevertheless we should not forget that He is also infinitely merciful. If on the one hand the justice of God demands that sinful man be punished, yet on the other hand His mercy pleads that he be pardoned. And where does the mercy of Almighty God manifest itself more than in the sacred tribunal of Penance. The priest raises his hand in absolution, and the guilt of sin is removed, the debt of eternal punishment is remitted and occasionally the entire debt of temporal punishment when the degree of penitential sorrow is equivalent in intensity to the degree of the malice of the sin. For as St. Thomas says, "Christ's Passion is of itself sufficient to remove all debt of punishment, not only eternal, but also temporal; and man is released from the debt of punishment according to the measure of his share in the power of Christ's Passion. In Baptism man shares in the power of Christ's Passion fully, since he dies with Him to sin, and is born again in Him to a new life, so that in Baptism, man receives the remission of all debt of punishment. In Penance man shares in the power of Christ's Passion according to the measure of his own acts." (III. Q. 86, a. 4, ad 3). As a general rule it may be said that penitents rarely have all the dispositions necessary to share fully in the power of Christ's Passion and to obtain the remission of the entire debt of punishment demanded by the justice of God. Therefore it cannot be denied that after sin has been forgiven there often remains a certain amount of debt, which the sinner must pay to the justice of God either by performing penances or undergoing temporal punishment.

History testifies that in the early days of Christianity the most severe penances were imposed upon sinners and especially upon those whose sins were of a public character. These penances consisted for the most part in humiliations, fasts, discipline and other austerities. Many, because of the nature of their sins, were obliged to perform these penitential exercises not for a few days or weeks but for a period of years. The faithful, however, were not always able to submit to these penances, because it sometimes happened that their bodily weakness made them incapable of going through a long stage of privations and mortifications. In such cases the Church allowed commutations, that is to say, granted lighter penances which did not tell so much on human nature. Frequently bishops deemed it expedient to substitute, in place of the long and severe penance prescribed by the canons, the recitation of certain prayers, the giving of alms or a pilgrimage to the holy places, drawing for full satisfaction on the treasury of the Church, wherein is contained the superabundant merits of our Lord Jesus Christ and His saints. These commutations became known in the course of time as indulgences and even in our own day we still speak of them under this name.

An indulgence is defined in Canon Law as "A remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins already pardoned as to their guilt, which the ecclesiastical authority grants from the treasury of the Church, for the living in the form of absolution, for the faithful departed in the form of suffrage." (Can. 911). It is evident from this definition that an indulgence is not, as most Protestants imagine, a pardon for sin nor a permission to commit sin. On the contrary, freedom from mortal sin is the first requisite for gaining an indulgence; furthermore no person can gain a plenary indulgence in its entirety who is not free from even venial sin and all willful affection to sin.

Since we have made it clear that only those who are in a state of grace can gain an indulgence, let us now turn our attention to another great truth which the Church teaches in regard to indulgences. What we wish to consider is contained in these words of the above definition, "A remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins." In other words an indulgence has value not only in the sight of the Church but also in the sight of God. And consequently a penitent who gains an indul-

gence is, in the first place, released from the obligation of performing that amount of public penance which would be imposed upon him for his sin according to the ancient canons supposing that they were still in full vigor. Moreover, he has also satisfied in the sight of Almighty God, in whole or in part according to the nature of the indulgence, for the temporal punishment which he incurred by the commission of the sin, and which without the indulgence he would have to undergo either in this life or in the next.

In the *Summa Theologica* (Sup. Q. 25. a. I.) St. Thomas after stating definitely that through the gaining of an indulgence the temporal punishment due to our sins is lessened in the sight of God, proceeds to demonstrate the truth of this assertion. Now it must be borne in mind that the superabundant merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, of His Blessed Mother and of the saints have not become exhausted after so many generations nor have they lost any of their value in the course of time. They are all contained in the treasury of the Church and we know that they will be pleasing and acceptable in the sight of Almighty God throughout all ages. So great is the quantity of these merits and especially those of our Divine Lord that they exceed the entire debt of punishment due to the justice of God by all mankind. But these merits are the common property of the whole Church because we are all members of one mystical body and through the communion of the saints we have a share in the good works of one another. And consequently the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter, the key-bearer, by the power of the keys, can, for a reasonable cause, draw these merits from the treasury of the Church and distribute them to all the faithful, thus supplying that which through human weakness they are unable to perform; and at the same time helping them to pay off the debt of temporal punishment which they cannot discharge by themselves.

Although the Church has power to open its treasury of good works and to dispense the superabundant merits of our Divine Lord, of His Blessed Mother and of His saints, to the faithful according to their needs, nevertheless it would be wrong to suppose that because we share in these merits they accordingly become our own. As a matter of fact merit is something that belongs properly and exclusively to the one who merits.

Thus it is that the degree of glory of the saints in heaven is proportionate to their merits. However, the merits of the saints besides being the means of determining their degree of glory, may also be offered in satisfaction for the temporal punishment which is due to the sins of mankind. In this respect it may be applied to others and is not necessarily restricted to any particular person. Now we know that the saints performed works of satisfaction which most assuredly overbalanced the amount of temporal punishment due to their sins. But apart from the satisfactory works which the saints performed over and above the amount of punishment due to their sins, we know that the merits of Christ are sufficient to cancel the whole debt of punishment due to the justice of God by all mankind. Therefore keeping in mind the doctrine of the communion of the saints and the fact that one man in a state of charity can satisfy for another, we can readily understand how it is that the Church can draw the superabundant satisfactions of Christ and His saints from its treasury of good works, and transfer them to poorer and weaker members who have not satisfied entirely for the temporal punishment due to their sins.

It seems within the scope of this article to state in conclusion what the Church teaches in regard to the efficacy of indulgences in relation to the faithful departed. Now it is part of the Catholic doctrine to believe that we can apply the indulgences granted by the Church only to the souls in Purgatory. However, since the Church exercises no direct jurisdiction over her departed children the application cannot be made to them directly, but only by way of suffrage. Over the souls of the dead Almighty God has conceded to no one the authority to pronounce formal judgment or to impart direct absolution. But nevertheless the same solicitude and tender care which the Church lavishes upon her children during their mortal life, follows them even beyond the grave. Once again the Church draws forth from her treasury the infinite merits of the Redeemer of men. She entreats Almighty God to accept these satisfactory works of His only-begotten Son and to have mercy on those suffering souls who wait at Heaven's gate yearning to be admitted into the eternal Holy of Holies, into the everlasting presence of their King and Lord.

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