

Indulgences

by Sebastian R. Fama

Did the Catholic Church invent its doctrine on indulgences in order to extract money from the faithful? Some people think so. They are quick to remind us that it was the selling of indulgences in the Middle Ages that sparked the Protestant Reformation. No one disputes that there were abuses by individuals in the past. But past abuses should not be used as a reason to reject indulgences or any other doctrine. The Bible itself has always been subject to abuse. Should it too be rejected? Of course not! Both the Bible and the doctrine on Indulgences should stand or fall on their own merits.

To begin with, indulgences cannot be bought. Some will claim that the fees attached to Masses for the dead prove otherwise. However, the fees are small and usually go to the priest who says the Mass. Certainly priests, just like all full-time ministers, deserve to get paid for the work they do. The Apostle Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 9:11-12: "If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more?"

The use of indulgences goes back to the early days of the Church and is firmly based on scriptural principals. As we saw in the essay on Purgatory the Bible clearly teaches that some punishments are **eternal (lasting forever)**, and others are **temporal (lasting for only a time)**. Indulgences are granted for the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin.

The Church has always taught that temporal punishment is a possibility in this life and in Purgatory. It **heals the wounds of sin** and **prepares us for eternal happiness with God**. Pope Paul VI speaks of that dual role in his *Apostolic Constitution on Indulgences*: "The aim pursued by ecclesiastical authority [The Church] in granting indulgences is not only that of **helping the faithful to expiate the punishment due sin** but also that of **urging them to perform works of piety, penance and charity – particularly those which lead to growth in faith and which favor the common good**" (4:8). The Bible itself encourages such behavior.

On piety: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

On penance: "Yet even now," says the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil" (Joel 2:12-13).

On charity: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18).

Those receiving indulgences must be sorry for their sins. The wrong attitude toward sin renders our prayers ineffectual. In Psalm 66:18-19 we read: "**If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.**" Performing acts of piety, penance and charity helps us to focus on the effects of sin, thus promoting in us a genuine contempt for it. A truly repentant individual is more likely to grow in holiness.

Indulgences may be partial, remitting only a part of the temporal punishment due, or plenary, remitting all the temporal punishment due. The Catholic Church is sometimes accused of trying to keep people away from the Bible. Ironically, "A *partial indulgence* is granted to the faithful who, with the veneration due the divine word, make a spiritual reading from Sacred Scripture. A *plenary indulgence* is granted, if this reading is continued for at least one half an hour" (*Enchiridion of Indulgences* No. 50).

Strictly speaking, the granting of indulgences is not the forgiving of sins. "An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins **whose guilt has already been forgiven**" (*Catechism of the Catholic*

Church No. 1471). Thus, indulgences may be applied to the souls in purgatory by way of prayer. This was taught by the early Church as evidenced by Tertullian, who wrote: "The faithful widow prays for the soul of her husband, and begs for him in the interim repose, and participation in the first resurrection, and offers prayers on the anniversary of his death" (*Monogamy* 10 [A.D. 213]).

"An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus (Matthew 16:19), intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishment due for their sins" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* No. 1478).

There is some misunderstanding concerning the term "the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints." It is feared that the Church is somehow equating the saints with Christ. However, this is not so. The treasury consists of the prayers of Christ and the saints. The term is simply an acknowledgment that they both pray for us (Hebrews 7:25, Revelation 5:8). The Bible itself refers to us as "God's co-workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

Furthermore, the use of the word "*merits*" does not mean that we can earn anything from God. James Akin addressed this point in an article that appeared in the November 1994 issue of "*This Rock*" magazine entitled, "*A Primer on Indulgences.*" He wrote:

Humans can't earn anything from God, though by His grace they can please him in a way He chooses to reward. Picturing the saints' acts under a single, collective metaphor (such as a treasury) is biblical: "It was granted her [the bride] to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" (Revelation 19:8). John tells us, "For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." Here the righteous deeds of the saints are pictured under the collective metaphor of clothing on the bride of Christ, the Church. Jewish theology also recognizes a treasury of merits. Jewish theologians speak of "the merits of the fathers" – the idea being that the patriarchs pleased God and inherited certain promises as a reward. God fulfills these promises and ends up treating later Jews more gently than they would have been treated. The idea of "the merits of the fathers" is essentially the same as the Catholic concept of the "treasury of merits." Both postulate a class of individuals, the Old Testament patriarchs on the one hand and Christ and the saints on the other, who have pleased God and whom God chooses to reward in a way involving lesser temporal punishments on others.

An example of this principle can be found in 2 Kings 8:16-19:

In the fifth year of Joram the son of Ahab, king of Israel, Jehoram the son of Jehosaphat, king of Judah, began to reign. He was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Yet the Lord would not destroy Judah, for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever.

If the doctrine on indulgences was created to extort money from the faithful, the Church has done a very poor job of it. A simple prayer such as: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph; have mercy on the souls in purgatory," will provide them with relief. If someone says a rosary in the presence of the Eucharist, (usually in Church) they can obtain a plenary indulgence which they can then offer up for someone in Purgatory. And as we saw above, indulgences can also be gained by reading Scripture, or by performing charitable acts. And you can do all of this without Church officials ever knowing about it.

That indulgences exist is reasonable and to be expected. The same loving Father who, through the death of His only Son provided a way to eliminate our eternal punishment, also provided a way to eliminate our temporal punishment.