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**Indulgences in the Jubilee Year:
Making New Sense of a Traditional Practice**

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Introduction

The opportunity to obtain a plenary indulgence by passing through one of the designated holy doors and by fulfilling other requirements has stirred a certain interest and, at the same time, considerable puzzlement. Few priests or religious educators feel confident to answer a rather straightforward question that many people have: *What exactly is an indulgence?* In fact, if they have a sense of church history, these same religious leaders may also feel embarrassment when indulgences are brought up. Weren't they, after all, a commercialized spiritual transaction that led to the Protestant Reformation? And yet Pope Francis, a beloved and trusted religious leader, has linked a plenary indulgence with observances in the course of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. His authority fuels the interest in indulgences, even as many pastoral leaders would perhaps rather let the matter go.

In these reflections, I will propose an understanding of indulgences that situate them in God's mercy and our graced and free responsibility before that mercy. Furthermore, I suggest that understanding the theological background of indulgences can and ought to generate hope in the hearts of believers. Before we arrive at these conclusions, however, we need to untangle the strands of doctrine and practice surrounding indulgences.

Theological and doctrinal complexities

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, basing itself mainly on the apostolic constitution of Pope Paul VI *Indulgentiarum doctrina* (1967) which itself draws on teaching from the Council of Trent, presents the Church's teaching on indulgences in three succinct paragraphs (1471-1473). In a citation of *Indulgentiarum doctrina* (Norm 1), the *Catechism* (n. 1471) defines an indulgence in this way:

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applied with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.

The definition is straightforward, but embedded within it are a number of doctrinal, theological, and historical elements that make indulgences difficult to understand and, frankly, difficult to explain. For example, indulgences are linked to history of the sacrament of Penance, more specifically, to the order within the celebration of the sacrament. There are also questions of

theological anthropology, including the doctrine of sin and its consequences, the doctrine of God's grace and human cooperation, and the level of certitude or assurance that we can have about our state of soul. The doctrine of purgatory also belongs to an understanding of indulgences. Finally, there are elements of ecclesiology, especially related to the doctrine of the communion of saints and how the Church mediates the redemption won for us by Christ.

With these complexities, where can we begin? The best place to begin is with the consequences of sin, because that is precisely what indulgences address.

Sin and its consequences

Not all sin, of course, is alike. There is grave or mortal sin that breaks our relationship with God. Unless there is repentance and forgiveness, it sets us in a state of permanent alienation from God or eternal punishment. Then, there is venial sin which damages but does not destroy our relationship with God and for which we also ought to seek forgiveness. If we are conscious of serious sin and if we approach the sacrament of Penance with sorrow for that sin, we are assured of the forgiveness of the guilt (*culpa* in Latin) of that sin. Similarly, if we are conscious of less serious (venial) sin in our lives, we can also approach the sacrament of Penance and seek forgiveness for the guilt of that sin. In the case of venial sin, there are also other ways as well of seeking forgiveness, for example, through acts of contrition or sorrow and by participation in the Eucharist.

Although the weight of the guilt or fault of mortal sin and venial sin are very different—radical alienation from God (eternal punishment) or a damaged relationship with God—both can be forgiven with the appropriate means. Once forgiven, however, both mortal and venial sins still have consequences. The guilt of sin is removed by forgiveness, but damaging consequences can remain. They need to be purified, so that there is a full restoration of the person. What are some of these consequences? Sin may leave its mark in an inordinate attachment to created things, a skewed sense of priorities, damaged relationships with others, and even destructive tendencies that may remain within us. I think we can all identify with the experience of being forgiven but still recognizing within us the need for fuller purification.

Something may be “fixed” but still stand in need of complete “repair.” I have used a personal experience as an example. It is not entirely perfect, but I think that it captures the basic point. Recently, I had knee surgery to repair a torn meniscus. Gratefully, the surgery went well. The knee got fixed, but that did not end the story. I needed therapy to complete the process and to bring me back to full functioning.

The *culpa* or guilt or fault of sin needs forgiveness, which by God's mercy we can receive. The consequence of sin, that is called the *poena* or punishment due to sin, needs purification and repair. And here it is very important to note that God does not vindictively impose punishments on sins. The punishments or consequences of sins flow from the very nature of the sins themselves. Eternal punishment is lifted by absolution. What remains as consequences is called *temporal punishment*.

So, the next logical question is: how do we find purification and repair for the punishment due to sin? The answer to that question brings us to the sacrament of Penance and eventually to the teaching on indulgences.

The Sacrament of Penance

Today, when we approach the sacrament of Penance, there is a certain order in its celebration. We confess our sins. The priest imposes a penance. We make an act of contrition or sorrow for our sins. The priest, in the name of Jesus Christ and his Body the Church, absolves or forgives us of our sins. We leave the celebration and go to do our penance.

The absolution or forgiveness that we receive upon confessing our sins and expressing our sorrow is the essential moment of the sacrament. We are indeed forgiven by God through the ministry of the priest and the Church. The imposition of a penance, which might be a prayer or an action, then launches the process of making amends or the sin which has been confessed and forgiven. It is a vehicle for making satisfaction for the sin or repairing the damage or consequences of sin. The action of the Church is twofold in making God's forgiveness available to repentant sinners and in offering a path of repair and purification through a penance.

In the early Church, the order of the celebration of the sacrament of penance was different. The sacrament began with a confession of sin and an expression of sorrow. Then a penance, often a public and sometimes a severe penance, was imposed. When the penitential act was completed, the Church then offered absolution or forgiveness. Over time, the Church mitigated the severity of the imposed penances and relegated them more and more to the personal or private sphere. Eventually, the order of the celebration as we have it today emerged.

The Church, entrusted by her Lord, with being an instrument of God's forgiving mercy, has exercised her mission and ministry in the twofold path of offering absolution or forgiveness and of offering a way of repair or of offering satisfaction for the punishment due to sin. This second path of repair or satisfaction is the foundation for indulgences, that is, the Church's prescribed prayers and actions which help the faithful find purification from the consequences of their sins, the remission of the temporal punishment due to them—as traditionally described.

How, then, do indulgences "work"? How do the prayers and works prescribed by the Church address the consequences of sin? These questions lead us to consider the Church and how she is the instrument of Christ's healing grace for us.

The Church ministers Christ's healing grace

The Church makes progress over time in her self-understanding, as she comes to know more fully and more deeply how she serves the mystery of Jesus Christ in the world. From the beginning, she has understood the power of forgiveness entrusted to her by the Lord. Over time, she came to understand more clearly how she could minister not only the forgiveness sins but also the healing of the consequences of sins.

The Church came to know that she could draw on "the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints," the infinite grace available in the mystery of Christ himself and as that mystery

has been lived out in the lives of the saints, to help Christians repair, re-build, and transform their lives. Granting indulgences for certain actions (such as pilgrimages) or certain prayers meant inviting Christians who were so disposed to receive the healing grace of Jesus Christ which alone could remove from them the consequences of sin, its temporal punishment.

This brings us back now to the words of Pope Paul VI and his definition and description of indulgences. Recall that he wrote:

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.

Indulgences belong to the order of grace and mercy, that grace and mercy that forgives sin can also be applied to repair the consequences of sin. Furthermore, grace in these instances calls for a free human response, a kind of cooperation and collaboration. Finally, it is important to note that all this happens in the context of the Church as the Communion of Saints and the Body of Christ.

Some qualifications

The remission of temporal punishment due to sin, the repair of the consequences of sin, can certainly be obtained through indulgences. They are not, however, the only means. This remission can also happen when we accept with faith, resignation, and trust the difficulties that we encounter in life, above all, the crisis that the coming of death provokes in us. Works of mercy and prayer and various forms of penance can also contribute to the remission of temporal punishment or the consequences of sin.

History also warns us that indulgences have been misunderstood and even abused. In the first place, they must not be associated with a kind of magical thinking, in other words, that they have a kind of power over God to enable us to be freed of sin and its consequences. An indulgence comes to us through the grace of God's mercy and when, in a free, loving, and repentant response, we accept that grace. It has nothing to do with the manipulation of divine power for our purposes. Indulgences make no sense apart from the path of sincere personal conversion of heart.

There is the all too human instinct alive in many of us to control our lives and our destinies. We cannot do so, but we still make attempts. In the matter of indulgences, we may want to be assured that they have "worked," that we are truly free of all the consequences of our sins and that there is no temporal punishment left. That assurance, like the certainty of our salvation, is not given to us in this life. We are, as Saint Paul powerfully tells us, saved in hope. We work out our salvation in fear and trembling. At the same time, we do so with complete trust and confidence in the merciful Lord who calls us forward.

Indulgences for those in purgatory

We can obtain indulgences for ourselves, and we can also obtain indulgences for those who have died and are in purgatory. To understand this, we need to understand purgatory in our faith and spiritual tradition.

The Church's teaching on purgatory poses a severe challenge for many people and for many reasons. To my mind, it is one of the most comprehensible and consoling doctrines in our tradition. Begin by taking the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which provide a basic description and definition of purgatory:

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven...The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect... (nos. 1030-1031)

Why, then, do I find this teaching comprehensible and consoling? My sense is that many of us (perhaps, most of us?), who are fundamentally good people, die with "loose ends" in our lives, the unfinished business of our souls, the edges of egoism that block us from a fully embracing love. How can we meet the Lord and see him face to face, unless we are purified and made ready to encounter Absolute Love? Without that purification and preparation, were we to enter the presence of the Living God, we would be annihilated. Purgatory offers us that path of purification and preparation after the course of our earthly life is completed.

Because death does not break the bonds of the Communion of Saints to which we belong, we are connected with those persons who have gone before us, as the Liturgy calls them "those who have fallen asleep in the hope of the Resurrection." Because we are connected, we can be of help as they go through their process of purification. Our help takes the form of applying indulgences on their behalf. This also makes sense of the practice of offering Mass for the deceased.

Kinds of indulgence: plenary and partial

The tradition speaks of two kinds of indulgence, plenary and partial. A plenary indulgence means the remission of all temporal punishment due to sin. A partial indulgence, as the name indicates, is a partial remission of temporal punishment. In the past, partial indulgences were quantified by days and weeks. That is no longer the case. Partial indulgences remain generically partial.

Obviously, the more desirable indulgence is the plenary. In the history of Christian devotion, some have mightily pursued plenary indulgences and attempted to accumulate them, as if they were easily collectible items. In fact the reality is much different. Again, there is no magic or manipulation of God in obtaining these indulgences. Whatever prescribed prayers or actions are done, they must be done with faith, trust, and a heart disposed to complete conversion. Here is a selection of norms taken from Pope Paul VI's apostolic constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*:

n. 6—A plenary indulgence can be acquired only once a day...

n. 7—To acquire a plenary indulgence it is necessary to perform the work to which the indulgence is attached and to fulfill three conditions: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion and prayer for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff. It is further required that all attachment to sin, even to venial sin, be absent.

If this disposition is in any way less than complete, or if the prescribed three conditions are not fulfilled, the indulgence will be only partial...

n.8—The three conditions may be fulfilled several days before or after the performance of the prescribed work; nevertheless it is fitting that Communion be received and the prayers for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff be said the same day the work is performed.

n.9—A single sacramental confession suffices for gaining several plenary indulgences, but Communion must be received and prayers for the Supreme Pontiff's intentions recited for the gaining of each plenary indulgence.

n.10—The condition of praying for the Supreme Pontiff's intentions is fully satisfied by reciting one "Our Father" and one "Hail Mary"; nevertheless the individual faithful are free to recite any other prayer according to their own piety and devotion toward the Supreme Pontiff

There is a total of twenty norms concerning indulgences. These particular norms are highlighted to indicate the essential conditions for receiving a plenary indulgence. It is important to note that seeking to gain an indulgence cannot be a merely extrinsic observance of specified requirements. Indulgences, as Pope Paul VI clearly indicates, are attached to a life journey of a conversion of heart. So, there is the extraordinarily important requirement in Norm 7: "It is further required that all attachment to sin, even to venial sin, be absent."

In the Jubilee Year of Mercy

Churches throughout the world—cathedrals, particular churches, and shrines—have been designated as pilgrimage sites. Doors have been designated as Holy Doors of Mercy. The faithful are invited to visit these places and pass through the Door of Mercy. Through this action, they may obtain a plenary indulgence for themselves or for deceased persons, provided that they fulfill the requirements. Again, these include the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, the reception of Holy Communion at Mass, a profession of faith (praying the Creed), prayers for the intention of the Holy Father, and a detachment from all sin.

The holy door is a sacramental, in other words, a reminder of the presence of the Lord and his action in our midst. Jesus said of himself in John's Gospel that he was the gate or door for the sheep. He is that access to new and abundant life. The doors that we use in our observance of

the Jubilee Year of Mercy evoke that sense of our passage through Christ in the Spirit to the Father and to eternal life.

The special indulgence attached to visiting the designated churches and passing through the doors of mercy is a vibrant affirmation of our faith in the infinite mercy of God that reaches out to us, not only to forgive us but to restore and repair whatever is broken and wounded within us.

So, we can pray with the Psalmist:

*Open to me the gates of holiness:
I will enter and give thanks.
This is the Lord's own gate
where the just may enter.
I will thank you for you have answered
and you are my savior.*

Psalm 118:19-21

References:

The teaching on indulgences is not easily understood, because it is a point of intersection for many different kinds of questions—theological, historical, spiritual, and pastoral. Here are some helpful references.

Primary sources:

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