

What on Earth Is an Indulgence?

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In this Holy Year there are many references to ‘the indulgence’ but few explanations on what it actually is. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n.1471) says that an indulgence is ‘a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven’. This raises more questions than it answers. Pope Francis spoke of the indulgence in his letter announcing the Holy Year (*Spes non confundit*, n.23) but he glides quickly over it, says a couple of important things, but does not enter into the question of what exactly it is.

Inevitable misunderstanding?

Any mention of indulgences immediately brings to mind that their abuse contributed significantly to Luther’s protest and the Protestant Reformation. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) had already tried to act against abuse of them while the Council of Trent (in 1563), acknowledging the critique, sought again to eliminate abuses.

Even where they were not abused, indulgences were frequently misunderstood, leading to strange notions such as the remission of ‘time in purgatory’. People often regarded this as happening automatically as long as one recited certain prayers, engaged in various devotional practices or even made donations to good causes. It seemed to lend itself all too easily to a superstitious, and even magical, understanding of how sacred power is attached to times, places and objects.

But *abusus non tollit usum*, the abuse of something is not sufficient reason to eliminate its practice where it is otherwise a good, helpful and perhaps necessary thing. If it is clear that the practice of indulgences is an

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essential part of the Church's ministry of reconciliation and mercy, then what is needed is proper understanding and morally correct practice.

At the Second Vatican Council it was clear that further theological reflection was necessary and Pope Paul VI sought to do his in his 1967 letter *Indulgentiarum doctrina* which is the most recent magisterial statement about indulgences. That letter substantially informs the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in its presentation of indulgences (nn. 1471-1479), seven of the 10 footnotes to those paragraphs being citations of Paul's letter. In seeking to head off abuse and misunderstanding, Pope Paul also sought to present those aspects of Christian teaching which the Church believes led to the practice of indulgences and continue to be served by that practice.

Punishment?

Another difficulty that arises immediately comes from the definition of an indulgence as 'remission of the temporal punishment due to sin'. To speak of God punishing people for their sins generates images of God that are childish at best, blasphemous at worst. Pope Francis is quick to point out that when we speak of punishment for our sins we are not to think of God punishing us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is equally swift in addressing this concern: 'punishment [for our sins] must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin' (n. 1472). Just as virtue is its own reward, sin is its own punishment. The punishment is implicit in the sins themselves, and is part of what sin is rather than anything added later. St Gregory of Nyssa, writing in the fourth century, already saw this:

... even if one says that painful retribution comes directly from God upon those who abuse their free will, it would only be reasonable to note that such sufferings have their origin and cause in ourselves (*Life of Moses II*, n.87).

Two kinds of punishment follow on sin. One is eternal because sin is an offence against God who is infinite and eternal. But God's mercy is also infinite and eternal and such punishment, paradoxical as it might seem, is easily remitted through the grace of contrition and absolution received in the sacrament of Penance.

The other kind of punishment is temporal: this is more difficult to understand and it is the one with which indulgences are concerned. It refers to sufferings of various kinds, following on from our sins or otherwise related to them, and happening within the context of our world and its history, affecting our physical nature, relationships, community situations, and particularly our spiritual condition, all that we call 'suffering'.

Who can deny that the world is full of suffering? Or that many wicked things are done every day? In some cases we easily see a link between sin and suffering whereas in other situations it is impossible to see any direct link. There are texts in the Bible which grapple with the problem of 'innocent suffering', *i.e.*, a suffering which comes on people who are totally undeserving of it. Job's friends offered him a simplistic mathematical solution: 'the amount of your sufferings is in proportion to the extent to which you have sinned'. This remains a powerful instinct in people: a cousin dying at a young age said to me 'I must have done something terrible to have ended up like this.'

But a Christian understanding of human suffering will regard it always in the light of Christ's sufferings and this radically subverts any easy connection between sin and suffering. We believe him to be the sinless human being whose sacrifice saves the world from its sins by making expiation for them (Rom 3.25; 1 Cor 5.7; Heb 2.17, 27; 9.26; 10.12; 1 John 2.2 and 4.10). Christians are called to follow Christ by aligning their sufferings with his. Taking up our cross, we can 'make up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings', St Paul says (Col 1.24), and so collaborate with Christ in the work of salvation (Rom 12.1; Eph 5.2; 2 Tim 4.6; Heb 10.26; 13.15f; 1 Peter 2.5).

Thomas Aquinas says that punishment is concerned with healing human relationships, restoring justice, and responding to scandal. He distinguishes 'simple punishment' – the sufferings I experience that follow directly from my own sinfulness – from 'satisfactory punishment' which is suffering that is either freely chosen, when we make sacrifices and engage in penitential practices, or is freely accepted, when I'm not quite sure why I'm suffering but seek to align my sufferings with those of Christ. Aquinas says that people can bear each other's sufferings in this satisfactory way when they are united in a union of love. Christ has done this for our sins but he also enables us to share in his redemptive sufferings on behalf of humanity. That gives us a clue as to the meaning of the indulgence: it is a way in which people united in a union of love share

with others the grace they receive through accepting whatever sufferings come their way.

The Communion of Saints

There are two understandings of sin in the Bible. For one, sin is an evil force that contaminates human life and passes from one generation to the next whereas for the other each individual is personally responsible for their own sin (Jer 31.29; Ezek 18.20). On the first view sin is a force or power that promotes evil in the world and contaminates all relationships. On the second view the guilt of a person's sins belongs simply to that person and is not to be offloaded onto anybody else. Likewise the grace of each person will be individual. Each one will answer to God for their own life and receive whatever credit or blame they deserve (1 Cor 3.12).

The practice of indulgences belongs with the first way in which the Bible speaks about sin. It presupposes an understanding of human solidarity in sin and in grace which can be at odds with contemporary understandings of the human person. In contemporary culture the promotion and protection of individual rights and freedoms is a fundamental obligation. That the human person is a social or political animal seems secondary. Herbert McCabe, O.P., wrote that 'for the modern view society is made of individuals, for our view the individual is made of societies' ('On Obedience', in *God Matters*, 1985, p. 231). By 'our view' he means the tradition coming from Aristotle through Aquinas for which the human being is by nature a social or political animal. On that view societies create individuals, not *vice versa*. Think about how many societies – linguistic, cultural, national, familial, religious, political – are needed to establish what I regard as my 'personal' identity.

Another way of thinking about this is to ask the question 'what happened to fraternity'? Of the great values which stand at the gatepost of the modern world, liberty and equality continue to receive the lion's share of attention. Pope Francis's preoccupation with fraternity is not surprising, not only because of the challenges facing human communities but also because it is central to the understanding of human life which Catholic Christianity brings to social and political debates, with notions such as common good, solidarity, social charity, participation.

This opens the way to a series of very interesting questions that unfor-

tunately cannot be explored further here. Our present interest in them is to suggest that the kind of solidarity in sin and in grace which is presupposed by the teaching about indulgences faces a challenge on this point: such solidarity may seem strange for a culture which values the individual in the way the present dominant culture does. But the doctrine emerged within a worldview where it is not only my sins that have consequences for the whole body of which I am a member, but where my virtues and any success grace might have in my life also have consequences for the whole body of which I am a member.

This is the most important doctrine highlighted by the teaching about indulgences: we belong together, in sin and in grace, we are one human family in Adam and in Christ. The help of Christ comes to us through his body, the Church, Paul says: 'where one suffers all suffer and where one is honoured all are honoured' (1 Cor 12:26), 'the life and death of each of us has its effect on others' (Rom 14:7). We are all affected by the sin and by the holiness of each of us.

The practice of indulgences thus highlights the doctrine of the communion of saints. This is about our 'sharing in holy things' such that our solidarity in sin is matched, and in fact overtaken, by our solidarity in grace ('where sin increased, grace abounded all the more': Rom 5:20-21). In his 1967 letter Pope Paul spoke powerfully of this solidarity as the basis for the doctrine of indulgences (n.4). The communion of saints means solidarity in sharing what is termed the 'treasury of the Church'. This notion – also controversial, it needs to be said – refers to the merits, prayers and good works accumulated across the centuries by God's grace, supremely in Christ but also in Mary and the other saints. It is part of the Church's ministry of mercy and reconciliation to share with poor struggling sinners the wealth of that treasury of grace which provides the 'resources' for the practice of indulgences.

Undoing the Consequences of Sin

If the doctrine of the communion of saints is highlighted by this practice, there are recent experiences of the Church which call for a serious re-consideration of another aspect of it. The residual effects of sin are addressed by the indulgence, Pope Francis says, consequences of sin that remain even after sins have been absolved. But these are not just in the sinner, they are

also in the world in which the thoughts, words, deeds and omissions of the sinner have certain effects. In sins of injustice, for example, the practice of restitution is well established. If I sin against justice, through theft or destroying someone's good name, the sincerity of my repentance is seen in my willingness to do all I can to undo the consequences of my unjust actions. In one way or another all sins are violations of justice and so all sins call for some restitution, an effort to undo and to heal their consequences, or at least to make amends and give satisfaction for the offences committed. It is, if you like, the positive face of 'punishment', the work involved in trying to restore an order of justice that has been distorted.

In the traditional presentation of the doctrine of indulgences this aspect is not completely absent – see especially Pope Paul's 1967 letter, nn. 2-3 – but the focus tended to be more on undoing the effects of sin in the life of the sinner. What remains after the guilt of our sins has been absolved is an undue attachment of our wills to things that draw our affection away from God. It is to the rectification of this weakening of our will that the indulgence is particularly addressed. In view of how indulgences have often been misunderstood, however, there is the risk of encouraging a kind of 'spiritual narcissism', a preoccupation with my own spiritual condition before God. It is something with which I should be concerned, of course. And indulgences can be gained also for others. But what about the consequences of my sins in the world, in my relationships not just with God or with myself but with my neighbour also? What about their consequences in the lives of those who have been sinned against?

The well-known saying that grace does not replace nature but brings it to perfection means there is no magical undoing of the consequences of sin. Grace is not a magic wand but rather an enabling power that strengthens us for the difficult challenges that come with facing up to the consequences of our sins. Think of the work involved in the quest for truth and reconciliation in South Africa and Northern Ireland, work seen also in many individual situations, in families and communities, where painful processes of reconciliation, truth and healing have been sought. These are works of grace, not replacing nature, as if grace steps in to do these things for us, but grace enabling people to do what needs to be done.

It is clear that today the teaching about indulgences needs to be developed in order to embrace more explicitly and more comprehensively the questions that arise now about the consequences of our sins not just

in ourselves but in those who have been sinned against. The thirteenth century mystical writer Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote that we can already find ourselves in purgatory, as we sometimes find ourselves in hell or in heaven. We easily fall into imagining these as future places, still somehow subject to conditions of space and time, when they are spiritual realities which we experience at all levels of our being, already here in this world as well as in the life to come. So we are already subject to processes of purification and healing, reconciliation and redemption. The difficult aspects of these processes, the sufferings they entail, constitute 'the temporal punishment due to sin'. To seek the indulgence is to seek God's help, through the ministry of the Church, with the demands these processes make on us.

Concluding remark

In this short article I have tried to do three things. First, to acknowledge that the notion of indulgences is problematic for various reasons even while the Church continues to speak of them, encouraging people to gain the indulgence of the Jubilee Year. Second, to show that the most important relevant doctrine is that of the communion of saints, in other words the solidarity of all human beings in the call to share the grace of Christ. Third, to stress that the residual effects of sins already forgiven refers not just to those effects in the sinner but also in the sinned against and in the community as a whole. I hope it might encourage others to offer further reflections on this question.

