

Indulgences

Indulgences are a great source of God's mercy but they seem to have become largely unknown or neglected in the Church today, to our detriment and to the detriment of the poor souls in Purgatory. To talk about Indulgences, it is helpful to start with a word or two about the redemptive work of our Lord, as well as a few words about sin, reconciliation, and the consequences of sin. In His Passion, our Lord won for us an infinite treasury of merit (grace). Our salvation is a matter of tapping into this great treasury of grace. Our Lord entrusted this treasury to His Catholic Church, along with real authority to bind and to loosen.

Sin, Reconciliation, and Reparation. Sin is an offense against God. Our sins damage (in the case of venial sin) or completely break (in the case of mortal sin) our relation with God. Now if we are sorry for what we've done and we want to be reconciled, we can go make a good Confession and we are immediately reconciled; relation with God is restored. *But*, the damage done by our sin still needs to be repaired (which is called reparation). Sin, reconciliation, and reparation is often likened to breaking someone's window. Suppose a boy was out throwing a ball around and it accidentally went through an old man's window next door. Suppose the neighbor is mad about it and mad at the boy; relation with him is damaged or even broken. Then the boy goes to the old man's door and tells him he's very sorry. The old man realizes he's truly sorry and that the boy really does value his relation with him and so he forgives the boy and they are reconciled. *But*, the window is still broken and needs to be repaired. So the two of them repair it together and it's all settled. Likewise, even after we repent of our sins, go to Confession, and are reconciled, there is still (generally) repair (reparation) to do.

There are numerous ways this repair can be brought about. For one thing, the greater or deeper our sorrow for sin (our contrition) is, the more it repairs the damage caused by sin. Going to Mass, mortification, almsgiving, and so on – all of these can make reparation, if done with humility and sincere devotion. Reparation always involves some personal sacrifice or work – just like the boy helping the old man fix the window.

The old man and the boy making repair together is an important part of the analogy. The boy can't do it alone, he doesn't have the resources (say money) or the capability (skills and knowledge) to do it. But it's important that the old man not just do it alone either because the very act of the boy working with the old man builds the relation between the two, much more so than if the old man just did it alone. How does that translate into reconciliation and reparation for sin? While our Lord did win for us an infinite treasury of merit (grace), we have to choose to tap into it – this is how we work with our Lord to make reparation. The primary way that our Lord dispenses this grace (merit from His treasury) is through His sacraments – that's the *primary* way but not the only way. Indulgences are another way to make reparation for sin, that our Lord, through His Church, provides us with to make repair for sin, either for ourselves or it can be offered for someone else. An Indulgence, like any other act of reparation, involves some work, some actions, some personal sacrifice – most often prayers. For example, there is an Indulgence for Divine Mercy Sunday. This involves the usual conditions for an Indulgence (Confession, Communion, and prayers for the intentions of the Pope); and then the specific works for this Indulgence are: “in any church or chapel, in a spirit that is completely detached from the affection for a sin, even a venial sin, take part in the prayers and devotions held in honor of Divine Mercy.”

Martin Luther was one of the first, if not the first, to ever reject the validity of Indulgences. A popular Protestant criticism of Indulgences is that the Church is telling people they can buy their way into Heaven. Apparently, as I was told at a previous assignment, this is even taught in schools now – that the Catholic Church was (or is) telling people that they can buy their way into Heaven. We will come back to this false and even absurd claim but first let us note that this was not actually Luther's objection. As pointed out by Church historian Dr Warren Carroll, Luther did not believe in Indulgences because he denied the infinite treasury of merit that our Lord won for us through His Passion. If there is no treasury of merit, there can be no such thing as an Indulgence since an Indulgence draws on this treasury. In spite of many heresies over the centuries, no one – to the best of my knowledge – had ever before denied this in the previous 1500 years of Catholicism. How, then, are we saved if this treasury of merit does not exist? Where do the merits of even Baptism come from if not won by our Lord and made available to us? The “logic” of this claim is beyond me.

Let us look closer at what an Indulgence is or involves using the definition given in the Catechism (1471):

“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. An indulgence is partial or plenary according to whether it removes either part (partial) or all (plenary) of the temporal punishment due to sin. The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead.”

This is saying a lot. First notice that an indulgence is for, and only for, reparation for sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. Indulgences do NOT remit sin. This immediately refutes the false claim that the Church is teaching that a person can “buy their way into Heaven.” A person could perform the works of an Indulgence every day but if they have not repented, if they are in a state of sin, if they have not gone to Confession with at least some contrition and been reconciled with God, the Indulgence will do nothing – *nothing*. An Indulgence only helps fix the window *after* being reconciled with the old man, it does not reconcile you with the old man. Reconciliation, flowing out of a sorrow for sin, has to come first. And if you offer an Indulgence for someone who is in hell (or Heaven for that matter), our Lord will make good use of it but it will not help that person. The Church has never taught otherwise, and never will. There has never been any teaching about buying your way into Heaven. But notice also that the Church says: the *faithful* who are duly disposed – that’s a big one. Indulgences are not magic beans – a person can’t just go through the motions, they must have faith, trust, confidence in God and all that He has revealed, and strive to live and act accordingly. But “duly disposed” is the really big condition, at least for receiving a plenary Indulgence. An Indulgence can be plenary or partial, plenary just means full – i.e., a complete or total remission of all punishment due to sin. But to receive a plenary Indulgence (either for yourself or another), a person has to be free from *all* attachment to sin, even venial sin. This is no small matter. There’s a lot of self-interest in one form or another that has to be first purified before a person can receive a plenary Indulgence – for themselves or another. This is a condition to obtain a full remission of “punishment due to sin” for any Indulgence offered. A person has to be (more or less) at that highest level of progression to our Lord (the unitive stage) before they can receive a *plenary* Indulgence. This should never discourage us from making an Indulgence for ourselves or those who have died. Even if we don’t make complete repair, we can at least make a partial one.

Whenever you encounter some absurd accusation against what our Lord teaches or offers through His Church, make sure to take the time to actually study the subject rather than just bowing down to any stone that’s hurled at His Church. The case of Indulgences is a good example. Could there be abuses – either out ignorance or even self-interest? Of course, there have always been shysters, starting with Judas Iscariot. But the abuse of some or even many does not negate the good things that God provides.

What does thinking about Indulgences do for us? The first and most obvious thing is that Indulgences provide us with a means to do good charitable work for those in need, namely those in Purgatory. Yes, those in Purgatory are bound for Heaven but they suffer intensely while in Purgatory. Numerous mystics of the Church and other saints have said that the suffering of Purgatory is worse than any suffering here on earth. If you saw someone starving to death you’d be moved by compassion to at least buy them a sandwich. How much more simple human decency should compel us to do whatever we can for the souls in Purgatory. Because Indulgences are tied to Purgatory (purification), they also remind us that there *are* consequences to what we do and don’t do, to the way that I am and am not. How easy it is and how frequent the temptation to think that what I do and don’t do doesn’t really matter, that our Lord doesn’t really care. Indulgences and purgatory remind us of the absolute purity one must have to enter Heaven. They remind us of the seriousness of every single thought, motive, intention, word, and deed we have. It sobers us up, so to speak, reminds me of the brevity of this life and the need to take our Lord seriously. It refocuses our mind and helps us realize that Heaven is not cheap, easy, or automatic. At the same time, Indulgences also remind us of the great mercy of God and how much He desires to bestow it upon us, giving us every means and opportunity to receive it.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.