



Additional Readings:

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Stjerna, Kirsi. *Encounters with Luther: New Directions for Critical Studies*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016.

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Indulgences Explained:

Taken from the Online Catholic Encyclopedia at: <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6095>

Defined: The word *indulgence* (Latin *indulgentia*, from *indulgeo*, to be kind or tender) originally meant kindness or favor; in post-classic Latin, it came to mean the remission of a tax or debt. In Roman law and in the Vulgate of the Old Testament (Isaiah 61:1) it was used to express release from captivity or punishment. In theological language, the word is sometimes employed in its primary sense to signify the kindness and mercy of God. But in the special sense in which it is here considered, an indulgence is a remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, the guilt of which has been forgiven. Among the equivalent terms used in antiquity were *pax*, *remissio*, *donatio*, *condonatio*.

What an indulgence is not: It is not a permission to commit sin, nor a pardon of future sin; neither could be granted by any power. It is not the forgiveness of the guilt of sin; it supposes that the sin has already been forgiven. It is not an exemption from any law or duty, and much less from the obligation consequent on certain kinds of sin, e.g., restitution; on the contrary, it means a more complete payment of the debt which the sinner owes to God. It does not confer immunity from temptation or remove the possibility of subsequent lapses into sin. Least of all is an indulgence the purchase of a pardon which secures the buyer's salvation or releases the soul of another from Purgatory.

What an indulgence is: An indulgence is the extra-sacramental remission of the temporal punishment due, in God's justice, to sin that has been forgiven, which remission is granted by the Church in the exercise of the power of the keys, through the application of the superabundant merits of Christ and of the saints, and for some just and reasonable motive. Regarding this definition, the following points are to be noted:

- In the Sacrament of Baptism not only is the guilt of sin remitted, but also all the penalties attached to sin. In the Sacrament of Penance the guilt of sin is removed, and with it the eternal punishment due to mortal sin; but there still remains the temporal punishment required by Divine justice, and this requirement

must be fulfilled either in the present life or in the world to come, i.e., in Purgatory. An indulgence offers the penitent sinner the means of discharging this debt during his life on earth.

- Some writs of indulgence--none of them, however, issued by any pope or council--contain the expression, "indulgentia a culpa et a poena", i.e. release from guilt and from punishment; and this has occasioned considerable misunderstanding. The real meaning of the formula is that, indulgences presupposing the Sacrament of Penance, the penitent, after receiving sacramental absolution from the guilt of sin, is afterwards freed from the temporal penalty by the indulgence. In other words, sin is fully pardoned, i.e. its effects entirely obliterated, only when complete reparation, and consequently release from penalty as well as from guilt, has been made. Hence Clement V (1305-1314) condemned the practice of those purveyors of indulgences who pretended to absolve "a culpa et a poena"; the Council of Constance (1418) revoked (Sess. XLII, n. 14) all indulgences containing the said formula; Benedict XIV (1740-1758) treats them as spurious indulgences granted in this form, which he ascribes to the illicit practices of the "quaestores" or purveyors.
- The satisfaction, usually called the "penance", imposed by the confessor when he gives absolution is an integral part of the Sacrament of Penance; an indulgence is extra-sacramental; it presupposes the effects obtained by confession, contrition, and sacramental satisfaction. It differs also from the penitential works undertaken of his own accord by the repentant sinner — prayer, fasting, alms-giving — in that these are personal and get their value from the merit of him who performs them, whereas an indulgence places at the penitent's disposal the merits of Christ and of the saints, which form the "Treasury" of the Church.
- An indulgence is valid both in the tribunal of the Church and in the tribunal of God. This means that it not only releases the penitent from his indebtedness to the Church or from the obligation of performing canonical penance, but also from the temporal punishment which he has incurred in the sight of God and which, without the indulgence, he would have to undergo in order to satisfy Divine justice. This, however, does not imply that the Church pretends to set aside the claim of God's justice or that she allows the sinner to repudiate his debt. The Church therefore neither leaves the penitent helplessly in debt nor acquits him of all further accounting; she enables him to meet his obligations.
- In granting an indulgence, the grantor (pope or bishop) does not offer his personal merits in lieu of what God demands from the sinner. He acts in his official capacity as having jurisdiction in the Church, from whose spiritual treasury he draws the means wherewith payment is to be made. The Church herself is not the absolute owner, but simply the administratrix, of the superabundant merits which that treasury contains. In applying them, she keeps in view both the design of God's mercy and the demands of God's justice. She therefore determines the amount of each concession, as well as the conditions which the penitent must fulfill if he would gain the indulgence.

Various kinds of indulgences: An indulgence that may be gained in any part of the world is universal, while one that can be gained only in a specified place (Rome, Jerusalem, etc.) is local. A further distinction is that between perpetual indulgences, which may be gained at any time, and temporary, which are available on certain days only, or within certain periods. Real indulgences are attached to the use of certain objects (crucifix, rosary, medal); personal are those which do not require the use of any such material thing, or which are granted only to a certain class of individuals, e.g. members of an order or confraternity. The most important distinction, however, is that between plenary indulgences and partial. By a plenary indulgence is meant the remission of the entire temporal punishment due to sin so that no further expiation is required in Purgatory. A partial indulgence commutes only a certain portion of the penalty; and this portion is determined in accordance with the penitential discipline of the early Church. To say that an indulgence of so many days or years is granted means that it cancels an amount of purgatorial punishment equivalent to that which would have been remitted, in the sight of God, by the performance of so many days or years of the ancient canonical penance. Here, evidently, the reckoning makes no claim to absolute exactness; it has only a relative value.

God alone knows what penalty remains to be paid and what its precise amount is in severity and duration. Finally, some indulgences are granted in behalf of the living only, while others may be applied in behalf of the souls departed. It should be noted, however, that the application has not the same significance in both cases. The Church in granting an indulgence to the living exercises her jurisdiction; over the dead she has no jurisdiction and therefore makes the indulgence available for them by way of suffrage (*per modum suffragii*), i.e. she

petitions God to accept these works of satisfaction and in consideration thereof to mitigate or shorten the sufferings of the souls in Purgatory.

Who can grant indulgences: The distribution of the merits contained in the treasury of the Church is an exercise of authority (*potestas iurisdictionis*), not of the power conferred by Holy orders (*potestas ordinis*). Hence the pope, as supreme head of the Church on earth, can grant all kinds of indulgences to any and all of the faithful; and he alone can grant plenary indulgences. The power of the bishop, previously unrestricted, was limited by Innocent III (1215) to the granting of one year's indulgence at the dedication of a church and of forty days on other occasions. Leo XIII authorized the archbishops of South America to grant eighty days. Pius X (28 August, 1903) allowed cardinals in their titular churches and dioceses to grant 200 days; archbishops, 100; bishops, 50. These indulgences are not applicable to the souls departed. They can be gained by persons not belonging to the diocese, but temporarily within its limits; and by the subjects of the granting bishop, whether these are within the diocese or outside--except when the indulgence is local. Priests, vicars general, abbots, and generals of religious orders cannot grant indulgences unless specially authorized to do so. On the other hand, the pope can empower a cleric who is not a priest to give an indulgence.

Dispositions necessary to gain an indulgence: The mere fact that the Church proclaims an indulgence does not imply that it can be gained without effort on the part of the faithful. From what has been said above, it is clear that the recipient must be free from the guilt of mortal sin. Furthermore, for plenary indulgences, confession and Communion are usually required, while for partial indulgences, though confession is not obligatory, the formula *corde saltem contrito*, i.e. "at least with a contrite heart", is the customary prescription. Regarding the question discussed by theologians whether a person in mortal sin can gain an indulgence for the dead. It is also necessary to have the intention, at least habitual, of gaining the indulgence. Finally, from the nature of the case, it is obvious that one must perform the good works — prayers, alms deeds, visits to a church, etc. — which are prescribed in the granting of an indulgence.

Authoritative teaching of the Church: The Council of Constance condemned among the errors of Wyclif the proposition: "It is foolish to believe in the indulgences granted by the pope and the bishops." In the Bull "Exsurge Domine", 15 June, 1520, Leo X condemned Luther's assertions that "Indulgences are pious frauds of the faithful"; and that "Indulgences do not avail those who really gain them for the remission of the penalty due to actual sin in the sight of God's justice." The Council of Trent declared: "Since the power of granting indulgences has been given to the Church by Christ, and since the Church from the earliest times has made use of this Divinely given power, the holy synod teaches and ordains that the use of indulgences, as most salutary to Christians and as approved by the authority of the councils, shall be retained in the Church; and it further pronounces anathema against those who either declare that indulgences are useless or deny that the Church has the power to grant them. It is therefore of faith (*de fide*)

- that the Church has received from Christ the power to grant indulgences, and
- that the use of indulgences is salutary for the faithful.

Basis of the doctrine: An essential element in indulgences is the application to one person of the satisfaction performed by others. This transfer is based on three things: the Communion of Saints, the principle of vicarious satisfaction, and the Treasury of the Church.

The communion of saints: "We being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:5). As each organ shares in the life of the whole body, so does each of the faithful profit by the prayers and good works of all the rest—a benefit which accrues, in the first instance, to those who are in the state of grace, but also, though less fully, to the sinful members.

The principle of vicarious satisfaction: Each good action of the just man possesses a double value: that of merit and that of satisfaction, or expiation. Merit is personal, and therefore it cannot be transferred; but satisfaction can be applied to others, as St. Paul writes to the Colossians (1:24) of his own works: "Who now

rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the Church."

The treasury of the Church: Christ, as St. John declares in his First Epistle (2:2), "is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." Since the satisfaction of Christ is infinite, it constitutes an inexhaustible fund which is more than sufficient to cover the indebtedness contracted by sin, Besides, there are the satisfactory works of the Blessed Virgin Mary undiminished by any penalty due to sin, and the virtues, penances, and sufferings of the saints vastly exceeding any temporal punishment which these servants of God might have incurred. These are added to the treasury of the Church as a secondary deposit, not independent of, but rather acquired through, the merits of Christ. The development of this doctrine in explicit form was the work of the great Schoolmen, notably Alexander of Hales, Albertus Magnus, and St. Thomas. As Aquinas declares: "All the saints intended that whatever they did or suffered for God's sake should be profitable not only to themselves but to the whole Church." And he further points out that what one endures for another being a work of love, is more acceptable as satisfaction in God's sight than what one suffers on one's own account, since this is a matter of necessity. The existence of an infinite treasury of merits in the Church is dogmatically set forth in the Bull "Unigenitus", published by Clement VI, 27 Jan., 1343: "Upon the altar of the Cross", says the pope, "Christ shed of His blood not merely a drop, though this would have sufficed, by reason of the union with the Word, to redeem the whole human race, but a copious torrent. . . thereby laying up an infinite treasure for mankind. This treasure He neither wrapped up in a napkin nor hid in a field, but entrusted to Blessed Peter, the key-bearer, and his successors, that they might, for just and reasonable causes, distribute it to the faithful in full or in partial remission of the temporal punishment due to sin." Hence the condemnation by Leo X of Luther's assertion that "the treasures of the Church from which the pope grants indulgences are not the merits of Christ and the saints" (Enchiridion, 757). For the same reason, Pius VI (1794) branded as false, temerarious, and injurious to the merits of Christ and the saints, the error of the synod of Pistoia that the treasury of the Church was an invention of scholastic subtlety (Enchiridion, 1541).

According to Catholic doctrine, therefore, the source of indulgences is constituted by the merits of Christ and the saints. This treasury is left to the keeping, not of the individual Christian, but of the Church. Consequently, to make it available for the faithful, there is required an exercise of authority, which alone can determine in what way, on what terms, and to what extent, indulgences may be granted.

The power to grant indulgences: Once it is admitted that Christ left the Church the power to forgive sins, the power of granting indulgences is logically inferred. Since the sacramental forgiveness of sin extends both to the guilt and to the eternal punishment, it plainly follows that the Church can also free the penitent from the lesser or temporal penalty. This becomes clearer, however, when we consider the amplitude of the power granted to Peter (Matthew 16:19): "I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven." (Cf. Matthew 18:18, where like power is conferred on all the Apostles.) No limit is placed upon this power of loosing, "the power of the keys", as it is called; it must, therefore, extend to any and all bonds contracted by sin, including the penalty no less than the guilt. When the Church, therefore, by an indulgence, remits this penalty, her action, according to the declaration of Christ, is ratified in heaven. That this power, as the Council of Trent affirms, was exercised from the earliest times, is shown by St. Paul's words (2 Corinthians 2:5-10) in which he deals with the case of the incest man of Corinth. The sinner had been excluded by St. Paul's order from the company of the faithful, but had truly repented. Hence the Apostle judges that to such a one "this rebuke is sufficient that is given by many" and adds: "To whom you have pardoned anything, I also. For what I have pardoned, if I have pardoned anything, for your sakes have I done it in the person of Christ." St. Paul had bound the guilty one in the fetters of excommunication; he now releases the penitent from this punishment by an exercise of his authority — "in the person of Christ." Here we have all the essentials of an indulgence.

Abuses: It may seem strange that the doctrine of indulgences should have proved such a stumbling-block, and excited so much prejudice and opposition. But the explanation of this may be found in the abuses which unhappily have been associated with what is in itself a salutary practice. In this respect of course indulgences are not exceptional: no institution, however holy, has entirely escaped abuse through the malice or unworthiness of

man. Even the Eucharist, as St. Paul declares, means an eating and drinking of judgment to the recipient who discerns not the body of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). And, as God's forbearance is constantly abused by those who relapse into sin, it is not surprising that the offer of pardon in the form of an indulgence should have led to evil practices. These again have been in a special way the object of attack because, doubtless, of their connection with Luther's revolt. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that the Church, while holding fast to the principle and intrinsic value of indulgences, has repeatedly condemned their misuse: in fact, it is often from the severity of her condemnation that we learn how grave the abuses were.

Even in the age of the martyrs, as stated above there were practices which St. Cyprian was obliged to reprehend, yet he did not forbid the martyrs to give the *libelli*. In later times abuses were met by repressive measures on the part of the Church. Thus the Council of Clovesho in England (747) condemns those who imagine that they might atone for their crimes by substituting, in place of their own, the austerities of mercenary penitents. Against the excessive indulgences granted by some prelates, the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) decreed that at the dedication of a church the indulgence should not be for more than year, and, for the anniversary of the dedication or any other case, it should not exceed forty days, this being the limit observed by the pope himself on such occasions. The same restriction was enacted by the Council of Ravenna in 1317. In answer to the complaint of the Dominicans and Franciscans, that certain prelates had put their own construction on the indulgences granted to these Orders, Clement IV in 1268 forbade any such interpretation, declaring that, when it was needed, it would be given by the Holy See. In 1330 the brothers of the hospital of Haut-Pas falsely asserted that the grants made in their favor were more extensive than what the documents allowed: John XXII had all these brothers in France seized and imprisoned. Boniface IX, writing to the Bishop of Ferrara in 1392, condemns the practice of certain religious who falsely claimed that they were authorized by the pope to forgive all sorts of sins, and exacted money from the simple-minded among the faithful by promising them perpetual happiness in this world and eternal glory in the next. When Henry, Archbishop of Canterbury, attempted in 1420 to give a plenary indulgence in the form of the Roman Jubilee, he was severely reprimanded by Martin V, who characterized his action as "unheard-of presumption and sacrilegious audacity". In 1450 Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, Apostolic Legate to Germany, found some preachers asserting that indulgences released from the guilt of sin as well as from the punishment. This error, due to a misunderstanding of the words "a culpa et a poena", the cardinal condemned at the Council of Magdeburg. Finally, Sixtus IV in 1478, lest the idea of gaining indulgences should prove an incentive to sin, reserved for the judgment of the Holy See a large number of cases in which faculties had formerly been granted to confessors.

Traffic in indulgences: These measures show plainly that the Church long before the Reformation, not only recognized the existence of abuses, but also used her authority to correct them.

In spite of all this, disorders continued and furnished the pretext for attacks directed against the doctrine itself, no less than against the practice of indulgences. Here, as in so many other matters, the love of money was the chief root of the evil: indulgences were employed by mercenary ecclesiastics as a means of pecuniary gain. Leaving the details concerning this traffic to a subsequent article, it may suffice for the present to note that the doctrine itself has no natural or necessary connection with pecuniary profit, as is evident from the fact that the abundant indulgences of the present day are free from this evil association: the only conditions required are the saying of certain prayers or the performance of some good work or some practice of piety. Again, it is easy to see how abuses crept in. Among the good works which might be encouraged by being made the condition of an indulgence, alms giving would naturally hold a conspicuous place, while men would be induced by the same means to contribute to some pious cause such as the building of churches, the endowment of hospitals, or the organization of a crusade. It is well to observe that in these purposes there is nothing essentially evil. To give money to God or to the poor is a praiseworthy act, and, when it is done from right motives, it will surely not go unrewarded. Looked at in this light, it might well seem a suitable condition for gaining the spiritual benefit of an indulgence. Yet, however innocent in itself, this practice was fraught with grave danger, and soon became a fruitful source of evil. On the one hand, there was the danger that the payment might be regarded as the price of the indulgence, and that those who sought to gain it might lose sight of the more important conditions. On the other hand, those who granted indulgences might be tempted to make them a means of raising money: and, even where the rulers of the Church were free from blame in this matter, there was room for corruption in their

officials and agents, or among the popular preachers of indulgences. This class has happily disappeared, but the type has been preserved in Chaucer's "Pardoner", with his bogus relics and indulgences.

While it cannot be denied that these abuses were widespread, it should also be noted that, even when corruption was at its worst, these spiritual grants were being properly used by sincere Christians, who sought them in the right spirit, and by priests and preachers, who took care to insist on the need of true repentance. It is therefore not difficult to understand why the Church, instead of abolishing the practice of indulgences, aimed rather at strengthening it by eliminating the evil elements. The Council of Trent in its decree "On Indulgences" (Sess. XXV) declares: "In granting indulgences the Council desires that moderation be observed in accordance with the ancient approved custom of the Church, lest through excessive ease ecclesiastical discipline be weakened; and further, seeking to correct the abuses that have crept in . . . it decrees that all criminal gain therewith connected shall be entirely done away with as a source of grievous abuse among the Christian people; and as to other disorders arising from superstition, ignorance, irreverence, or any cause whatsoever--since these, on account of the widespread corruption, cannot be removed by special prohibitions—the Council lays upon each bishop the duty of finding out such abuses as exist in his own diocese, of bringing them before the next provincial synod, and of reporting them, with the assent of the other bishops, to the Roman Pontiff, by whose authority and prudence measures will be taken for the welfare of the Church at large, so that the benefit of indulgences may be bestowed on all the faithful by means at once pious, holy, and free from corruption." After deploring the fact that, in spite of the remedies prescribed by earlier councils, the traders (*quaestores*) in indulgences continued their nefarious practice to the great scandal of the faithful, the council ordained that the name and method of these *quaestores* should be entirely abolished, and that indulgences and other spiritual favors of which the faithful ought not to be deprived should be published by the bishops and bestowed gratuitously, so that all might at length understand that these heavenly treasures were dispensed for the sake of piety and not of lucre. In 1567 St. Pius V canceled all grants of indulgences involving any fees or other financial transactions.

Apocryphal indulgences: One of the worst abuses was that of inventing or falsifying grants of indulgence. Previous to the Reformation, such practices abounded and called out severe pronouncements by ecclesiastical authority, especially by the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) and that of Vienne (1311). After the Council of Trent the most important measure taken to prevent such frauds was the establishment of the Congregation of Indulgences. A special commission of cardinals served under Clement VIII and Paul V, regulating all matters pertaining to indulgences. The Congregation of Indulgences was definitively established by Clement IX in 1669 and reorganized by Clement XI in 1710. It has rendered efficient service by deciding various questions relative to the granting of indulgences and by its publications. The "Raccolta" was first issued by one of its consultors, Telesforo Galli, in 1807; the last three editions 1877, 1886, and 1898 were published by the Congregation. The other official publication is the "Decreta authentica", containing the decisions of the Congregation from 1668 to 1882. This was published in 1883 by order of Leo XIII. See also "Rescripta authentica" by Joseph Schneider (Ratisbon, 1885). By a Motu Proprio of Pius X, dated 28 January, 1904, the Congregation of Indulgences was united to the Congregation of Rites, without any diminution, however, of its prerogatives.

Salutary effects of indulgences: Lea (History, etc., III, 446) somewhat reluctantly acknowledges that "with the decline in the financial possibilities of the system, indulgences have greatly multiplied as an incentive to spiritual exercises, and they can thus be so easily obtained that there is no danger of the recurrence of the old abuses, even if the finer sense of fitness, characteristic of modern times, on the part of both prelates and people, did not deter the attempt." The full significance, however, of this "multiplication" lies in the fact that the Church, by rooting out abuses, has shown the rigor of her spiritual life. She has maintained the practice of indulgences, because, when these are used in accordance with what she prescribes, they strengthen the spiritual life by inducing the faithful to approach the sacraments and to purify their consciences of sin. And further, they encourage the performance, in a truly religious spirit, of works that redound, not alone to the welfare of the individual, but also to God's glory and to the service of the neighbor.