

Jubilee of Mercy – Indulgences

Indulgences – you may associate this word with 16th Century Protestant reformers decrying the selling of indulgences. While the Church did not sell indulgences *per se*, their association with almsgiving unfortunately gave rise to the “selling” accusations. The Council of Trent reformed the practice of indulgences, and in 1567, Pope Pius V canceled all grants of indulgences involving fees or financial transactions.

Or you may recall timeframes attached to various prayers – 30 days, 100 days, 3 years, etc. This attempt to measure the worth of specific prayers or doing certain good deeds led to the misunderstanding that these were corresponding reductions in the amount of time in purgatory; but time is a condition of this world, not the afterlife. Pope Paul VI removed these labels in 1967, stating that indulgences would be either *plenary* or *partial*, removing *all* or only *part*, respectively, of sins’ “temporal punishment”.

The concept of indulgences results from an effort to incorporate both justice and God’s mercy in the reality of human sinfulness. Justice demands atonement for the harm we do to our relationship with God and His community by our sins – a rebalancing of the good order disrupted by sin. Even after our sins are forgiven in sacramental confession, negative impacts remain and we need to be purified of them. Since we cannot achieve this on our own, “God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness. ... God’s justice is his mercy given to everyone as a grace that flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. ... Reconciliation with God is made possible through the paschal mystery and the mediation of the Church.” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, #21-22)

Pope Francis says that we feel the heavy burden of sin, and “despite being forgiven, the conflicting consequences of our sins remain. ... God forgives our sins, ... yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger than even this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through the ... Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.” As members of God’s People, we are spiritually bound to one another, including to all the saints, “(whose) holiness comes to the aid of our weakness in a way that enables the Church ... to fortify the weakness of some with the strength of others.” (*MV*, #22)

The Church illustrates this through the image of a storehouse or treasury – Christ’s redemptive actions and the saints’ good deeds are assets “deposited” there, to be drawn out by the Church to offset the liabilities incurred by sinners. Through designated actions or prayers, we make these “withdrawals,” thus sharing in the indulgent, infinite mercy of God. The Church grants indulgences as the steward of God’s mercy.

“To live the indulgence of the Holy Year means to approach the Father’s mercy with the certainty that his forgiveness extends to the entire life of the believer. To gain an indulgence is to experience the holiness of the Church, who bestows upon all the fruits of Christ’s redemption, so that God’s love and forgiveness may extend everywhere.” (*MV*, #22) God doesn’t leave us trapped in sin’s consequences – his mercy is our hope, and his mercy is infinite.