

INDULGENCES – HISTORICAL NOTES

[DS refers to Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum ...* 45th edition, 2018]

1095 Synod of Clermont / Pope Urban II

All who go to Jerusalem exclusively for devotion, to free the Church of God, this pilgrimage counts as complete penitence

1063 Alexander II

Had earlier granted a similar plenary indulgence to Christian soldiers who fought against the Saracens

1215 Lateran IV / Innocent III

DS 819 – Chapter 62, on relics of saints, on abuse of indulgences – against irrational and excessive concession, brings into disrepute the power of the keys and penitential satisfaction loses all its force. So limit to a year, 40 days ... !!

1273 Thomas Aquinas on indulgences

In his homilies on the Our Father, at the petition ‘forgive us our trespasses ...’, St Thomas writes:

The successors of the Apostles found another mode of remission of this punishment, namely, the good use of indulgences, which have their force for one living in the state of grace, to the extent that is claimed for them and as indicated by the grantor. That the Pope can bring this about, is sufficiently evident. Many holy men have accomplished much good, and they have not greatly sinned, at least not mortally; and these good deeds were done for the common use of the Church. Likewise the merits of Christ and the Blessed Virgin are, as it were, in a treasury; and from it the Supreme Pontiff and they who are by him permitted can dispense these merits where it is necessary. Thus, therefore, sins are taken away not only as regards their guilt by contrition, but also as regards punishment for them in confession and through indulgences.

He considers the question of punishment due to sin in *Summa theologiae*

1300 BONIFACE VIII

DS 868 - *Antiquorum habet*: says that an ancient document reports that those who visited St Peter’s were granted ‘copious remissions and indulgences of sins’. This he grants for the Holy Year of 1300 to those who visit the basilicas (of Rome) when they do it respectfully, doing penance and confessing their sins, this to happen in all centenary years (once a century in other words).

In the Basilica of St John Lateran there is a painting by the artist **Giotto** which shows Boniface VIII proclaiming the Holy Year of 1300 (the painting is in one of the side aisles, not far from the Holy Door, and his proclamation is also set in there).

DANTE is believed to have visited Rome in 1300 and he gives four snapshots of life in the city during the first Holy Year

- crowds near Castel Sant'Angelo
- the pine cone at St Peter's
- the *Veronica* being shown on Good Friday in St Peter's (this was the highpoint of the pilgrimage in the Middle Ages – this ancient icon was lost in 1529 when Rome was sacked and may be the one kept at Manoppello, a small town in the Abruzzi region).
- the mosaic of Christ in St John Lateran's

In 2016 a centenary of Dante (born 1265, i.e. 750 years previously) coincided with the Holy Year of Mercy and Pope Francis wrote about both. The Holy Door opens onto the journey of conversion which is also what Dante's great poem is about, a journey of conversion from misery to happiness. It recounts a journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven and is set in Holy Week 1300 (Good Friday fell on 25 March in 1300). It is a personal, individual journey of conversion as well as a communal, ecclesial, social journey of conversion. It begins in mercy and *Miserere* is its opening word, when Dante meets Virgil in the desert and takes him for Christ (Psalm 51, the *miserere* psalm; Exodus = liberation through the desert)

Inferno – above all else it is Egypt, and bondage to sin, and the plagues of Egypt are there. The indulgence initially seems to be about liberation from hell and transfer to purgatory and only later did it become a transfer from purgatory to heaven – **IS THIS TRUE??**

Purgatorio is a work of God's mercy towards sinners. See for example the words of Manfred, one of the characters in Purgatory:

Horrible were my sins; but the infinite goodness has such open arms that it takes whatever turns to it (*Purgatorio* 3.118-123).

Dante says that the Jubilee indulgence makes it possible to fly from Ostia to the mountain (Mount Sinai) in the sea (*Purgatorio*) –

Did Dante hear from Irish pilgrims about islands in the ocean? And about Purgatory also, which seems to have been well developed in the Irish Church. Some suggest that it was the Irish who introduced the jubilee concept of Purgatory to the Roman church. 'St Patrick's Purgatory' refers to Station Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal, to this day a place of pilgrimage. Station Island was perhaps a model for Dante as was also Skellig Michael, the precipitous cliff-island off the Kerry coast. **– IS THIS TRUE?**

Paradiso – a place of reconciliation, joy and love – where harmony reigns, contrasting things making a harmonious melody (in contrast to when on earth all they managed was a cacophony) – a place where all are at home.

1343 Clement VI – Bull ‘Unigenitus Dei Filius’

He changed the Holy Year to once in every 50 years and in declaring the Holy Year of 1350 gave the first presentation of the doctrine concerning **the treasury of merits at the disposition of the Church as the basis of indulgences**, a doctrine developed by theologians from the 13th century onwards.

DS 1025-1027 The treasury, Christ above all – 1 Corinthians 1.30; Hebrews 9.12; 1 Peter 1.18f; Isaiah 1.6; Wisdom 7.14 – generous, overflowing, infinite, mercy. And Peter has been given the keys to dispense as appropriate.

DS 1059 – Clement VI’s letter to Mekhithar of the Armenians asking him to profess his faith – do you believe that the Roman Pontiff of himself may promulgate general sacred canons, grant more ample indulgence to those who visit Rome or the Holy Land, or to any faithful person truly and fully penitent who has confessed?

1415 Council of Constance

DS 1192 – One of the errors of Wyclif is his claim that it is silly (*fatuum*) to believe in indulgences from the Pope or bishops

1418 Martin V

The question returned at the same Council under Pope Martin V, in the form of a question to Wyclifites and Hussites on the same point – DS 1192; 1266-68

1476 Sixtus IV (1471-1484)

The link with money is a concern – a bull of Sixtus IV in 1476 regarding the Church of St Peter at Saintes (DS 1398 !!) needs to be clarified by the same Pope in an encyclical of 1477 (DS 1405-07). The bull of 1476 was being interpreted to mean that praying or pious suffrages were no longer necessary – but that is not what was meant – the indulgence does not replace prayer and fasting – souls in purgatory receive as if they had done those things but they still need to be done by the ones seeking the indulgence for them – the Pope is relying, he says, on the ‘common scholastic teaching of the doctors’.

See also DS 1416, same Pope, 9 August 1479: among the errors of Peter of Osma is the view that the Pope cannot remit the punishment of purgatory

1518 Leo X

Luther published his 95 theses on indulgences on 31 October 1517. On 9 November 1518 a decree on Luther’s objections was sent by Leo X to Cardinal Cajetan, the Dominican theologian who had just engaged directly with Luther at Augsburg and tried to get him to recant - DS

1447-1449. Cajetan included the most important part of this decree in his commentary on *Summa theologiae* III 48,5. The pope repeats the teaching of the Church of Rome on indulgences defending the power of the Pope to grant them.

DS 1448 speaks of guilt and punishment due to sin. The *guilt* is lifted in the sacrament, *punishment* is lifted by ecclesiastical indulgence, entrusted to the Pope by the power of the keys – from the superabundance of the merits of Christ and the saints – by way of absolution (for the living) or of suffrage (for the dead: it was already a long tradition that purgatory was held to be essential for this).

1520 Leo X

The bull *Exsurge Domine* of 15 June 1520 lists 41 errors of Martin Luther (**DS 1451-1492**). Note especially n.17 (DS 1467) – Luther is wrong to deny that the treasures of the Church, from which the Pope grants indulgences, are the merits of Christ and the saints.

1551 Julius III / Council of Trent

DS 1693, on ‘works of satisfaction’, speaks of *temporalibus flagellis a Deo inflictis et a nobis patienter toleratis apud Deum Patrem per Christum Iesum satisfacere valeamus*, ‘may we be able to make **satisfaction** to God the Father through Christ Jesus through the **temporal scourges inflicted by God** and patiently endured by us.’

1563 Pius IV / Council of Trent

DS 1835 Christ gave the Church the power to grant indulgences – Matthew 16.19; 18.18 – and it has used it from ancient times. The practice is to continue because it is good for the Christian people and approved by sacred councils, but there is to be moderation in the granting of indulgences so as not to weaken ecclesiastical discipline. In order to change and correct the abuses which nest (*irrepserunt*) in them, on the strength of which the term indulgence is blasphemed by heretics, this present decree establishes, as a general rule, the complete abolition of all undignified trafficking in money done to obtain them.

DS 1862ff The Tridentine ‘Profession of Faith’ – in which DS 1867 speaks of purgatory, prayers to the saints, veneration of relics, use of images: the power of granting indulgences was given by Christ to the Church and that is of the greatest help (*maxime salutarem esse*) to the Christian people

1567 Pius V

Among the errors of Michael Baius is denial of the efficacy of indulgences – DS 1960

1682 Innocent XI

Among the errors of Miguel de Molinos is the view that it is better to satisfy divine justice than to seek divine mercy – the former comes from pure love, whereas seeking indulgences comes

from a love that is interested in ourselves. It is not pleasing to God and is not meritorious but comes from a desire to flee the cross.

1743 Benedict XIV

On 16 March 1743, his profession of faith for the Orientals repeats the text from the Tridentine profession of faith (DS 2537)

1794 Pius VI

28 August 1794 - constitution responding to the errors of the Council of Pistoia: DS 2640-2643. Pistoia denied the notion of the merits of Christ and the saints, theologians substituting 'absolution from canonical punishment', a false and confused application of merits – DS 2641. The theologians in question are described as *scholasticos sui subtilitatibus inflatos*, 'scholastics inflated by their own subtleties'.

1840 Gregory XVI

DS 2750 a clarification about indulgences

1967 PAUL VI

Indulgentiarum Doctrina – summarises earlier teaching and develops the doctrine underlying the practice, in particular the doctrine of the 'communion of saints.' Partial indulgences are now simply 'partial' with no additional determination of days or years; thus the mathematics of indulgences came to an end.

1993 CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

§§1471-1479 [text provided]

2024 Pope Francis: *Spes non confundit* (Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee of 2025)

Francis skims over the question of indulgences (n23). He quotes from the Catechism §1472 for which the residual effect of sin is 'an unhealthy attachment to creatures.' But this is something in the sinner that needs further assistance. What about the sinned against? If all sin is an injustice of some kind, then what restitution, satisfaction, rectification is possible for some of our sins which continue to have consequences not only in ourselves but in others?

When Francis refers to Paul VI it is not to *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* but to the bull of indiction for the Holy Year of 1975, *Apostolorum Limina* (23 May 1974) which refers to Christ as 'himself our 'indulgence'' just as he is our 'righteousness' or our 'justice'. But Pope Paul is there simply summarizing what he had already said in the earlier document.

Still needed is a definition of **temporal punishment due to sin**. Francis speaks of 'consequences of sin' or 'residual effects of sin' and warns against any suggestion that God punishes. Is this an adequate modernization of the idea or is it a way of shelving the idea of 'temporal punishment'?

DIFFICULTIES REGARDING INDULGENCES

1. The role this doctrine and its associated practices played in the Protestant Reformation.
 2. The concept of being punished by God for our sins – how speak of this when there is so much emphasis on God's mercy?
 3. An obstacle is the individualisation of contemporary culture and the loss of a sense of solidarity, of being in it together, whether in sin or in grace, in Adam or in Christ.
 4. Restitution in matters of ordinary justice is easily understood, seeking to undo the effects of such sins. But other consequences of sin are not so easily healed.
- Ad 1 The importance of understanding well the Church's teaching, how it developed from the scriptures and earlier tradition, and the importance of Paul VI's 1967 document.
- Ad 2 Understanding that the punishment for our sins is implicit in the sins themselves rather than something God 'adds' on top of them – in the light of God's truth and love we see them clearly and are dismayed by our sins.
- Ad 3 Recover a stronger sense of human solidarity in sin and in grace as taught in the Bible. Note the two senses of sin there, one that it is each individual's conscious choice, the other that it is a power at work among us (the psalm asks the Lord to acquit us of our 'hidden faults').
- Ad 4 Purgatory as purification, enabling us to be fully detached from the things of this world so as to live fully the love which is God's gift to us in Christ. God's truth and love is the light in which this is seen as well as the fire that purifies, the final judgment. Grace is not a magic replacement of human nature but rather enables human nature to do what needs to be done.

I had a go at weaving this material into a manageable article which is entitled, 'What on earth is an indulgence?' and which is published in Conversations, the Irish Dominican journal, in its issue of May/June 2025 [text supplied].