

Indulgences? Yep. Remedies to bring us back to God

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I heard that there are opportunities for obtaining indulgences during the Year of Faith. I thought indulgences were a thing of the past. Are they still around?

Indulgences are alive and well and continually misunderstood. An indulgence is “the remission of temporal punishment due to sin.” Let’s break that down a little.

First, “temporal punishment” is used in contrast to “eternal punishment” (hell). This means a person is in a state of grace, having confessed all mortal sins. The punishment here is what we would have to go through in purgatory.

This is where it might be helpful for us to slightly rephrase things. I like to say indulgences are the “remission of temporal consequences due to sin.” When we think of punishment, it is common to turn to notions of unjust or arbitrary punishment. Who hasn’t been on the receiving end of unjust punishment or believed a punishment was simply at the whim of the punisher?

That is why I prefer the term “consequence” over “punishment.” Consequences are the necessary result of an action. They are naturally proper to a choice. It’s like “spiritual physics.” In natural physics, certain laws govern behavior. In spiritual physics, the same is true. Every sin has a consequence inherent in it.

We all know this.

We all recognize that sin changes us.

Even after we have been forgiven and reconciled to God and the Church, there are real consequences. If you choose a serious sin for the first time, it probably took a lot to get to the point where you were able to choose it. Once you did, you may have felt a sharp pain of guilt.

But did you ever notice that, over time, as you continued to choose that sin, the choice became easier and the guilt became less and less? This is because of spiritual physics. One of the results of sin is that we become attached to sin. Even when we are healed, the scar remains.

Mediating grace

Now, the Church has been commissioned by Jesus Christ himself to mediate grace to the people of God. As the Second Vatican Council stated, the Church is the universal sacrament of salvation. God continues to dispense his grace through the Church. Further, Jesus declared that his apostles would be given the Spirit to “bind and loose” people from their sins.

This is where the doctrine on indulgences comes in.

There are four or five requirements for an indulgence.

First, one needs to pray for the pope.

Second, people must go to confession within seven days of performing the “thing.”

Third, they must receive holy Communion on that day.

Fourth, they must do the “thing.”

Fifth, for a plenary indulgence (full remission of all temporal punishment for sin) one must be free from all attachment to mortal or venial sin.

This “thing” is always connected to some kind of prayer, fasting or almsgiving, three remedies Jesus talks about for sin and slavery to evil in the Gospels.

Every indulgence incorporates an action involving one of these things, like making the Stations of the Cross in a church on a Friday during Lent, or making a pilgrimage to a holy site and praying there.

The point is, the indulgence is aimed at being a remedy. If my heart has grown far from God, then prayer, fasting and almsgiving are ways my heart can return to God by God’s grace.

This is why the first three requirements are so important. We pray for the pope because this indicates that we are aware of our being united in faith with our Holy Father. We go to confession to allow God to forgive our mortal sins. We receive the holy Eucharist both because it is the greatest sign of being united with the Church and because the Eucharist is the source of all grace. The thing that we do is then moved entirely by God’s grace and helps us to become more healed from the wounds of sin.

Indulgences are not superstition but immensely practical and grace-filled opportunities for Christians to open themselves up to the healing power of God’s grace.

Last thing: People point to indulgences being “sold.” This never happened, though it might have looked like it.

Almsgiving is giving resources to those in need. This is a good thing. The church is a noble institution to which a person might want to give alms.

During the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica (which has inspired millions, both rich and poor), the church allowed people to give a donation toward its construction as almsgiving.

You can see how this might look like an indulgence is being sold. After all, you are giving money to the Church and are getting some spiritual benefit. But selling an indulgence would be the sin of simony. The church has always condemned this practice. But you could imagine how many people (including ordinary parish priests) might have understood that particular indulgence in that light.

Nonetheless, the church never sold indulgences; they are great gifts offered to the people of God by Jesus through his church.

Father Schmitz is director of youth and young adult ministry for the Diocese of Duluth and chaplain of the Newman Center at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Reach him at fathermikeschmitz@gmail.com.

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