

You've heard it many times: "Catholics used to believe in indulgences, but we do not believe in them today." It is said with mild embarrassment and a desire to close a chapter of Church history with which many Catholics feel uncomfortable.

Those who claim that indulgences are no longer part of Church teaching have the admirable desire to distance themselves from abuses that occurred around the time of the Protestant Reformation. They also want to remove stumbling blocks that prevent non-Catholics from taking a positive view of the Church. As admirable as these motives are, the claim that indulgences are not part of Church teaching today is false.

This is proved by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which states, "An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishment due for their sins." The Church does this not just to aid Christians, "but also to spur them to works of devotion, penance, and charity" (CCC 1478).

Indulgences are part of the Church's infallible teaching. This means that no Catholic is at liberty to ignore or disbelieve in them. The Council of Trent stated that it "condemns with anathema those who say that indulgences are useless or that the Church does not have the power to grant them" (Trent, session 25, *Decree on Indulgences*). Trent's anathema places indulgences in the realm of infallibly defined teaching.

The pious use of indulgences dates back into the early days of the Church, and the principles underlying indulgences extend back into the Bible itself. Catholics who are uncomfortable with indulgences do not realize how biblical they are. The principles behind indulgences are as clear in Scripture as those behind more familiar doctrines, such as the Trinity.

Before looking at those principles more closely, we should define indulgences. In his apostolic con-

stitution on indulgences, Pope Paul VI said: "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 defined conditions through the Church's help when, as a minister of redemption, she dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions won by Christ and the saints" (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 1).

This technical definition can be phrased more simply as, "An indulgence is what we receive when the Church lessens the temporal (lasting only for a short time) penalties to which we may be subject even though our sins have been forgiven." To understand this definition, we need to look at the biblical principles behind indulgences.

PRINCIPLE 1: SIN RESULTS IN GUILT AND PUNISHMENT

When a person sins, he acquires certain liabilities: the liability of guilt and the liability of punishment. Scripture speaks of the former when it pictures guilt as clinging to our souls, making them discolored and unclean before God: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Is. 1:18). This idea of guilt clinging to our souls appears in texts that picture forgiveness as a cleansing or washing and the state of our forgiven souls as clean and white (Ps. 51:4-9).

We incur not just guilt, but liability for punishment when we sin: "I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless" (Is. 13:11). Judgment pertains even to the smallest sins: "For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccl. 12:14).

PRINCIPLE 2: PUNISHMENTS ARE BOTH TEMPORAL AND ETERNAL

The Bible indicates some punishments are eternal,

lasting forever, but others are temporal. Eternal punishment is mentioned in Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

We normally focus on the eternal penalties of sin, because they are the most important, but Scripture indicates temporal penalties are real and go back to the first sin humans committed: "To the woman he said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children (Gen. 3:16).

PRINCIPLE 3: TEMPORAL PENALTIES MAY REMAIN WHEN A SIN IS FORGIVEN

When someone repents, God removes his guilt (Is. 1:18) and any eternal punishment (Rom. 5:9), but temporal penalties may remain. One passage demonstrating this is 2 Samuel 12, in which Nathan the prophet confronts David over his adultery:

"Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Nathan answered David: 'The Lord on his part has forgiven your sin; you shall not die. But since you have utterly spurned the Lord by this deed, the child born to you must surely die'" (2 Sam. 12:13-14). God forgave David but David still had to suffer the loss of his son as well as other temporal punishments (2 Sam. 12:7-12). (For other examples, see: Numbers 14:13-23; 20:12; 27:12-14.)

Protestants realize that, while Jesus paid the price for our sins before God, he did not relieve our obligation to repair what we have done. They fully acknowledge that if you steal someone's car, you have to give it back; it isn't enough just to repent. God's forgiveness (and man's!) does not include letting you keep the stolen car.

Protestants also admit the principle of temporal penalties for sin, in practice, when discussing death. Scripture says death entered the world through original sin (Gen. 3:22-24, Rom. 5:12). When we first come to God we are forgiven, and when we sin later we are able to be forgiven, yet that does not free us

from the penalty of physical death. Even the forgiven die; a penalty remains after our sins are forgiven. This is a temporal penalty since physical death is temporary and we will be resurrected (Dan. 12:2).

PRINCIPLE 4: GOD BLESSES SOME PEOPLE AS A REWARD TO OTHERS

In Matthew 9:1-8, Jesus heals a paralytic and forgives his sins after seeing the faith of his friends. Paul also tells us that "as regards election [the Jews] are beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (Rom. 11:28).

When God blesses one person as a reward to someone else, sometimes the specific blessing he gives is a reduction of the temporal penalties to which the first person is subject. For example, God promised Abraham that, if he could find a certain number of righteous men in Sodom, he was willing to defer the city's temporal (and eternal) destruction for the sake of the righteous (Gen. 18:16-33; cf. 1 Kgs. 11:11-13; Rom. 11:28-29).

PRINCIPLE 5: GOD REMITS TEMPORAL PUNISHMENTS THROUGH THE CHURCH

God uses the Church when he removes temporal penalties. This is the essence of the doctrine of indulgences. Earlier we defined indulgences as "what we receive when the Church lessens the temporal penalties to which we may be subject even though our sins have been forgiven." The members of the Church became aware of this principle through the sacrament of penance. From the beginning, acts of penance were assigned as part of the sacrament because the Church recognized that Christians must deal with temporal penalties, such as God's discipline and the need to compensate those our sins have injured.

In the early Church, penances were sometimes severe. For serious sins, such as apostasy, murder, and abortion, the penances could stretch over years, but the Church recognized that repentant sinners could

shorten their penances by pleasing God through pious or charitable acts that expressed sorrow and a desire to make up for one's sin.

The Church also recognized the duration of temporal punishments could be lessened through the involvement of other persons who had pleased God. Scripture tells us God gave the authority to forgive sins "to men" (Matt. 9:8) and to Christ's ministers in particular. Jesus told them, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

If Christ gave his ministers the ability to forgive the eternal penalty of sin, how much more would they be able to remit the temporal penalties of sin! Christ also promised his Church the power to bind and loose on earth, saying, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). As the context makes clear, binding and loosing cover Church discipline, and Church discipline involves administering and removing temporal penalties (such as barring from and readmitting to the sacraments). Therefore, the power of binding and loosing includes the administration of temporal penalties.

PRINCIPLE 6: GOD BLESSES DEAD CHRISTIANS AS A REWARD TO LIVING CHRISTIANS

From the beginning the Church recognized the validity of praying for the dead so that their transition into heaven (via purgatory) might be swift and smooth. This meant praying for the lessening or removal of temporal penalties holding them back from the full glory of heaven. For this reason the Church teaches that "indulgences can always be applied to the dead by way of prayer" (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 3). The custom of praying for the dead is not restricted to the Catholic faith. When a Jewish person's loved one dies, he prays a prayer known as the *Mourner's Kaddish* for eleven months after the death for the loved one's purification.

In the Old Testament, Judah Maccabee finds the bodies of soldiers who died wearing superstitious amulets during one of the Lord's battles. Judah and his men "turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out" (2 Macc. 12:42).

The reference to the sin being "wholly blotted out" refers to its temporal penalties. The author of 2 Maccabees tells us that for these men Judah "was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness" (verse 45); he believed that these men fell asleep in godliness, which would not have been the case if they were in mortal sin. If they were not in mortal sin, then they would not have eternal penalties to suffer, and thus the complete blotting out of their sin must refer to temporal penalties for their superstitious actions. Judah "took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this . . . he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (verses 43, 46).

Judah not only prayed for the dead, but he provided for them the then-appropriate ecclesial action for lessening temporal penalties: a sin offering. Accordingly, we may take the now-appropriate ecclesial action for lessening temporal penalties—indulgences—and apply them to the dead by way of prayer.

These six principles, which we have seen to be thoroughly biblical, are the underpinnings of indulgences. But, the question of expiation often remains. Can we expiate our sins—and what does "expiate" mean anyway?

Some criticize indulgences, saying they involve our making "expiation" for our sins, something which only Christ can do. While this sounds like a noble defense of Christ's sufficiency, this criticism is unfounded, and most who make it do not know what the word "expiation" means or how indulgences work.

Protestant Scripture scholar Leon Morris comments on the confusion around the word "expiate": "[M]ost of us . . . don't understand 'expiation' very

well. . . . [E]xpiation is . . . making amends for a wrong. . . . Expiation is an impersonal word; one expiates a sin or a crime" (*The Atonement* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983], 151). The *Wycliff Bible Encyclopedia* gives a similar definition: "The basic idea of expiation has to do with reparation for a wrong, the satisfaction of the demands of justice through paying a penalty."

Certainly when it comes to the eternal effects of our sins, only Christ can make amends or reparation. Only he was able to pay the infinite price necessary to cover our sins. We are completely unable to do so, not only because we are finite creatures incapable of making an infinite satisfaction, but because everything we have was given to us by God. For us to try to satisfy God's eternal justice would be like using money we had borrowed from someone to repay what we had stolen from him. No actual satisfaction would be made (cf. Ps. 49:7-9, Rom. 11:35). This does not mean we can't make amends or reparation for the temporal effects of our sins. If someone steals an item, he can return it. If someone damages another's reputation, he can publicly correct the slander. When someone destroys a piece of property, he can compensate the owner for its loss. All these are ways in which one can make at least partial amends (expiation) for what he has done.

An excellent biblical illustration of this principle is given in Proverbs 16:6, which states: "By loving kindness and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil" (cf. Lev. 6:1-7; Num. 5:5-8). Here we are told that a person makes temporal atonement (though never eternal atonement, which only Christ is capable of doing) for his sins through acts of loving kindness and faithfulness.

CATHOLIC ANSWERS
2020 Gillespie Way, El Cajon, CA 92020
Toll free order line: (888) 291-8000
Web: www.catholic.com

Anti-Catholicism

PRIMER ON INDULGENCES

