

## Indulgences

**J**ust stop for a moment and imagine that you are dead. Did you picture your lifeless body, or your house without you there, or an empty desk at work? In each case we unconsciously place ourselves in the picture as an observer but, of course, if we really were dead we wouldn't be there to observe. The reason we do this is because the physical world around us is all we know, it's what we use to construct our thoughts and to feed our imagination. It's the same with heaven and life after death. We have no idea what it will be like – we can't possibly know because we have never been there - and so we let our imagination take over, but whatever images we come up with will all be in terms of our physical world because that's all we know.

**T**he other thing we struggle with when it comes to our concept of heaven and the afterlife is time. Time is an earthly construct which, as far as we know, won't exist in heaven because heaven is outside of our physical world. But as physical beings living in a world governed by time, we just can't imagine a situation where time doesn't exist. However just as we use the physical realities of our world to help us picture what heaven might be like (images which can never even begin to approach the reality), so we also project our concept of time onto that picture. We think of heaven as a place and therefore our being there must be measured by the passage of time.

**J**ust to show that time isn't quite as constant or definite as we think, take as a simple example the experience of people living north of the Arctic Circle where the sun never sets all summer and never rises all winter. The normal 24-hour clock no longer applies because, going by the rising and setting of the sun, a "day" lasts for months on end as does a night. It's only by actually measuring 24 hours with a clock that people can divide the endless light or dark into actual liveable days. It would be stranger still if we were on a space shuttle orbiting the earth. A single orbit takes around 90 minutes, which means that every 90 minutes the sun "rises" and "sets" from the vantage point of the astronaut, and so, in theory, their day is only 90 minutes long. A day on the moon (sunrise to sunset) lasts just over twenty-nine earth days, and a day on Mercury would be the equivalent of 176 of our days. So you see, even though these examples all involve time as a measure, that measure isn't quite as fixed and "normal" as we might think.

**N**ow where was I going with all this? Ah yes, indulgences. Eamon Duffy<sup>1</sup> makes the comment that like most modern Catholics he is at best ambivalent about the theology of indulgences. Speaking for myself, I thought they were a thing of the past until I noticed that they are still dealt with in the catechism and

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of the History of Christianity, University of Cambridge, in his book *Faith of Our Fathers*

the Holy Father recently brought them back to everyone's consciousness when indulgences were attached to devotions carried out on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes on this the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions there. So what are indulgences and why might people struggle to understand them?

*An indulgence, the catechism says, 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 prescribed conditions through the action of the Church. An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin. The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead.*<sup>2</sup>

**B**asically what this is saying is that even when our sins have been forgiven, there might still be, from our point of view, things to make up for to God – just as we may say sorry to someone we have offended but still feel we have to buy them a small gift by way of demonstrating that we really are sorry. Speaking purely from a personal point of view, I struggle a little bit with this because if God's forgiveness is both total and unconditional (as the Church teaches), to suggest that somehow there is still "work to be done" to make complete amends sounds more like a human concept than something God would demand or expect. This then leads to a further area of Church teaching – that of purgatory, which I'll come back to in a moment.

**H**ow indulgences work is that the performance of a specific spiritual act such as taking part in some devotion, or going on a pilgrimage, would have an indulgence of a certain number of days (typically 300 or 500 or the like) attached to it. The concept is that whatever length of time we might need to spend in the afterlife making up for the sins we have committed would be reduced by that amount. The immediate problem, which remains unresolved in the Church's teaching, is how time can be deducted somewhere where time doesn't exist. To try to resolve that particular conundrum might not only be impossible (as long as we are still in this world), but may also be a wasted exercise in that perhaps we don't need to resolve it.

**I**t may well be (and these are, again, just my personal musings) that in attaching indulgences to certain spiritual activities, the Church, limited by human language, was expressing the benefits in a concept we could understand - that of time, "time off for good behaviour" as we might say. What, in fact, was more important was the actual carrying out of a spiritually meritorious action, by which I mean that the carrying out of that action was its own reward. By going on retreat or by improving our spiritual and devotional life, we were thereby hopefully improving our relationship with God which in and of itself would

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1471

have benefits for this life and for eternity which were immeasurable but, needing a visible carrot on a stick to get us motivated in the first place, the Church expressed the immeasurable in more concrete terms – as “time off for good behaviour”.

Perhaps it wasn't/isn't actually “time off” so much as “value added” as we say, in that by doing better and being better, we might be more likely to avoid sin and any attendant consequences in the first place. This, let me repeat once again, is my own personal train of thought which helps me deal with an otherwise troubling concept of time-related indulgences. However it does seem to find an echo in what the catechism says: *The Christian should strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the ‘old man’ and to put on the ‘new man’* (as St Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians).

A point we should take from this, and remembering what was said in the catechism paragraph quoted earlier, is that indulgences don't just benefit us personally but can also be offered for the dead. If we hold to the concept of time deducted, then we can directly offer the indulgence itself for someone else who has died. If we prefer to think instead of the “value added” idea, the catechism says that within the communion of saints (meaning all of us, living and dead) *there is an abundant exchange of all good things (by which) the holiness of one profits others* (para 1475), suggesting we can offer our own spiritual efforts and activities and works of charity (which at the same time benefit us spiritually) for the souls of those who have died so they benefit too. This is also why we are encouraged to ask the prayers of Our Lady and the saints for the departed so that “this treasury of the immense and unfathomable prayers and good works of Mary and of the saints” (para 1477) may benefit the departed also.

But back to purgatory – so to speak.

The Church says: *All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven* (but that this is) *different from the punishment of the damned.*<sup>3</sup> Only saints, we might assume, were and are judged worthy of immediate entry into heaven. The rest of us, I think we would readily admit, may well be in need of some sort of purification to bring us to a state where we would then be worthy of that reward. That's what the Church has traditionally called purgatory (meaning: to purge), a sort of final spiritual cleansing (but not punishment), the repair of areas where we might otherwise fail our spiritual MOT. But, again, in a place where (as far as we know) time doesn't exist, purgatory would seem to

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<sup>3</sup> Para's 1030 & 1031

be more logically an experience rather than a time-measured process. Perhaps, as some theologians suggest, it may even be an instantaneous “illumination” in the light of God that simultaneously highlights our faults and failings and instantly heals them. We don’t know.

What we do know is the Church’s teaching that we should pray for the dead. Eamon Duffy writes: *Prayer for the dead is neither fear nor fire insurance and emphatically not an attempt to appease an angry God. It is an exercise in the virtues of faith and hope and love. It is also a bridge across the gulf of the separation which is death. By remembering the dead, constantly recalling their names in the liturgy and in private, they remain part of the community of the Church. We are surrounded and supported by the prayers of the Church, a support which continues into the silence of death.*

The idea that our prayers and Masses for a loved one who has died are a “bridge across the gulf of separation” is obviously very important to us spiritually and emotionally. It maintains a link, it declares that the person is still loved, still close to us, and that we are concerned to assist them in whatever spiritual need they may still have. Of course, again, we are thinking in terms of time whereas their experience may be instantaneous. We may offer years of prayers and Masses, but in heaven these may be received all together in an instant - we just don’t know. Theologically one Mass is surely just as valuable, just as effective, as a hundred Masses and yet, emotionally we are probably more comforted by the regular offering of prayers and Masses because we want to continue doing all we can for the person, assisting them in whatever way we can in whatever needs they may have. And because of what we said earlier that *within the communion of saints there is an abundant exchange of all good things*, if the person we are praying for is now in heaven and no longer needs those prayers, they are surely received on behalf of other members of that communion, other members of the body of Christ who do need them. Such remembrances, such spiritual actions, are, therefore, never wasted.

Our constant hope while we continue to be pilgrims on earth, constrained as we are by a life’s journey measured in time, first and foremost is in Our Lord’s resurrection and his promise to us of eternal life. But we can perhaps also place our hope in St Paul’s words that death takes place in the twinkling of an eye (1 Cor 15) and that our being reunited with loved ones in heaven, where time doesn’t exist, will, for them and for us, also take place in that same twinkling of an eye.

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