

## **INDULGENCES ARE EXPRESSION OF GOD'S MERCY**

**Pope John Paul II**

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The Catholic teaching on indulgences was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis at the General Audience of Wednesday, 29 September, as he continued his reflection on the merciful Father's forgiveness of sins. "The starting-point for understanding indulgences is the abundance of God's mercy revealed in the Cross of Christ. The crucified Jesus is the great "indulgence" that the Father has offered humanity through the forgiveness of sins and the possibility of living as children in the Holy Spirit, the Pope said. Here is a translation of his catechesis, which was the 27th in the series on God the Father and was given in Italian.

1. In close connection with the sacrament of Penance, our reflection today turns to a theme particularly related to the celebration of the Jubilee: I am referring to the gift of indulgences, which are offered in particular abundance during the Jubilee Year, as indicated in the Bull *Incarnationis mysterium* and the attached decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

It is a sensitive subject, which has suffered historical misunderstandings that have had a negative impact on communion between Christians. In the present ecumenical context, the Church is aware of the need for this ancient practice to be properly understood and accepted as a significant expression of God's mercy. Experience shows, in fact, that indulgences are sometimes received with superficial attitudes that ultimately frustrate God's gift and cast a shadow on the very truths and values taught by the Church.

2. The starting-point for understanding indulgences is the abundance of God's mercy revealed in the Cross of Christ. The crucified Jesus is the great "indulgence" that the Father has offered humanity through the forgiveness of sins and the possibility of living as children (cf. Jn 1:12-13) in the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 5:5; 8:15-16).

### **God forgives but requires satisfaction**

However, in the logic of the covenant, which is the heart of the whole economy of salvation, this gift does not reach us without our acceptance and response.

In the light of this principle, it is not difficult to understand how reconciliation with God, although based on a free and abundant offer of mercy, at the same time implies an arduous process which involves the individual's personal effort and the Church's sacramental work. For the forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism, this process is centred on the sacrament of Penance, but it continues after the sacramental celebration. The person must be gradually "healed" of the negative effects which sin has caused in him (what the theological tradition calls the "punishments" and "remains" of sin).

3. At first sight, to speak of punishment after sacramental forgiveness might seem inconsistent. The Old Testament, however, shows us how normal it is to undergo reparative punishment after forgiveness. God, after describing himself as "a God merciful and gracious ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin", adds: "yet not without punishing" (Ex 34:6-7). In the Second Book of Samuel, King David's humble confession after his grave sin obtains God's forgiveness (cf. 2 Sm 12:13), but not the prevention of the foretold chastisement (cf. *ibid.*, 12:11; 16:21). God's fatherly love does not rule out punishment, even if the latter must always be understood as part of a merciful justice that re-establishes the violated order for the sake of man's own good (cf. Heb 12:4-11).

In this context temporal punishment expresses the condition of suffering of those who, although reconciled with God, are still marked by those "remains" of sin which do not leave them

totally open to grace. Precisely for the sake of complete healing, the sinner is called to undertake a journey of conversion towards the fullness of love.

In this process God's mercy comes to his aid in special ways. The temporal punishment itself serves as "medicine" to the extent that the person allows it to challenge him to undertake his own profound conversion. This is the meaning of the "satisfaction" required in the sacrament of Penance.

4. The meaning of indulgences must be seen against this background of man's total renewal by the grace of Christ the Redeemer through the Church's ministry. They began historically with the ancient Church's awareness of being able to express the mercy of God by mitigating the canonical penances imposed for the sacramental remission of sins. The mitigation was offset, however, by personal and community obligations as a substitute for the punishment's "medicinal" purpose.

We can now understand how 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 prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints" (*Enchiridion Indulgentiarum, Normae de Indulgentiis, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999, p. 21; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1471*).

The Church has a treasury, then, which is "dispensed" as it were through indulgences. This "distribution" should not be understood as a sort of automatic transfer, as if we were speaking of "things". It is instead the expression of the Church's full confidence of being heard by the Father when—in view of Christ's merits and, by his gift, those of Our Lady and the saints—she asks him to mitigate or cancel the painful aspect of punishment by fostering its medicinal aspect through other channels of grace. In the unfathomable mystery of divine wisdom, this gift of intercession can also benefit the faithful departed, who receive its fruits in a way appropriate to their condition.

### **Inner conversion is required to benefit from indulgences**

5. We can see, then, how indulgences, far from being a sort of "discount" on the duty of conversion, are instead an aid to its prompt, generous and radical fulfilment. This is required to such an extent that the spiritual condition for receiving a plenary indulgence is the exclusion "of all attachment to sin, even venial sin" (*Enchiridion Indulgentiarum, p. 25*).

Therefore, it would be a mistake to think that we can receive this gift by simply performing certain outward acts. On the contrary, they are required as the expression and support of our progress in conversion. They particularly show our faith in God's mercy and in the marvelous reality of communion, which Christ has achieved by indissolubly uniting the Church to himself as his Body and Bride.

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