

Plenary Indulgence

Introduction

The recent visit of the Pope to Australia for World Youth Day certainly drew attention to the Roman Church. Our television screens were painted with the white and purple robes of the pontiff, with thousands of people surrounding him, some almost in a state of hysteria.

As a Reformed Protestant all of this hullabaloo didn't make much of an impression on me – until the morning I read the following in the news paper:

"Pope Benedict XVI has decreed a plenary indulgence for participants in the World Youth Day festivities that will open in Sydney, Australia, on July 15.

The plenary indulgence is also available to "all those who, wherever they are, will pray for the spiritual goals of this meeting and for its happy outcome."

This was obviously a quote from an official Catholic World News bulletin.¹

An ongoing practice?

A Catholic informer declares: "You don't hear about indulgences anymore, at least not in Catholic circles. If it could be said that at one time they were over emphasized, it's surely true that today they're under-emphasized."²

Personally I thought that after the incisive debate regarding the issue with the dawn of the Reformation indulgences were more or less something of the past. But now we had this "plenary indulgence" for World Youth Day.

I must admit that I know very little about the issue. I remember something of the ridiculous indulgences in the time of Luther when sins were forgiven at the sound of the coin dropping in the collection box, but how does it work in modern times?

I got an answer from Steven Rossi. [Plenary indulgence] "... means the full remission of all temporal punishment (time spent in purgatory) due to sin in one's entire lifetime up to that point."³

One can also go to the *Enchiridion* (handbook) of Indulgences, which is the Church's official handbook on what acts and prayers carry indulgences and what indulgences actually are. This handbook defines indulgences as "the remission before God of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven as far as their guilt is concerned."⁴

¹ <http://www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=59505>

² <http://www.catholic.org/clife/prayers/indulgc.php>

³ <http://www.geocities.com/stevenrossi/PlenaryIndulgence.html> . Note the specifier "up to that point". Forgiveness from sins thus depends solely on the one who makes confession, how many times, by what works, and of course the "church" who intercedes for the sinner "and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ" (see "By what Authority" below).

⁴ This is a clear as mud! One is forgiven, but not forgiven; you still have to watch out for some other punishment; if not in this world, then in purgatory? Where do we find Biblical warrant for such a statement?

Sins forgiven and the sinner justified?

The first thing to note is that forgiveness of a sin is separate from punishment for the sin. Through sacramental confession we obtain forgiveness, but we aren't let off the hook as far as punishment goes.⁵

Now for the difficult part: "A *partial* indulgence removes part of the temporal punishment due for sins. A *plenary* indulgence removes all of it. This punishment may come either in this life, in the form of various sufferings, or in the next life, in purgatory. What we don't get rid of here we suffer there."⁶

A further definition: "The Plenary Indulgence is granted to the faithful who will devotedly participate at some sacred function or pious exercise taking place during [the "Twenty-third World Youth Day", including its solemn conclusion], so that, having received the Sacrament of Reconciliation and being truly repentant, they receive Holy Communion and devoutly pray according to the intentions of His Holiness."⁷

To be more precise: "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".⁸

Good works, not grace!

The question is of course who qualifies for this ecclesiastical benevolence?

The answer: "To gain indulgences, whether plenary or partial, it is necessary that the faithful be *in the state of grace* at least at the time the indulgenced work is completed. A plenary indulgence can be gained only once a day. In order to obtain it, the faithful must, in addition to being in *the state of grace*:

- have the interior disposition of complete detachment from sin, even venial sin;
- have sacramentally confessed their sins;
- receive the Holy Eucharist (it is certainly better to receive it while participating in Holy Mass, but for the indulgence only Holy Communion is required);
- pray for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff."⁹

If you're feeling a bit lonely, or guilty about how you treated your deceased relatives, it is handy to know that indulgences "...can always be applied either to oneself or to the souls of the deceased, but they cannot be applied to other persons living on earth."¹⁰ (Sorry!) The Catholic Catechism states in paragraph 1479: "Since the faithful departed now being purified are also members of the same communion of saints, one way we can help them is to obtain indulgences for them, so that the temporal punishments due for their sins may be remitted."¹¹

All of this does not come because of grace; it seems like hard work (if not, confusingly hard work). You have to read the Bible: "A *partial indulgence* is granted to the faithful, who with the veneration due the divine word

⁵ <http://www.catholic.org/clife/prayers/indulgc.php>

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=8289>

⁸ <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?id=2663&repos=1&subrepos=&searchid=271231>

⁹ <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?id=2663&repos=1&subrepos=&searchid=271231>

¹⁰ <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?id=2663&repos=1&subrepos=&searchid=271231>

¹¹ <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=4714>

make a spiritual reading from Sacred Scripture. A *plenary indulgence* is granted, if this reading is continued for at least one half an hour.¹²

A plenary indulgence is granted, if the Rosary is recited in a church or public oratory or in a family group, a religious Community or pious Association; a partial indulgence is granted in other circumstances. To make it more clear: "The Rosary is a certain formula of prayer, which is made up of fifteen decades of "Hail Marys" with an "Our Father" before each decade, and in which the recitation of each decade is accompanied by pious meditation on a particular mystery of our Redemption."¹³

A last chance

And if you were not altogether on the right spot when your last breath is breathed, rest assured: those "...who cannot be assisted by a priest to bring them the sacraments and impart the Apostolic Blessing with its plenary indulgence (see Canon 530 § 3 of Code of Canon Law), Holy Mother Church nevertheless grants a plenary indulgence to be acquired at the point of death, provided they are properly disposed and have been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime. The use of a crucifix or a cross to gain this indulgence is praiseworthy." The condition: provided they have been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime.¹⁴

By what authority?

Who gives this plenary indulgence? Does it come by word and promise of the Lord, by assurance from the Holy Scriptures, resting in the righteousness of our only Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? It seems not to be the case.

The Catechism gives the answer: "(1478) 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 punishments due for their sins. Thus the Church does not want simply to come to the aid of these Christians, but also to spur them to works of devotion, penance, and charity."¹⁵

What hope do we have?

If I have to hope in anything I have read regarding indulgences, I certainly have no hope to be saved. The rules are complicated, confusing and not even to the point (there is the "abouts", "at leasts" and the "more or lesses". And having met all the requirements, one still have to reckon with the fact that "a partial indulgence removes part of the temporal punishment due for sins. A plenary indulgence removes all of it. This punishment may come either in this life, in the form of various sufferings, or in the next life, in purgatory. What we don't get rid of here we suffer there."¹⁶

If I received partial indulgence, how much forgiveness have I received? Which part is not forgiven? If I received plenary indulgence, why purgatory? If I do end up in purgatory, who knows how long my loved ones

¹² <http://www.ourladywarriors.org/indulge/g50.htm>

¹³ <http://www.ourladywarriors.org/indulge/g48.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.ourladywarriors.org/indulge/g28.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=4714>

¹⁶ <http://www.catholic.org/clife/prayers/indulgc.php>

will be saddled with my unforgiven sin, or if they would care for my burning soul at all? Can one really die in peace in the Catholic Church, even after the Last Rites?

What has happened to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? What is grace, if the “church” has the power “of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favour of individual Christians”? Is the “church” the mediator, or is *Christ* our Mediator?

Thank God!

Thank God for the Reformation which took us back to the Scriptures *alone*, which points us to Jesus Christ *alone*, showing us that we are saved by faith *alone*, resting in the merits of Christ *alone*. He is our last High Priest and our last sacrifice. Nothing can stand between Him and us; our salvation is purchased in Him from all eternity.

In Him I am called!

In Him I am forgiven!

In Him I am justified!

In Him I am free!

In Him I am adopted as God’s child!

In Him I am sanctified!

In Him I am glorified!

In Him I am saved – for time and eternity!