

The Papal System – XIX. Indulgences



Johann Tetzel Selling Indulgences

Continued from [XVIII. Purgatory](#).

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In England this practice, with some additions and variations, was very common. The money was not given directly for an indulgence, but it was bestowed upon the poor as an atonement for iniquity; and along with it psalms were repeated, and forms of prayer; and a number of days was devoted to fasting personally, or by a hired deputy, with a view to secure remission without any protracted penance. In A.D. 747, a council of bishops was held at

Cloveshove in England; and a wealthy man applied to this synod for the pardon of a heavy crime, on the ground that he had given so much alms, and secured so many to sing psalms and fast for him, that he had ample compensation for the sins of a hundred years, if his life should be continued that long. The council decided that alms were not to be given as a license to commit sin; that they could relieve no transgressor from his appropriate ecclesiastical penance, and that the singing of psalms was without meaning except as the expression of the heart.

The same custom obtained in France, and had to be denounced by the provincial council of that country, meeting at Chalons, A.D. 813. This synod condemned the folly of those who expected to secure freedom from Church penances by charitable contributions.

At first indulgences were limited exclusively to church penances, but in process of time they embraced all the temporary punishments due the soul on earth and in purgatory. Christ, it was said, had endured and removed the eternal penalties of sin; but the sufferings, short of everlasting continuance, must be borne in purgatory or be removed by an indulgence.

The earthly sufferings could be endured by deputy. Any amount of fasting, flagellation, or pilgrimage work could be discharged by substitute, and throngs of monks in times of papal darkness were competitors for the repulsive service.

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It is commonly agreed that Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, was the inventor of this doctrine. His description of it, from his distinguished position in the Catholic Church, and from his remarkable talents, must be interesting:

"Moreover the unity of the mystical body is the reason why they prevail, in which many, in works of penitence, render more than their debts, and

many bear patiently unjust tribulations also, through which a multitude of punishments may be expiated, if such were owed; of whose merits the supply is so great that it exceeds every penalty incurred by those now living, and especially on account of the merit of Christ. . . . Thus the aforesaid merits are the common possession of the whole Church."

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In A.D. 1343, Clement VI. issued a bull beginning with the words *Unigenitus Dei filius*, in which he proclaimed a jubilee, which was to commence in 1350; and which was to be celebrated every fiftieth year. In this constitution the merits of all the elect, and of the Virgin Mary, are said to fill up a vast treasure, which is increased by the merits of Christ not needed to remove the eternal punishment of sin. This wonderful aggregate of soul-riches Jesus gave to the popes for distribution, a liberal disbursement of which is promised in the coming jubilee,

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"By the apostolical power entrusted to me, I absolve thee from all the sins which to God and me thou hast truly confessed; if thou art not able personally to take part in this enterprise, but if thou wilt furnish help according to thy ability, I bestow on thee the most perfect forgiveness of all thy sins, both from the guilt and punishment of them, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

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A profound sensation was created throughout Prague by the eloquence and principles of Huss. Jerome fired the enthusiasm of the students by the same sentiments. The people sympathized with righteousness, and hated the vile frauds of Rome; and to express their contempt for the indulgence iniquity a procession was formed, the papal bulls were suspended from the necks of certain lewd women, and, surrounded by a great throng of people, they were driven through the chief streets of Prague. The carriage occupied by the women was attended by men with arms, shouting: "To the stake with the letters of a heretic and rogue." The documents were formally taken to a large fire and publicly burned.

Leo X., Tetzel and Indulgences.

Leo X. was a pope of extravagant tastes and expensive habits. And in A.D. 1517 he issued a bull for the sale of indulgences. That act was the most eventful one that had happened in a thousand years, or that should occur in the next millennium. It was destined to bring Protestantism from heaven to rouse up a slumbering world. That bull stirred up saints and heroes to shiver the tyrannical scepter of "the man of sin;" to behold the adorable Saviour in his woes as the sole Redeemer of the sons of men, whose blood cleanses from all sin; to pursue the idolatries of saint and angel worship, prayers to dead men and living seraphs, the filth of the confessional, the festering follies of human merit, the wafer-worship of the mass, and the unclean system of celibacy in convents and churches over the nations and down the ages. And these TRUE CRUSADERS will never stop in their efforts until they drive the paganism of the papacy into the abyss where it was born, That bull, under God, was the instrument in raising up men of apostolic faith and zeal, who will never rest till they overturn the ignorance, degradation, heathenism, and apostasy of mankind, and enthrone the life-giving cross, with its healing blood, in the wounded souls of our lost race.

JOHN TETZEL.

This man belonged to the Dominican Friars. When he began the business of peddling indulgences for Leo, he was over sixty years of age; he had a voice of great strength; in his way he was a man of moving eloquence; his tact and facility for meeting all objections were never surpassed; he had been predestinated by the Prince of Darkness for the indulgence trade, and had given all diligence to make his calling and election, and success sure; he lacked no qualification for his position. It needed a man without shame, and Tetzel had no such impediment; it required a man destitute of truth, and John regarded falsehood as a daily pastime; it demanded a man without fear, and the agent of Leo was no coward; it was indispensable that the preacher of indulgences should have no heart, and John Tetzel had no pity, and no love except for himself.

John Howe speaks of the human soul being the temple of God in ruins: his idea prompts the thought that all over the soul there are fragments of columns, cornices, and sculpture of rare beauty—that is to say, that there are good thoughts, desires, affections, and purposes—broken and defective, strewn all over the soul. Cromwell's chaplain, with the most charitable inclination, and after the most careful and protracted scrutiny, could discover none of these beautiful and broken remains in the heart of Tetzel. He was a monk and an adulterer, a sot and a preacher; a man without any tinge of decency, and without one worthy quality. Such was Leo's indulgence commissioner.

His Mode of Conducting Business.

He and his companions appeared in a gorgeous carriage, followed by attendants finely equipped, before a city; immediately the magistrates were informed that the grace of God and of St. Peter was at their gates. Forthwith the whole population, of all ages, sexes, and ranks, with lighted tapers, went out to meet the monk; and such a welcome greeted him as few men have ever received. Soon John was installed in the principal church; the pope's bull was spread out on a velvet cushion, a great red cross was erected near the altar, above which the papal arms were hung; John ascended the pulpit and began:

"Indulgences are the most precious and sublime gift of God; this red cross has the very same efficacy as the actual cross of Christ; come and I will give you letters under seal, *by which the sins which you may desire to commit in the future shall be forgiven you*; I would not exchange my privileges for those of St. Peter in heaven, for I have saved more souls by my indulgences than he converted by his sermons; there is no sin too great for indulgence to remit. If it were possible for any one to have committed an outrage on the mother of God, let him pay, let him pay well, and it will be forgiven him; indulgences not only save the living, they save the dead also; priest, noble, merchant, wife, young girls, young men, hear your departed parents and your friends crying to you from the bottom of the abyss: *'We are enduring horrible torments! A little alms would deliver us; you can give them and yet you will not!'* At the very instant the piece of money chinks on the bottom of the strong box, the soul comes out of purgatory, and flies upward

into heaven. Oh, imbecile and brutish people, who perceive not the grace that is so richly offered to you... Now heaven is everywhere open; now you can ransom so many souls! Hard-hearted and thoughtless man, with twelve pence you can ransom your father out of purgatory, and you are ungrateful enough not to save him. I declare to you that though you had only a single coat, you would be bound to take it off and sell it, in order to obtain this grace. The Lord God is no longer God; he has committed all power to the pope."

Kings, queens, princes, and bishops, had to pay twenty-five ducats for an ordinary indulgence. Abbots paid ten. All with an income of five hundred florins, paid six. Those who had two hundred florins a year, paid one; others only a half. A still smaller sum might be taken from poorer persons.

There was a tax for particular sins. Polygamy paid six ducats; theft in a church and perjury nine ducats; murder eight ducats and magic two ducats. For thirty crowns Tetzel sold a Saxon gentleman an indulgence giving him pardon for a nameless sin which he was about to commit. The Saxon flogged and robbed him, and was discharged by Duke George without penalty when he showed his indulgence.

The Form of an Indulgence.

"May our Lord Jesus Christ have pity on thee, N. N., and absolve thee by the merit of his most holy passion. And I, in virtue of the apostolic power entrusted to me, absolve thee from all ecclesiastical censures, judgments, and penalties which thou mayst have deserved; moreover, from all the excesses, sins, and crimes, which thou mayst have committed, how great and enormous soever they may have been, and for whatsoever cause. I efface all the marks of disability, and all the notes of infamy which thou mayest have incurred on this occasion. I remit the pain which thou shouldst have to endure in purgatory, I render thee anew a partaker of the sacraments of the Church. I again incorporate thee into the communion of saints, and re-establish thee in the innocence and purity in which thou wert at the hour of thy baptism; so that at the moment of thy death, the gate of entrance to the place of pains and torments will be shut to thee, and, on the contrary, the gate which leads to the heavenly paradise, will be opened to thee. If thou art not to die soon, this grace will remain unimpaired till thy last hour arrive. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Friar John Tetzel, commissary, has signed it with his own hand."

Tetzel was alone among mortals. As a man he was beneath any known priest or human being; Judas would have shrunk, however great the bribe, from signing a document so full of falsehood and soul-murder. A more wicked instrument never was written by human hands. And yet, such were the indulgences sent forth by Leo X., through Tetzel, Samson, and others.

This infamous traffic brought money in heaps to Leo, to Cibo, his brother-in-law, and to the Archbishop of Mentz. And if it rebuilt St. Peter's, it erected, under God, the great temple of Protestant Christianity, in which

fervent piety glows, and from which science, liberty, literature, and prosperity have gone forth, in the grandest earthly exhibitions, to bless the nations of the world.

One of the most popular modern historians of Germany says: "The sale of indulgences was let out for entire provinces, to the highest bidders or farmers-general, and these again appointed several sub-farmers, who, for the sake of gain, committed the most shameful abuses. They selected men of eloquence and impudence to excite the minds of the people, and induce them to purchase by wholesale. They sold indulgences for the heaviest crimes committed; for pillage of churches, perjury and murder; nay, the promise of indulgence could even be obtained before the commission of the contemplated crime."

And such was the universal outcry against indulgences all over Europe that the Council of Trent, while approving of the practice, had to recommend restraints upon their issue, and prohibit the receipt of all evil gains from them.

The Decree of the Council.

"Since the power of conferring indulgences was given by Christ to the Church, and she has used the said power, divinely granted to her, even in the earliest times, the sacred and holy synod teaches and commands that the use of indulgences, most salutary to Christian people, and approved by the authority of sacred councils, be kept in the Church; and it condemns with anathema those who assert that they are useless, or deny that the Church has the power of granting them. Yet, in granting them, it desires that moderation be observed according to the ancient and approved custom of the Church, lest by too great facility ecclesiastical discipline be weakened; and desiring that the abuses be amended and corrected which have crept into them, and by the occurrence of which the excellent name of indulgences is blasphemed by heretics; it appoints generally by this decree, that all evil gains for procuring them be altogether abolished, from which a very fruitful cause of the abuses among Christian people has been derived."

Indulgences in some form exist still, the pitiable, decrepit skeleton of the burly, insolent demon that flourished everywhere in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and excited abhorrence and indignation in the sixteenth. In the primitive Church transgressors were condemned to long penances; they had to appear either in front of the house of God, or in a part of it specially appropriated to the fallen, for two, five, and ten years, begging the forgiveness of the Church, and soliciting restoration to her communion. This situation inflicted the greatest disgrace, and continued the most grievous distress of mind. The ecclesiastical laws which governed religious delinquents were marked by singular severity. But wiser and kinder counsels crept in, and penitents, who showed undoubted sorrow, were relieved of their penance earlier than old usage demanded. This abridgment of the long sentence of penance was called an INDULGENCE, and really was the commencement of that system which reached its scandalous maturity under Leo X., and in the preaching of the immortal Tetzels.

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