

Indulgences: Jubilee and Otherwise

By Father Robert F. McNamara

Television satellites broadcast to the world; on Dec. 27, 1983, the marvelous sight of Pope John Paul's gentle conversation with his would-be-assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca. Agca, nervous but trusting, asked the Pope's forgiveness. The Holy Father, who had already stated that forgiveness from his hospital bed in 1981, now expressed it personally to his assailant. "Time" magazine appropriately hailed the scene as one of great symbolic significance. Indeed, for a vignette dramatically its equal, we would have to go back to the scene of Pope St. Gregory VII absolving Emperor Henry IV at Canossa in the year 1077.

What has this meeting to do with indulgences? Well, let me first ask: Why did the pope only forgive Agca? Why did he not also demand his release from prison?

I am sure that most readers would answer, forgiveness and penal justice are two different things. Forgiveness is an act of love; punishment of wrongdoing is an act of justice. Whenever a person commits a crime, he disturbs the public order, and for more reasons than one he must be given some punishment. That is why we often say of a person who leaves prison after his term, "He has paid his debt to society."

Now the same distinction holds regarding our sins against God and neighbor. Though not always crimes

punishable in civil law, sins of any sort bring down upon us sinners a debt of punishment. If we never ask God's forgiveness, the penalty for grave sins is hell - eternal separation from Him who created us. Even if we do ask His forgiveness we must still be punished so as to make amends for disturbing the universal order He established. This punishment is called "temporal" because it is a matter of time, not (like that of hell) a matter of eternity.

Thanks be to God, there are many ways in which we can make amends to Him while we are still in the land of the living. The penance assigned us in confession is one means. Others are: prayer, the sacraments, Mass, acts of self-denial, works of mercy, cultivating the beatitudes, and even just a cheerful acceptance of the ups and downs of daily life.

And there is still another means: indulgences. Indulgences, for some people, are difficult to understand; but their theology has not limited their genuine popularity. An indulgence, said Pope Paul VI, is "the remission of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven insofar as their guilt is concerned." Since the middle ages, the popes have singled out certain Christian devotions and good deeds and attached them a far greater potency in the eyes of God than they would naturally have. Thus, a self-confessed murderer would surely have a heavy penalty before God. But if he should merit a plenary (or full) indulgence of the type obtainable in the Holy Year, he would eliminate at once all pending punishment.

How can the popes bring into being this marvelous gift? By applying to a specific good action (like a pilgrimage) some of the rich "extra credits" from the treasure of merits accumulated by Jesus himself, by Mary and by all the saints. As Paul VI pointed out in his magnificent apostolic constitution, "The Doctrine of Indulgences" (1967), the popes do this by the "power of the keys" of St. Peter; and on the basis of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, which implies the common sharing of all good things spiritual by the People of God, whether they are on earth, in purgatory, or in heaven. So in the last analysis, an indulgence is a loving gift, made to us, through the pope, by all our friends the saints.

Indulgences, though only one way of making reparation for our sins, are so lavishly generous that we should seek to obtain them as often as possible. Furthermore, we can offer to God any indulgence we gain with the request that He apply it, as He sees fit, to the souls in purgatory. That is an added charity on our part; it is, as John Paul says, a true exemplification of the Communion of Saints.

To gain a plenary indulgence, it is necessary to fulfill certain required conditions. Hence we must be careful to do so. By the way, the Holy Year indulgence can be obtained more than once in the year of jubilee, under those specific conditions. So if you have already made a Holy Year pilgrimage on your own behalf, why not make several others and apply their indulgences to some soul in purgatory?

Even when this Holy Year is over, there are a number of plenary indulgences easily available. Here are some devotions to which they are attached: family or group recitation of the rosary; making the stations of the cross; reading the Scriptures for one-half hour; making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament for one-half hour; making a retreat for at least three days; etc.



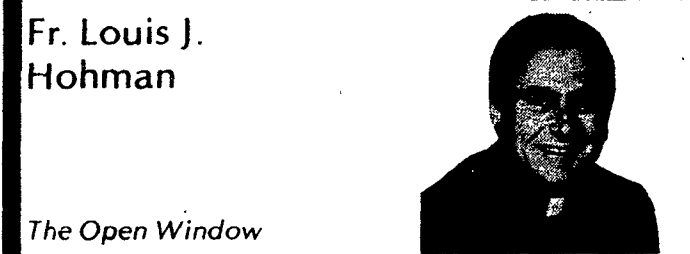
There are also many partial indulgences (that is the new description for all that are not complete or plenary). You can obtain a partial indulgence, for instance, by just lifting up your mind in prayer to God in the midst of your labors or sufferings; or by denying yourself something good and pleasant; or by sharing with the needy, in a spirit of faith, some of your time or your possessions. There are also many devotions to which partial indulgences are attached: reciting the Angelus; prayerfully visiting a cemetery; teaching or receiving religious instruction; listening to a sermon with devotion; making the sign of the cross; etc.

Why not renew during this Holy Year the general intention of obtaining as many indulgences as are attached to our daily good deeds? And as you do so, save some for God to apply, as He chooses, to the poor souls. This, says John Paul, is "a concrete and precious act of charity toward the departed."

Correction

In the Holy Year progress report which appeared in the Feb. 1 issue, it was incorrectly printed that the 1983-84 Holy Year commemorates the 1550th anniversary of the Crucifixion. It should have read the 1950th anniversary.

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The Open Window

We All Need External Reconciliation

Dear Friends,

Last week I indicated that I would try to explain why individual confession of serious sins is required and why individual confession of lesser sins is highly desirable. There seems to be a high level of concern in the "Official" Church relative to the low frequency use of the sacrament on an individual basis. This has certainly not come about through the bad will of people or even "taking the easier way out," but rather their common sense which told them that the formalism and mechanical repetitions of their past had too little substance to be meaningful.

Apart from the law, then, why should one bother with individual confession, especially in the case of sins which are not serious? Let's take the situation involving serious sin first. Choosing to do one's own will rather than God's will in a serious matter constitutes rebellion and probably a kind of alienation not only from God but from the faith community with which we are identified and which suffers by what I do. It should be obvious that reconciliation cannot simply be private and hidden. It can't be in private life and it can't be in these matters either.

Let's take an example. Suppose a husband and wife have a serious argument in which the husband loses his temper and strikes his wife. He then goes storming from the house and goes to a nearby park. In the meantime, in the park, he also decides he is very sorry he ever struck his wife and so he returns to the home. Now it would be quite unlikely if not impossible, for him to enter the house, go to the living room and sit down in front of the TV. Even though she has forgiven him and he is sorry, there must necessarily be an outward sign of sorrow

and recognition of the reconciliation. The comment might be made that in the case of God the sorrow is already known and therefore it does not require an external manifestation. In response I would say that the external sign while not needed for God is very realistically needed on the part of the man.

Furthermore there is a very real need for external reconciliation from the point of view of the faith community which has been offended by the sin committed. Reconciliation to that faith community which is visible must be brought about in a visible way. One might argue that this does not necessarily call for individual private confession, and I would find it difficult to argue against that. In view of the fact that such individual private confession did not even begin until after the tenth century it would seem impossible to argue as a necessity. However, the rightness of it should seem abundantly clear.

Arguing for individual confession of less serious sins is somewhat more difficult. There obviously is no necessity from any point of view. However it certainly is a very useful instrument for making a new beginning. The occasion of a retreat or change of life style or placement as well as the beginning of a new job might be an important occasion to have this external sense of beginning again. Holy Communion itself in which we recommit ourselves to the Lord Jesus and to the Father through Jesus obviously brings about the forgiveness of any less serious sin.

As far as the use of the confessional for counseling, it would seem that is not the most proper place. That kind of direction should be given in another place and another context, and the practice of individual confession should be a somewhat more celebrating sacramental act which denotes a new beginning.

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