
APOSTOLIC TIMES AND THE FATHERS

by Mary Ellen Nourse, T.O.P.

Since the Second Vatican Council, a movement has been evident toward a return to our early Christian roots. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, for example, is a modern replication of the process by which candidates in Apostolic times were initiated into the faith. Mass vestments and vessels now bear a greater resemblance to what might have been used in the early years of the Church.

Therefore, our focus today on indulgences is in keeping with this return to our roots. Current thought might be expressed as, "Yes, indulgences are still around, but nobody pays any attention to them. After all, indulgences weren't part of the early Church." As John stated in his opening speech, a widespread lack of knowledge is evident regarding the use of indulgences in our Catholic Church. The concept of indulgences does date to Apostolic times. Fr. Ivan Fucek, assistant theologian of the Apostolic Penitentiary, states that the Church's teaching on indulgences and Purgatory ". . . was implicit in the Church's doctrine from the very beginning." (Covolo, 1999).

This paper will examine Baptism and Penance as were practiced in the early Church. This will then lead to a discussion of the concept and use of indulgences as understood by our early Church Fathers.

A. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the Early Church

In the early Church, the sacrament of Baptism represented the culmination of a long process intended to prepare candidates for their future lives as Christians in a non-Christian environment. As Fr. Bausch states, "The catechumenate was a long training period of instruction, prayer, fasting, and conversion" (Bausch, 1999, 50). During their years of study, catechumens were accompanied by a sponsor from the Christian community who offered encouragement and support. In addition, the sponsor sometime would fast along with his candidate. Typically, this period of preparation lasted three years (Bausch, 1999). The period of immediate preparation lasted 40 days. During that time, the candidates as a group met often with the local bishop who asked them questions (called scrutinies) regarding their motives and commitment.

Therefore, Baptism on Holy Saturday night was taken very seriously in the early Church. Baptism meant a radical change of lifestyle as well as possible

martyrdom. The sacrament represented a one-time only forgiveness of sins. For this reason, some candidates postponed Baptism until death was imminent.

Once Baptism was given, the thought of a baptized Christian falling into sin was anathema. Such a situation would never occur. However, as Jesus stated in the Garden, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Temptations occurred, and some Christians succumbed. Scandalous public sins were committed. St. Paul had strong words for one Christian found guilty of fornication:

It is actually reported that there is lewd conduct among you of a kind not even found among the pagans--a man living with his father's wife. Still you continue to be self-satisfied, instead of grieving, and getting rid of the offender! As for me, though absent in body I am present in spirit, and have already passed sentence in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ on the man who did this deed. United in spirit with you and empowered by our Lord Jesus, I hand him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5: 1-5)

As Fr. Bausch states, "These 'deliverances to Satan' were standard terms for excommunication" (Bausch, 1999, 161). In the case of an excommunicated but repentant sinner, how was he or she to be admitted back into the community? How could the early Christians be assured of the contriteness of their former brother or sister? The early Church used the power given to the Apostles on Easter night for reconciling repentant sinners with the Christian community.

B. Reconciliation and Penance in the Early Church

Although Baptism was meant as a person's only chance for forgiveness of his/her sins, a post-baptismal forgiveness could be conferred. As quoted in the Faith of the Early Fathers, Tertullian wrote, "(The devil's) poisons are foreseen by God, and although the gate of repentance has already been closed and barred by baptism, he permits it to stand open a little. In the vestibule he has stationed a second repentance which he makes available to those who knock--but only once, because further were in vain" (Bausch, 1999, 166). Thus, the first evidence of a second repentance is extant. Two stipulations were set for those who desired this second repentance: admittance of the sin to clergy and public penance.

Since Easter night, the early Church believed in the power of the Apostles and their successors to forgive sins in Jesus' name. James Cardinal Gibbons points out that the Acts of the Apostles recounts that those desiring to become Christians confessed their sins to the Apostles prior to Baptism. As Cardinal Gibbons maintains, "Why did they confess their sins unless they were bound to do so?" (Gibbons, 1917, 282). Note, however, that the power to forgive sins was given only to the Apostles and their successors. As St. Ambrose wrote in *De paenitentia*, circa 387-390 A.D.,

"This right (of binding and loosing) has been granted to priests only" (Jurgens, 1979).

The process of repentance consisted of several stages. First, the person had to admit to himself that he was guilty of serious public sin. Next, the sinner approached the bishop to request enrollment in the "order of penitents." After imposition of hands by the bishop, the transgressor then began public penance by dressing in sackcloth. This public penance lasted years, perhaps a lifetime. Finally, the bishop would invite the repentant sinner to rejoin the Christian community on Holy Thursday. (Baush, 1999).

Reconciliation and penance in the modern Church may seem very easy when compared to the process by which those guilty of scandalous public sins in the early Church were brought back into the fold. An "Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be" pales in comparison to years of wearing sackcloth, praying, and fasting. As quoted in "The New Rite of Penance" by Doris Donnelly, St. Jerome describes such a public penance fulfilled by a wealthy Roman lady named Fabiola:

On the day before the Pasch, when the whole city was looking on, Fabiola took her place in the ranks of the penitents, with disheveled hair, a ghastly countenance, soiled hands and sordid neck. She prostrated herself before the bishop, the presbyters, and all the people, as they wept along with her. . . She laid bare to all her wound, and a Rome in tears beheld a livid scar on her flesh. The sides of her garment were unfastened, her head was bared, her lips tightly drawn. She did not enter the church of the Lord, but like Miriam, the sister of Moses, she sat apart, outside the camp, in order that the priest who had cast her forth might personally call her back again. (Bausch, 1999, 169).

An important note made by St. Jerome is that the Christian community shared the penitential suffering of the repentant Fabiola. This concept of shared suffering, evident in the early Church, formed the basis of the Fathers' granting of indulgences.

C. Indulgences in the Early Church

As was noted in the previous section, early Christians often shared in the penances being carried out by their excommunicated former brethren. In some cases, the Church exercises its authority to lighten the mortifications. Cardinal Gibbons writes:

We find the Bishops of the Church, after the Apostles, wielding this same power (to forgive sins). No one disputes the right, which they claimed from the very first ages, of inflicting canonical penances on grievous criminals, who were subjected to long fasts, severe abstinences, and other mortifications for a period extending from a few days to five or ten years and even to a lifetime, according to the gravity of the

offense. The penalties were, in several instances, mitigated or cancelled by the Church, according to her discretion, for a society that can inflict punishment can also remit it. (Gibbons, 1917).

The early Church, therefore, exercised her authority to lessen punishments for scandalous sin. This early usage of indulgences, considered by some to have been developed in the second century of the Church, dates to Apostolic times. James Cardinal Gibbons explains:

The prerogative of granting indulgences has been exercised by the teachers of the Church from the beginning of its existence. St. Paul exercises it in behalf of the incestuous Corinthian whom he condemned to a severe penance proportioned to his guilt, "that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord." And having learned afterwards of the Corinthian's fervent contrition, the Apostle absolves him from the penance that he had imposed: "To him, that is such a one, this rebuke is sufficient, which is given by many. So that contrawise, you should rather pardon him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with sorrow. .. and to whom you have pardoned anything, I also. For what I have pardoned, if I have pardoned anything. . . I have done it in the person of Christ."

Here we have all the elements that constitute an indulgence. First--a penance, or temporal punishment proportioned to the gravity of the offense, is imposed on the transgressor. Second--the penitent is truly contrite for his crime. Third--this deems the Apostle (worthy) to remit the punishment. Fourth--the Apostle considers the relaxation of the penance ratified by Jesus Christ, in whose Name it is imparted.

Fr. Enrico Covolo adds commentary to the above discussion regarding St. Paul and the repentant Corinthian. Although Fr. Covolo questions the use of the term "indulgence," the concept is still evident:

Thus, for example, the grace of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 2:10 in relation to an unnamed member of the community should not be considered an indulgence in the strict sense but a reconciliation. This form of reconciliation flourished in the Church from the second to the fourth centuries and took place primarily through the intercession of the martyrs or confessors of the Faith. ..

Louis Wohl underscores the belief of the early Church in the intercession of the martyrs:

Indulgences, too, had their origin in the times of the early martyrs. The young Church was very severe. Penance for grave sin was strict and was performed in public before the sinner could be admitted to the Church again. (Wohl, 1961).

Mr. Wohl provides an example of this intercession by the early martyrs:

Then came a moving plea from the dreaded Mamertine (Roman) prison. The steadfast and faithful ones, imprisoned there and waiting for the day when they must enter the arena and meet with death, wrote to the elders, asking them to forgive their weaker brothers (who "gave in" and had been excommunicated). And the elders of the Roman Christian community assembled and decreed that the heroic death of the martyrs and saints in union with Jesus Christ's passion and death had set up a spiritual treasure which the Church could use to help others. (Wohl, 1961).

This spiritual treasure--the prayers and sufferings of the Mamertine martyrs offered on behalf of others--was a belief of the early Christians which was developed further during the Middle Ages.

D. Summary

Belief in the concept of indulgences dates back to Apostolic times. Our Lord gave to the Apostles and their successors the power to forgive sins in His name. Along with the power of forgiveness came the authority to impose penances on transgressors as well as the authority to remit the mortification. Those who maintain that indulgences are a Medieval idea of the Church need only to read the letters of St. Paul and the writings of the early Fathers.

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