

Indulgences: Double coupons for the heaven-bound

Aren't indulgences a thing of the past? Long gone with Tetzel and the Counter-Reformation? Not so. Indulgences were formally defined at Trent and are issued even today.

Lutheran apologists for Rome defend indulgences as merely a way for Catholics to take repentance seriously. Since they're not sold anymore, nor come with specific time-off in purgatory (such as 300 years), the claim goes that they're not an ecumenical problem today.

Nice try, but no cigar. Pope Benedict XVI recently made it clear that he, as the Vicar of Christ on earth, mediates the Treasury of Merit¹ and that indulgences are tied to works. Here are the details:

In August 2005 Pope Benedict issued "special indulgences" in connection with his trip to Cologne, Germany, for the Roman Catholic Church's World Day of Youth festivities.

The papal decree said that those who "in a spirit of total detachment from any sin, will take part attentively and devoutly" in the festivities could receive from the Pope a plenary indulgence – for this good work. A plenary (full) indulgence is like getting double coupons to minimize time in purgatory.²

Those who did go to Cologne for the Pope's visit but prayed fervently for God to help Catholic teenagers strengthen their faith "in accord with the holy norms of the Gospel and Mother Church" could receive a partial indulgence – for this good work. A partial indulgence is like getting a single coupon to minimize time in purgatory.

The old scheme of salvation remains. The Pope controls the Treasury of Merit. He dispenses the merits of Christ and the Saints. The distinction between partial and plenary (full) indulgences shows that time off from purgatory is still graduated. And indulgences, though not directly financial, are still costly. Time is money. Believers can and must do good works to cooperate in achieving their salvation.

Same-old, same-old.

Thanks be to God that Luther rediscovered that we are totally saved by the alien righteousness of Christ and that all our works, even our best works, are filthy rags (Isa 64:6; not merit). What freedom – the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

¹Extra merit earned by the Saints

²In Catholic teaching purgatory is not part of hell but an extension of the church.