"The zeal to gain indulgences has certainly declined among Catholics." This sentence, written by Karl Rahner about thirty years ago, would surely be an understatement if used to describe the situation of Catholics today (Rahner, 150). One of the three major signs of this Jubilee Year according to the Holy Father is the sign of indulgences; yet it is safe to say that not only the faithful, but even majority of the clergy, have no real idea what indulgences are. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) provides a definition of indulgences, quoted from Pope Paul VI's apostolic constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*; but this definition is hardly illuminating for most people:

"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 minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints" (CCC, 1471).

In fact, not only does this definition not clarify matters for many of us; it actually raises problems. Speaking of "temporal punishment" remitted due to the performance of "certain prescribed con-
ditions,” the definition seems to suggest, at first reading, a vindictive, or at least, a legalistic God, very different from the God Jesus described as a prodigal Father, embracing his returning Son without question or condition (Lk. 15). Moreover, in the face of the grave social, political and economic problems facing us in our country today, a stress on indulgences seems so trivial, a commutation of our “sentence” in purgatory that is totally unconnected and irrelevant to anything real and significant for flesh and blood people struggling in the troubled Philippines of President Joseph Estrada.

How then are we to make the sign of indulgences a meaningful one for our people this Jubilee year? Are they meaningful at all, in the first place? This brief piece will attempt to bring about a proportionate appreciation of indulgences: “proportionate,” because the indulgences are certainly not the most important element of our faith, or even of the Jubilee Year; “appreciation,” because they are a gift available in the Church, part of our Catholic heritage, and it would be a shame not to receive the gifts offered to us to help us on the path to full conversion.

THE DUAL CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

The first point to the doctrine of indulgences is its realistic understanding of what sin does to us. When we sin gravely, we break our communion with the living God; if unhealed, this ruptured relationship with the living source of all life ends up in eternal punishment. This broken communion is healed through the sacrament of reconciliation, in which the merciful Father forgives us, putting our sins from us, as far as “the East is from the West” (Ps. 103:12).

Yet sin, even sins that are not totally disruptive of our relationship with God, have a second effect. They do objective harm to us. We think so often of sins in terms of discrete actions; we forget that our actions are, in a sense, creative of our very selves, our innermost persons. To put it simply, we become what we do. Our lustful acts make us into lustful persons who begin to look at others more and more primarily as objects of pleasure; our repeated boastful acts and words
transform us little by little into proud people who tend instinctively to be contemptuous of others; constantly giving in to the temptations of gossiping and speaking ill of others gradually makes us people who see and delight in the weaknesses of others. The point is: we become inordinately attached to certain sinful patterns of thinking, speaking and acting; we become enslaved to certain sinful patterns. And this enslavement we experience even after we have been forgiven by God. Thus, beyond the forgiveness which heals our relationship with God, we experience the need for a deep interior purification from our attachments to sin; we experience our need for liberation from our enslavement to sin.

The process of purification and liberation is called “temporal punishment,” first, because it is not eternal but must be endured over a period of time; and secondly, because the process of purification is painful. (Surely we have experienced this pain of detachment in the many moments of our lives when we tried, for the love of God, to detach ourselves from some addictive pattern in our lives)! I, for one, believe, however, that it might be best to avoid speaking of “temporal punishments,” as people may misunderstand these words, and to replace them with references to “purification from the harmful effects of our sin” or “liberation from our enslavement to sin.”

THE “TOTAL MERCY OF THE FATHER”

If the double effects of sin constitute the “bad news,” the “Good News” is this: the merciful Father desires, in the fullness of his compassion and love for us, not simply to forgive us and mend our broken relationship with him. Beyond this, his “indulgence,”—that is to say, his kindness, his slowness to anger, his favor—toward us his children fills him with a desire to heal, purify, and liberate us from the enslavement of our sinful patterns. Jesus reveals to us that the Father truly wants to make us whole, rather than simply juridically declaring us forgiven. Just as the Prodigal Father did not simply embrace his son, then leave him to look and smell like a hog-watching servant, so our heavenly Father does not simply desire to forgive us and then leave us in our enmeshment with sin. Just as the Prodi-
gal Father placed robe, sandals, and ring on his son, restoring his dignity, so the heavenly Father desires to lift us up from the death of sin to his own life of love and freedom. "Behold I make all things new"! cries out the One seated upon the Throne in the book of Revelation (Rev. 21:5). To make us new creatures, a new creation, in the pattern of the Son, by the action of the Spirit, is the loving project of our God.

The reality and the transforming efficacy of the Father's mercy is surely the most essential Gospel dimension of the Catholic belief in indulgences. As Bishop Rino Fisichella, auxiliary bishop of Rome and professor at the Gregorian University insists, "In my opinion, the primary reference point for giving a consistent explanation of indulgences is mercy. Mercy is the ultimate sign of the Father's love, which goes to the very end in pardoning the sinner" (Fisichella, 129). The doctrine and practice of indulgences thus teach first of all, as Paul VI writes, "how sad and bitter it is to have abandoned the Lord God" (Indulgentiarum Doctrina, 4), as we realize the harmfulness sin has effected in our persons. But more importantly, indulgences remind us of the "total gift of the mercy of God," a mercy that wants to forgive and make whole.

The question arises: how does this merciful, healing, liberating love of the Father reach us, to touch and transform us? The answer: in many, many ways, of which the indulgences are but one. Experiences of great love ("charity," as St. Peter reminds us, "covers a multitude of sins" [I Pt. 4:8]); and even experiences of great suffering, of "trials . . . lived according to God's will" have "the same efficacy as indulgences" (Ibid., 132). We know this is true from experience. How many of us have felt ourselves healed of a sinful attachment or enabled to walk in a new way because we have been deeply moved by the unconditional, generous love of a parent or because we have been purified by sufferings which we did not expect, but which we did not escape from, but tried to bear in humility and trust.

But the point is: the indulgences, while not the only way the Father's healing love reaches us, is also a way, and a way offered to us in a special way during this Jubilee year. How then does the Father's liberating mercy reach us through the indulgences?
THE CHURCH AS MINISTER OF REDEMPTION AND COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The practice of indulgences involves the intercession and mediation of the Church in a special way. As we pointed out earlier, the forgiven sinner still bears in his or her person the wounds of the sin she or he has committed: the "Old I who is still unconverted or at any rate not wholly changed" still remains; as does the hardness of heart, the selfishness, the weakness of will; thus, the road to total conversion remains long and difficult. "What anguish, what incalculable spiritual developments, what deadly pains still remain to be endured in a process of spiritual transformation, until all is made different" (Rahner, 152). And yet, the doctrine of indulgences reminds us that in the arduous path of purification and renewal which the forgiven Christian still has to walk, he or she does not have to walk alone. The crippled man lying by the pool of Bethsaida, when asked by Jesus whether he wanted to "be made well," described his isolated condition, the sad fact that he had no one to assist him, no one to bring him to the healing waters of the pool: "I have no one . . ." he said (Jn. 5:7). The point is: the crippled man's words are words no Christian needs to say, because each Christian is a member of the Body of Christ, the Church.

The Church is the "minister of redemption," the servant and instrument of the Father's liberating mercy. In order that the Father's healing love might touch the sinner unto transformation, the Church prays for the forgiven sinner striving for fuller conversion and asks the sinner to perform certain simple actions to "gain" an indulgence: sacramental confession; participation in the Eucharist; an act of penance or charity, such as a pilgrimage to a Jubilee pilgrimage Church, or a visit to the sick or suffering; prayers offered for the intentions of the Holy Father.

What is the meaning of these prescribed actions? Are they simply arbitrary penitential requirements devised by the Church? Not at all. If one pays closer attention, one sees that they are all actions that strive to place the striving sinner deeper and deeper into the reality of the Church. Penance reconciles the sinner to the Church; the Eu-
charist is the celebration and realization of communion with Christ and his Church; pilgrimage or a visit to the sick is a practical action of communion with a local Church or concrete members of the Church; and prayer for the Holy Father is a conscious act of loyalty and fidelity to the servant of the Church’s unity, the bishop of Rome, the Pope.

Why this attempt on the part of the “minister of redemption” to draw the Christian seeking more total renewal more deeply into the heart of the Church? Precisely, because the Church is not just an organization or institution, but a communion, a living exchange, a ceaseless network of ever flowing love and holiness. The inner life of the Church involves this mysterious dimension described by John Paul II beautifully in *Incarnationis Mysterium* (10):

Among the faithful there is a marvelous exchange of spiritual gifts, in virtue of which the holiness of one benefits others in a way far exceeding the harm which the sin of one has inflicted upon others. There are people who leave in their wake a surfeit of love, of suffering borne well, of purity and truth, which involves and sustains others.

This, I think, is what the phrase “treasury of saints” means: not that the Church has a kind of spiritual bank of merits from which she can make spiritual withdrawals. Rather, the “treasury of the saints” is the reality of the Holy Church as a “an inexhaustible, limitless solidarity in love” (Fisichella, 132). We are truly one body, as St. Paul teaches (I Cor. 12), so that the holiness and love of the other members of the body “circulate,” as it were, around the body, touching us, and healing us. In our time, it was St. Thérèse of Lisieux who lived out the truth of our communion with one another in the Church most memorably. When she was young, she powerfully experienced the reality of the Church as communion when her prayers and sacrifices for the sake of the criminal Pranzini, brought about, in some mysterious way, the latter’s conversion to Christ a few moments before his execution (Thérèse 1976, 99-100). In one of her last conversations before her death, she told her sisters that she was convinced that in heaven, the saints will look at each other with such gratitude, because only then
will they realize how much they owe to each other's prayer and goodness (Thérèse 1977, 99-100).

The point is: the Church functions as servant of the Father's healing, liberating mercy through her prayer and through the wealth of love, prayer and goodness that touches the forgiven sinner in a deep and mysterious way when he or she allows himself or herself, by fulfilling the simple actions prescribed by the Church, to be placed more decisively in the heart of this body, of this communion of love and holiness which is the Church. "The use of indulgences tells us," Paul VI wrote, "how closely we are united with one another in Christ, and how the supernatural life of each can help others to be more easily and more closely united to the Father" (Indulgentiarum Doctrina, 9) [cf. CCC, 1474-1479].

THE JUBILEE INDULGENCE

What then is an indulgence? Would it not be possible, from all that has been said above, to restate the Catechism of the Catholic Church definition in this perhaps not completely adequate, but probably more understandable, fashion:

An indulgence is a gift of the Father's "total mercy," his forgiving and liberating love, which, in answer to the prayer of the Church, the Father grants in order to free the forgiven Christian from his or her disordered attachment or enslavement to sin, through his or her deeper immersion into the living communion of love and holiness, the body of Christ, which is the Church.

To conclude: I have insisted upon the relative importance of the indulgences. They are not the only, and perhaps, not even the most powerful way, that the Father's healing mercy reaches us to transform the patterns of sin and death and unfreedom that are the bitter fruits of our sin, and which keep us from sharing the fullness of freedom, life and love of Christ. But they are one way, and this Jubilee year, we are given the possibility of "gaining" an indulgence everyday—which is to say, we are given the rare opportunity of experiencing the Father's
merciful love in its fullness everyday; to walk the path of conversion, to be healed of our deeply rooted selfishness, pride and fear, and to be empowered to love more fully and freely everyday; to experience everyday “the Church . . . in the world as the living presence of the love of God who leans down to every human weakness in order to gather it into the embrace of his mercy” (John Paul II, 9). Perhaps, this Jubilee year, in our time of troubles, the indulgences are a modest way offered us by the Church toward the inner personal renewal and liberation we so badly need if we are to contribute truly to the renewal and liberation of our suffering country.

REFERENCES


