

Remarks on Sin and Indulgence

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I

IN 1473, the bishop of Norwich, James Goldwell (1472–99) obtained from Pope Sixtus IV (1471–84)—after whom the Sistine Chapel is named—an indulgence for pilgrims visiting Norwich Cathedral. The bishop needed money. Restoration work was required after a fire in 1463 caused considerable damage to this venerable church building that dates from 1096.¹ According to the terms of the papal indulgence, Christians were invited to call at Norwich Cathedral both on the Annunciation, that is, 25 March, which was the start of the civil year in medieval England,² and at Trinity, the patronal feast of the cathedral, which falls during England's springtime. As the poet reminds us, "Oh, to be in England / Now that April's here . . ." ³ Bishop Goldwell was an educated man of the early renaissance, a prelate who collected rare books. He foresaw that convenient times of the year would encourage Christians to visit his See

¹ Herbert de Losinga laid the foundation stone: "I am the first to have built at Norwich a church in the name and in the honour of the Holy and Undivided Trinity."

² The change to the first of January was made only in the mid-eighteenth century. See British Calendar Act of 1751 in "For the Year 1752, The Statutes at Large, From the Twentieth Year of the Reign of King George the Second to the Thirtieth Year of the Reign of King George the Second," Volume the Seventh, London: Printed for Mark Basket, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, and by the Assigns of Robert Basket; And by Henry Woodfall and William Strahan, Law Printers to the King's Most Excellent Majesty. MDCCLXIV. Cap. XXIII. A.D. 1751. *Anno vicesimo quarto Georgii II.* "An Act for Regulating the Commencement of the Year; and for Correcting the Calendar now in Use."

³ Robert Browning, "Home Thoughts, From Abroad."

city in order to obtain the special papal indulgence. The Norwich bishop was also a believer in satisfactory works. His own tomb in the cathedral includes an altar shelf where priests would celebrate Masses for his soul. To ensure the continuance of these suffrages for his salvation, moreover, the bishop left a sum of 636 pounds.⁴

The Norwich Sixtine indulgence was an especially generous one. Twelve years and twelve Lents were accorded to pilgrims who fulfilled the stipulated requirements for receiving the indulgence.⁵ This dispensation meant that those who devoutly visited the cathedral at Norwich and left a monetary donation to assist the repair work received the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin that otherwise would have required of said sinners twelve years of penitential practices and twelve Lents of supplemental penance. The indulgence got off to a good start. In its first year, 1474, the receipts totaled 21 pounds, two shillings, and three & 3/4 pence. In 1474 also, more than two-thirds of this gross sum was collected at the Annunciation (New Year's). So Robert Browning's romanticism about English springtime may not have held the same persuasive power in the late fifteenth century as it did in the nineteenth.

The above account and similar information fills the pages of a remarkably fair and balanced book, *Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise?* published in 2007.⁶ The author, R. N. Swanson, a distinguished professor of medieval history at the University of Birmingham, exhibits a highly refined competence for both conducting and reporting on archival research. A glance at the richly elaborated, forty-three page bibliography of source materials that mention indulgences in late medieval England suffices to confirm this evaluation. The bibliography also provides the potential reader who picks up this volume of hefty erudition a glimpse of what he or she may expect to discover in the book's more than 500 pages. In short, one finds a fascinating and mainly positive account of Catholic penitential practices from c. 1300 to 1547, when the abrogation of indulgences by the

⁴ Ian Atherton, *Norwich Cathedral: Church, City, and Diocese, 1096–1996* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1996), 472.

⁵ Aquinas, in *Quodlibetal Question II*, q. 8, a. 2, gives the conditions for an indulgence: "Ad hoc ergo quod indulgentia alicui valeat, tria requiruntur. Primo causa pertinens ad honorem Dei, vel ad necessitatem aut utilitatem Ecclesiae. Secundo auctoritas in eo qui facit: Papa enim potest principaliter, alii vero in quantum potestatem ab eo accipiunt vel ordinariam, vel commissam, seu delegatam. Tertio requiritur ut sit in statu caritatis ille qui indulgentiam percipere vult."

⁶ R. N. Swanson, *Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 359. See my review in *Medievalia et Humanistica* 36 (2010).

reformed church of Henry VIII took final hold in England. The surviving records indicate that, prior to the Big Tudor Upheaval, indulgences provided a large number of Christians with a much-appreciated remedy for sin. It is very difficult to conclude, on the other hand, that one may read Swanson's highly documented research as an exposé of the superstitious delusions of religious backwoodsmen.

The practice of distributing indulgences in late medieval England belongs to a certain historical period that, like every period, including our own, witnessed departures from what would be considered normative. Those who recall the *Pardoner's Tale* from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* will find the pardoner's self-description borne out in some of what Swanson narrates: "Indulgences of pope and cardinal, / Of patriarch and bishop, these I do / Show, and in Latin speak some words, a few, / To spice therewith a bit my sermoning / And stir men to devotion, marvelling."⁷ Even after Henry VIII broke with Rome, English pardoners such as Harry Cleepulle continued, so Swanson discovers, to solicit funds for London charitable institutions, though, for obvious reasons, without appealing to a "papal indulgence."⁸ *Indulgences in Late Medieval England*, however, displays neither cynicism nor anti-Catholic affect. The author shows that while pardoners enjoyed access to English congregations, no evidence, for example, confirms that they were in the habit of mounting English pulpits.⁹ Swanson rather demonstrates that purveyors of indulgences occupied a place in the economic and sociological structure of English society that responded properly to the religious requirements of English Catholics.¹⁰ The book, then, unearths a sociological snapshot of late medieval piety, but its brave attempt to supply some of the theological background for the practices he reports falls short of recounting a history of the Church's theology of indulgences. I consider the shortfall an important one to draw to the attention of readers who want to understand the Catholic theology of indulgences. Even the most careful historical research falls short of capturing *sacra doctrina*, "which," as St. Thomas reminds us, "has come to us through divine revelation beyond the discoveries of the rational sciences."¹¹

⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343–1400) "Prologue" to the *Pardoner's Tale*: "Bulles of popes and of cardynales, / Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe, / And in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe, / To saffron with my predicacioun, / And for to stire hem to devocioun."

⁸ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 496.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 523.

¹¹ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 1.

II

During the Year for Priests (2009–2010), for instance, good Catholics throughout the world found themselves the beneficiaries of the same papal largesse that motivated the people of Norwich to help Bishop Goldwell restore his cathedral. During that special year of grace, however, the Pope, our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, granted an indulgence to restore the Catholic priesthood. The gift of special indulgences that accompanied that year aimed to put into high relief the indispensable and irreplaceable place of the Roman Catholic priest.¹² The priesthood and indulgence enjoy a mutual relationship that much of post-conciliar Catholic theology, alas, has let pass unnoticed. Flannery O'Connor explains why: "Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause."¹³ It would be difficult to apply this same judgment to the fifteenth-century residents of Norwich. They knew the cause in their actual lives that made obtaining the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin something desirable. Priesthood and indulgence go together inasmuch as each stands "at the center of the theology of a redemptive, atoning Incarnation and of the theology of the essentially 'cruciform' Christian life."¹⁴ Indulgences are ineptly tagged "passports to paradise." They rather constitute special instruments of entering more deeply into the mystery of Christ's Passion and death. What Bishop Goldwell and his Norwich flock understood, of course, is that this mystery embraces both heaven and earth.

To some persons, it may seem oddly antiquated to associate indulgences with priestly life. Surely there are other things that the priest must do in addition to preaching indulgences. Consider, however, our present circumstances. It is a commonplace to observe that, since the end of the Second Vatican Council, Christian anthropology and spiritual theology have erred on the side of promoting an unwarranted optimism about passports to paradise. Celebration of the inevitable triumph of the human spirit always eclipses the sanctification of the burdensome. Our generation has inherited the Enlightenment confidence in the perfectibility of man by man. Bishop Goldwell would not have been amused. He included twelve Lents in his Norwich Cathedral repair fund drive. He understood

¹² Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary of 25 April 2009 (Prot. N. 136/09/1).

¹³ This quotation is taken from Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country" in Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 805.

¹⁴ This lapidary expression is borrowed from T. C. O'Brien, *Effects of Sin, Stain and Guilt*, vol. 27 (Blackfriars edition of the *Summa theologiae*), 99.

that the evil of sin finds no remedy from within a world of sinners. Only Christ redeems man. Lent signals the need for Christians to identify with the suffering Christ. The weeks of Lent afford both priest and seminarian the time to embrace “the sanctification of the burdensome.” Their sacramental ministry depends on it. For it belongs by divine institution to the Catholic priest to mediate Christ’s satisfaction and merits to the members of Christ’s Body. No one else can do it. Only the Catholic priest can sacramentally sanctify the burdensome. This miracle of grace works most startlingly, when measured by human expectations, through the obtaining of indulgences.

Today we suffer less from burnt-out cathedrals and more from burnt-out sacramental practice. Today’s sacramental ministry exhibits the consequence of pursuing feverishly a burdensome-less Christianity in which no one sees a cause for Redemption and no one imagines that the sanctification of the burdensome avails to anyone’s advantage. We behold this deficient view of Christian satisfaction played out at Baptism, for instance, by the nonchalant omission of meaningful instruction on the effects of original sin. At Confirmation, by the familiar emphasis on social do-gooding in rites of passage. At Penance, well, by the disappearance of the very sacrament that makes a quite burdensome human action, sorrow for sins, a sanctified and sanctifying action. At Marriage, by large-scale retreat before the manifold threats to fidelity and fecundity, which constitute the burdens, the *munera*, of Matrimony. At Holy Orders, by confused outlooks on the authentic exercise of pastoral charity, which oftentimes result from mistaking the laity’s co-responsibility for the Church with an erroneous view of their collaboration with the sacred ministry of priests.¹⁵ At Holy Anointing, by the neglect of this sacrament when the opportune time arrives, and by the gradual shift of emphasis from the most burdensome of human activities, dying, to the provision of consolation for those who are bereaved. Even what is burdensome in the Blessed Eucharist, namely, the remission of venial sins and the subsequent intensification of charity, suffers eclipse when priests allow the reception of Holy Communion to become a routine Catholic cultural practice.

III

Gary A. Anderson has provided us with another kind of historical study than the one produced by Professor Swanson.¹⁶ Anderson’s short chapters of biblical exegesis reveal that throughout the old dispensation God

¹⁵ See the 1997 Inter-dicasterial “Instruction on Certain Questions regarding the collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest.”

¹⁶ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

prepared the People of Israel for the gift of Redemption that Christ's death on the Cross brings. The fascinating exposition of word usage confirms the truth of what, in his mature works at least, St. Thomas Aquinas holds on sin. For example, recall *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 48, a. 5. There Aquinas teaches "that in human life evil is properly and *exhaustively* divided into the evil of sin (*malum culpa*) and the evil of punishment (*malum poenae*)."¹⁷ Anderson reveals the continuity between the two dispensations with respect to evil in one of its two basic meanings: the debt to undergo punishment incurred by a sinful action. In addition, the author generously invites a reconsideration of certain theological opinions that by the early sixteenth century had put an end to Bishop Goldwell's indulgence and, I suppose, his chantry chapel too. In 1532, when the last entry in the register was made, the Norwich Sixtine indulgence raised a total of eight shillings, six and 1/2 pence.¹⁸

At the heart of the granting of indulgences stands the liability to punishment that Anderson shows variously and variously emerges within the pages of the Old Testament. To interpret the evidence in a manner coherent with the *sacra doctrina*, one needs to insert the history of sin into the history of Christ's saving action. (This is not the moment to initiate the discussion, however.) The Thomist tradition helps us understand what stands behind the reality of the indulgence and of satisfactory actions in general. In a way that excludes all voluntaristic extrinsicism, Aquinas clarifies the nature of the punishment that befalls the sinner, what it means to stand liable for punishment. The twentieth-century Thomist T. C. O'Brien captures Aquinas's point clearly: "The *reatus poenae* is in strict correlation with the following most precise expression of the nature of sin, *actus debito ordine privatus*, an act lacking the order it should have."¹⁹ To the extent that one keeps this definition of sin in mind, then it should be easy to understand the quantification of times that provided the coin of the realm for the medieval indulgences. Twelve years and twelve Lents or "quarantines."²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas in all likelihood lacked the exegesis of Anderson and of course was already canonized by the time that Bishop Goldwell

¹⁷ O'Brien, *Effects of Sin*, 99.

¹⁸ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 359.

¹⁹ O'Brien, *Effects of Sin*, 99. See *ST* I-II, q. 72, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁰ " 'Quarantines' is an expression frequently used in the grants of indulgences, and it signifies a strict ecclesiastical penance of forty days, performed according to the practice of the early Church. Hence an indulgence of seven quarantines, for instance, implies the remission of as much temporal punishment as would be blotted out by the corresponding amount of ecclesiastical penance." See Anthony Maas, "Quarantines" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911).

obtained his indulgence. Still, Aquinas remains a master of the *sacra doctrina*. It is a question for another colloquium to inquire how Aquinas's theology illumines the full Christological significance of what Anderson recounts and explains the practices that Swanson documents.

IV

What follows aims to supply a general account of the theological understanding that governed and continues to govern the Church's practice of granting indulgences.²¹ The Church associates indulgences with the penitential spirit that Christian life requires. She teaches that Christ's redemptive sufferings—his satisfaction—can spiritually benefit those members of his Mystical Body who are properly disposed for spiritual renewal. To understand how an indulgence works, one should recall that one person can share in the good deeds of another person, even as Christians are instructed both to pray for and to help their brothers and sisters. In other words, the gift of indulgences gives concrete expression to the communion of saints.

Charity is not produced by magic. No serious person ever imagined that the bestowal of divine grace amounts to magical repetition of totemic actions. Authentic instruction on how to benefit from an indulgence stipulates that one must possess true interior contrition for past sins and have already confessed these sins to a priest. No one excluded by grave sin from communion with God can expect to receive the total gift of his mercy. So St. Augustine explains, in his *De Trinitate*, Book 15, that it is not the same thing to remove the arrow and to heal the wound—"non est idem abstrahere telum, et sanare vulnus." This means that it is one thing to forgive sin—to remove the arrow—and another thing to heal the wounds caused by sin in human nature. The practice of granting indulgences shows that sin entails more than the infraction of a divine rule. Since it disregards the in-built purposes of human nature, sin leaves man in a state of personal disorder. Sinful actions affect adversely the psychology and character of the whole person. Each sinner requires a remedial discipline that can redirect his or her human energies toward virtuous activity.

The "temporal punishment" due to sin can be explained by sin itself. St. Augustine famously teaches that every disordered action brings about its own punishment.²² Sin reduces the human psychological powers to

²¹ For further explanation, see my "St. Thomas Aquinas on Satisfaction, Indulgences, and Crusades," *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 2 (1992): 74–96.

²² *Confessions*, Bk. 1, no. 19 (The Harvard Classics, 1909–19): "For Thou hast commanded, and so it is, that every inordinate affection should be its own punishment."

purposes that fall short of human flourishing. Since this sinful deformation implies disordered attachments to created goods, Christian conversion ordinarily entails the willing acceptance of satisfactory works. These “penances” are required because of the very human need to order one’s willed affective life toward good deeds and away from bad ones. A sinner needs not only forgiveness but restoration, which implies a real change of life, the gradual elimination of evil within.

Healing the wounds that sin causes in the human person exceeds our native abilities. By his Passion, death, and Resurrection, Christ accomplished full satisfaction for human sins: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pt 2:24). The sovereign dignity of Christ’s person means that his work possesses a kind of infinite value. Christ’s work is so great that the Church announces a treasure trove—the *thesaurus ecclesiae*. Indulgences draw upon this spiritual treasure chest that contains the good works of Christ and the saints.

The personal actions of Christ and the saints make up the *thesaurus ecclesiae* or “the treasury of satisfactions,” as Swanson translates the expression.²³ Because they form one Body in the Church, all Christians can participate in this spiritual treasure, which is augmented throughout the ages by the good deeds of holy men and women who themselves remain united with the suffering Christ. By bearing evils and practicing charity, each Christian becomes an active participant in healing the world, completing “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body” (Col 1:24). Swanson also refers to a “Treasury of Merits” and suggests that the concept was open sometimes to misunderstandings both popular and theological.²⁴

In the Church, everything exists in a communion of charity. This belief explains the canonical rule that the one who presides over the universal Church on earth possesses authority to distribute the treasury of the Church. The Pope extends indulgences to those united in charity with him. When the Successor of Peter grants an indulgence, he exercises the “power of the keys.” In *Quodlibetal Question* II, q. 8, a. 2, Aquinas provides the biblical foundation for this prerogative of the Roman pontiff: “Therefore, dispensation of this treasure belongs to the one who is in charge of the whole Church; hence the Lord gave to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 16:19).”²⁵ Swanson (15) finds this element

²³ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 8.

²⁴ See the index in Swanson, *Indulgences*, 578, for the various references.

²⁵ “Totus ergo iste thesaurus est in dispensatione eius qui praeest generali Ecclesiae; unde Petro dominus claves regni caelorum commisit, Matth., XVI. Quando ergo utilitas vel necessitas ipsius Ecclesiae hoc exposcit, potest ille qui praeest Ecclesiae,

of Catholic thought difficult to interpret, and the theological argument leaves him skeptical.²⁶

One may inquire how an indulgence can change our psychological dispositions. The Church teaches that Christ's love remains powerful enough to alter what the sinner himself did not have the occasion (or perhaps even the will) to do for himself. Because he is the very Son of God, the Church recognizes the exceeding value that Christ's sufferings communicate to every member of the Church. An indulgence provides a concrete way to participate in his obedient love.

Christ's heroic love can overcome even the habitual sinner's psychological resistance to godly living. Of course indulgences do not provide an excuse for spiritual laziness. Still, the duly pardoned sinner who rejoices in the gift of the Father's mercy is made ready for ultimate communion. Accordingly, an indulgence can be obtained on behalf of the souls of the deceased. The Church applies the indulgence to the faithful departed because the elect who await final purification belong to the one communion of the Church. The Incarnate Son establishes a wide communication of divine goodness that can overcome whatsoever indisposition sin may leave in the living or the dead. Only the mystery of the Incarnation can explain such a wondrous exchange that animated so much of Catholic life in late medieval England. Swanson's assessment based on "spiritual commodity and comprehensible utility" falls short of penetrating this important element of the *sacra doctrina*.²⁷

Christ's service of obedient love explains indulgences as much as graces can be explained. Why is pardon for sin through an indulgence less burdensome than ordinary efforts at reform of life? Aquinas in the aforementioned text gives the reason: "The labor of Christ's sufferings suffices."²⁸ In this mystery of a "vicarious life," the eminent satisfaction of

de ista infinitate thesauri communicare alicui, qui per caritatem fit membrum Ecclesiae, de praedicto thesauro quantum sibi visum fuerit opportunum, vel usque ad totalem remissionem poenarum, vel usque ad aliquam certam quantitatem; ita scilicet quod passio Christi et aliorum sanctorum ei imputetur ac si ipse passus esset quantum sufficeret ad remissionem sui peccati, sicut contingit cum unus pro alio satisfacit, ut dictum est." The translation continues: "Accordingly, when either the well-being or absolute necessity of the Church requires it, the one who is in charge of the Church can distribute from this unlimited treasure to anyone who through charity belongs to the Church as much of the said treasure as shall seem to him opportune, either up to a total remission of punishment or to some certain amount."

²⁶ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 15.

²⁷ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 22.

²⁸ *Quodlibetal Question II*, q. 8, a. 2.

Christ and the superabundant satisfaction of the Virgin Mary and the saints are communicated to the pilgrim Christian. The practices that Professor Swanson sets forth in his massive collection of materials reveal the vibrant piety of late medieval England. The Church continues to grant indulgences, although the occasions for receiving them mainly center on spiritual activities such as jubilees and pilgrimages and special occasions like the recent Year for Priests. It is an advantage of Swanson's research that it makes known the devotion of English Catholics in the late medieval period. Their Catholic devotion enjoys solid theological standing in its attachment to eleemosynary offerings.

We can thank Professor Anderson for providing supportive argumentation on behalf of the authenticity of the indulgence practices of late medieval England. His final essay, chapter twelve, offers a short defense of the biblical foundations for St. Anselm's *Cur Deus homo?* This archbishop of Canterbury (1093–1109) contributed mightily to making the performance of satisfactory actions a staple of Catholic life in the Middle Ages. On occasion, I have explained what distinguishes St. Anselm's view of satisfaction from Aquinas's mature reflections on the subject.²⁸ For Aquinas, satisfaction transforms rather than exacts. It was a desire for this divinizing transformation that, I suggest, made so many persons in late medieval England eager to participate in the awarding of indulgences. It is the same desire for personal transformation that should make the practice of indulgences a staple of Catholic life in our period. N V

²⁹ See my *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas*, *Studies in Historical Theology* VI (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1990).