New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12244

Indulgences: A New Appreciation for the Present Moment?

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Abstract

With the celebration of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy indulgences have once again moved to the fore of Catholic imagination, with many pilgrims availing themselves of the opportunity to pass through a Door of Mercy or 'Holy Door' and thereby receive the jubilee indulgence. While the practice of indulgences has experienced something of a revival in popularity during recent papacies, the precise doctrine remains largely unrehearsed and unfamiliar, simultaneously evoking strong reactions of distaste and disquiet among many as memories of medieval abuse linger on. This article sets out the precepts of the most recent authoritative teaching on indulgences, itself almost fifty years old, before exploring the theological interpretation offered by Karl Rahner and tracing its gradual and largely anonymous appropriation in papal teaching through the post-conciliar period. With Pope Francis promoting mercy as a central theme for his papacy and ecclesial vision, the paper closes by considering how he may be proposing a further re-appropriation of indulgences which shifts attention from their *post-mortem* efficacy to their capacity to establish a Franciscan reflexivity of mercy in the contemporary church.

Keywords

indulgence, mercy, Rahner, Pope Francis, *aggiornamento*

Introduction

On 8th December 2015 Pope Francis opened the Holy Door at St Peter's Basilica in Rome, thus inaugurating the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy he had announced the previous April with the Bull of Indiction, *Misericordiae Vultus*, or 'The Face of Mercy'.[1]

[1] Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015).

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With this year dedicated to mercy, Pope Francis wishes to turn the Church's attention to the wonder of God's mercy present in its midst. As Francis puts it, 'the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action'[2] and so he encourages the faithful to reflect on, and engage in, the great works of mercy within the Church; the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, the sacrament of reconciliation and, of course, the practice of indulgences. Indeed with the huge visual symbolism of the opening of the Holy Door, and the making available of other such doors throughout Christendom, indulgences threaten to become the 'take home message' of the jubilee year, especially within the secular press. An impressive achievement for an aspect of Church doctrine and praxis which was, half a century ago, assumed to be on the verge of a quiet obsolescence.[3]

As it is, the continued existence, even renewed flourishing, of the practice of indulgences comes as something of a surprise to many Catholics. Those familiar with Chaucer's devastating parody in *The Canterbury Tales*, or with some vague awareness of the neuralgic issues underlying the Reformation, usually assume that indulgences were abolished by the Council of Trent, or at least dealt a final deathblow at the Second Vatican Council. Many of us are confused as to what they involve, what they effect, how they relate to sacramental absolution – and the theology underpinning any or all of this. Yet Pope Francis has shown that indulgences remain a living component of Church doctrine with the potential for being a valued aspect of contemporary praxis. One might even wonder whether, as with so much else, Francis is prompting a re-appropriation, an *aggiornamento*, of indulgences; a chance to retrieve and develop further the theology underlying their practice. It is some of these issues surrounding the doctrine and theology of indulgences which will be explored here.

Church doctrine

The official teaching of the Church states that 'an indulgence is the remission in the sight of God of the temporal punishment due for sins, the guilt of which has already been forgiven.'[4] This comes as a bit of a blow to those of us who have previously exited the confessional assuming that all was 'done and dusted', a misconception attributable at least in part to the post-conciliar emphasis that sins absolved in

[2] *Ibid.,* 12.

[3] See for example, Karl Rahner, 'Indulgences', in Karl Rahner and others, eds., *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopaedia of Theology: Volume Three* (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), pp. 123-129.

[4] *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 992 (London: Collins, 1983).

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the sacrament are not only forgiven, but entirely forgotten by our all-merciful and ever-loving God. As it is, the Church utilises here the Thomistic distinction between guilt and punishment.[5] While the guilt of sin is removed (satisfied) by confession and sacramental absolution, sin additionally brings upon the individual certain 'after effects' or 'inner consequences' which are understood as the 'temporal punishments' of sin. These temporal punishments must be resolved either in this life or during the process following death commonly referred to as purgatory. Indulgences remit either fully (as in the case of a plenary indulgence) or in part (partial indulgences) these temporal punishments and can be obtained either for oneself, or for the souls of the dead for whom the process has not yet been completed. The most recent authoritative statement of church teaching on indulgences ascribes to them two aspects.[6] The first is the specific 'work' of the particular indulgence, so in the case of a jubilee indulgence this can involve making a pilgrimage to a relevant cathedral or shrine and passing through the Holy Door. The works attached to individual indulgences are usually set forth by the Apostolic Penitentiary, and vary from indulgence to indulgence. Every plenary indulgence, however, also has three universal 'conditions' attached to it. These are: first that the penitent must have participated in the Sacrament of Penance (thus being absolved from the *guilt* of their sins); second, they must receive Communion; and thirdly that they offer prayers for the Pope's intentions (this last criterion being satisfied by reciting one 'Our Father' and one 'Hail Mary', although other prayers can equally meet the requirement). Reception of the Eucharist and prayers for the Pope must be performed for each and every plenary indulgence, while one sacramental confession may suffice for several, providing the person remains in a state of grace. Finally, the teaching of 1967 adds a final component. To obtain a plenary indulgence the penitent must, at the time of performing the work of the indulgence, be free from 'all attachment to sin, even to venial sin',[7] a requirement which led at least one commentator to observe that plenary indulgences will be largely unobtainable by the majority of us most of the time.[8] Where any one of the conditions for the fulfilment of the plenary indulgence is lacking, including the required complete detachment

[5] For a survey of the new distinctions introduced by Aquinas into the medieval theology of penance and indulgences see Edward Schillebeeckx, 'The Spiritual Intent of Indulgences', *Lutheran World* 14 (1967), pp. 11-32.

[6] Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*. https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_01011967_indulgentiarum-doctrina.html.

[7] *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, norm 7.

[8] Karl Rahner, 'On the Official Teaching of the Church Today on the Subject of Indulgences', in *Theological Investigations: Volume 10*, tr. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, [1967] 1973), p. 166-198, (p. 184).

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from sin, the indulgence becomes partial, thereby commuting some, but not all, of the temporal punishment. Partial indulgences can also be obtained by performing various other specified works (again the details vary from indulgence to indulgence) 'with a contrite heart', but without the need of the further three conditions.[9]

Such are the facts. As the Apostolic Constitution is at pains to point out, the understanding of indulgences and their place in the economy of salvation is based on several dearly held doctrines of the Church. First, the teaching of the Mystical Body of Christ and the Communion of Saints makes clear that both sin and holiness ramify through the whole Church; their effects are social, affecting more than just the individual concerned. Through the 'supernatural solidarity' of all members of Christ's Body, 'the sin of one harms the others, just as the holiness of one also benefits the others.'[10] From this it is clear that the effects of sin may continue to reverberate through the universal order, even once the specific guilt of the individual person is forgiven. These 'vestiges of sin' must be cleansed or remitted, either through voluntary reparation or the willing acceptance of 'punishments established by the just and most holy wisdom of God.'[11] The church's doctrine of purgatory, defined in the thirteenth century, admits that where this process is not fully completed in an individual's lifetime, the process may continue after their death in a further period of purification prior to full admission into the kingdom of heaven.

While accepting the social effects of our transgressions, we can also, on the other hand, throw ourselves on the considerable assets that such solidarity in the mystical body offers. From ancient times, the Church had understood that the 'prayer and good works of the upright', could remit the canonically-imposed penances due to sin and speed the reconciliation of the penitent with the ecclesial community. With the development of the doctrine of the 'treasury of the Church' (*thesaurus Ecclesiae*) in the fourteenth century it became understood that the Church possessed a 'treasury' of the inexhaustible expiation and merits obtained by Christ in his great work of redemption.[12] This treasury includes also the prayers and good works of Mary his Mother, and those of all the saints who have already attained salvation. In the practice of indulgences then, the Church understands that she can request that the riches of this infinite treasury be applied to the individual, thereby remitting for them, either fully or partially, the temporal consequences (or punishments) of their sin.

[9] *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, norm 5.
[10] *Ibid.,* 4.
[11] *Ibid.,* 3.
[12] The first dogmatic statement on the treasury of the Church was given by Pope Clement VI in his Papal Bull *Unigenitus*, issued in January 1343.

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All this doctrinal elegance, it should be admitted, was not achieved at once. Indeed the area of indulgences is one where praxis has largely preceded both theology and teaching.[13] The first recognisable modern indulgences appeared in France in the eleventh century and throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries theologians and churchmen struggled to map out a theology which would make sense of them. In fact, the earliest theologians to consider the issue, among them figures no less than Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, were initially sceptical if not downright critical, and for their first two centuries indulgences struggled to shake off the perception that they were, at best, concessions to the imperfect. It must also be fully acknowledged that the proliferation of indulgences in the Middle Ages was associated with multiple abuses (not least their use for fiscal purposes), and the development of an unduly materialistic and legalistic understanding of the treasury of merit and the Church's authority to dispense its contents. While the Council of Trent attempted to eliminate the abuses surrounding indulgences, and Pius V definitively banned all associated commercial or monetary aspects, vestiges of medieval legalism remained and by the mid-twentieth century the practice of indulgences had waned to the point of imminent extinction.

The Second Vatican Council

In the mid 1950's it seemed that the Church was confronted with a choice; either to let the practice of indulgences slip into an unlamented obscurity, or to attempt a re-visioning of the theology surrounding them. Indeed, Karl Rahner argued that it was only through the working out of a 'clear and deepened theology of indulgences' that it could be established whether anything was to be regretted in their eventual disappearance from ecclesial practice if not official doctrine.[14] In the 1940's and 50's both Rahner and the German theologian Bernhard Poschmann had attempted to resolve some of the obscurities in the theology of indulgences; focusing at least initially on the (disputed) issue of continuity between early Church penitential practice and the medieval emergence of indulgences, and secondly on the (again contested) issue of whether the Church possesses the juridical authority to dispense the treasury of merit in the same way

[13] For useful summaries of the historical development of indulgences see especially Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981), pp. 1145-1147; and Timothy F. Lull, 'Indulgences', in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 295-297.

[14] Karl Rahner, 'Remarks on the Theology of Indulgences', in *Theological Investigations: Volume II*, tr. Karl-H Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, [1955] 1963), pp. 175-201, (p. 178).

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that she claims jurisdiction for the absolution of guilt in the sacrament of penance.[15] It was, however, at the Second Vatican Council that the issue became available for wider episcopal discussion.

In the *vota* submitted by the bishops prior to the Council, many had requested a review of the practice and teaching of indulgences, if not their definitive abolition.[16] These expressions of unease arose largely from the fact that while popular interest in indulgences had indisputably waned, modern pontificates had considerably multiplied their availability. In 1963 Paul VI therefore appointed Cardinal Cento to form a commission to propose a reform of indulgences and in 1965, as the Council drew to its conclusion, decided that Cento's position paper should be presented to the Council Fathers for debate, while emphasising that the neither the topic nor the document was to be considered as official Council business. Accordingly, the text was sent to the episcopal conferences on 15th October 1965 and time set aside in the Council hall on 10th and 11th November for their responses. It has to be said that reception of the document was somewhat less than universally enthusiastic. Joseph Ratzinger, functioning as *peritus* to Cardinal Frings of Cologne, described it as containing 'no spirit of the Council',[17] and the Anglican observer John Lawrence commented that, 'it seems to come straight from the late fourteenth century [. . .] the lawyers of the Indulgences Department of the Curia have gone on doing their job without realising that the Council is changing everything. I found myself laughing out loud as I read my copy.'[18] The presence of the ecumenical observers in the Council hall, of course, lent a certain discomfiture to the public discussion of indulgences, leading Congar to bewail in his diary, 'the idea that this should be open to public debate in the presence of the Observers! [. . .] have they not realised that beneath this there are all the elements of tragedy [. . .] this is neither the time nor the place to bring them up again.'[19]

If Cento's document was out of keeping with the spirit of the times, the Council Fathers rose to the challenge. Maximos IV Saigh, representing the Melkite episcopate, was the first to speak,

[15] Poschmann's pivotal research into the history of indulgences is available only in German. An English review of his work can be found in Francis Courtney, 'New Explanations of Indulgences', *The Clergy Review* 14 (1959), pp. 464-479.

[16] For a detailed account of the events surrounding the discussion of indulgences at the Council see Peter Hünermann 'The Discussion of Indulgences: An Unpleasant Affair' in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II: Volume V*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Orbis, 2006), p. 379-386.

[17] Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, revised edition (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), p. 256.

[18] John Lawrence, 'Osservatore Romano: 2', *The Tablet*, 15th January 2000, p. 33-34. http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/15th-january-2000/33/osservatore-romano-2.

[19] Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, tr. Mary John Ronayne and Mary Cecily Boulding (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2012), p. 839.

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highlighting the lack of continuity between early Church penances and medieval indulgences; arguing that the authority to dispense ecclesiastically imposed penances is not equivalent to jurisdiction over the remission of temporal punishments. He was followed by Cardinals Döpfner and König, representing the German and Austrian episcopal conferences respectively. Döpfner's response (drawn up by the German theologian Otto Semmelroth and further edited by Rahner) subjected Cento's paper to what should have been a devastating theological critique, questioning its oversimplified theology, inadequate historical understanding, inappropriate use of scripture, and overly juridical style. It was met with enthusiastic applause in the hall and many Fathers subsequently requested copies of the text.[20]

By the end of 11th November, just eleven conferences had given their responses, and while a few had approved the document (Spain and Italy, for example) criticism remained robust. Following a day dedicated to other business, the Council Fathers returned on the 13th expecting the debate to continue. Instead, they were met with the announcement that all further discussion was now halted and that episcopal conferences yet to give their opinion should simply submit their reports in writing. Without further ecclesial debate and in the absence of any ongoing theological discussion, Paul VI then issued *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* on 1st January 1967, based largely on Cento's position paper, although the extent to which the episcopal objections were accommodated is disputed.[21] Certainly the Apostolic Constitution makes passing reference to the contentious issue of historical continuity, arguing that there has been a 'progression' in both doctrine and discipline through the centuries (rather than any discontinuous 'change'); while on the subject of jurisdiction over the remission of temporal punishments it claims for the Church the power to make an 'authoritative intervention' in dispensing the treasury of satisfaction won by Christ and his saints. The Constitution is perhaps more remarkable for the new norms it sets in place. The distinction between plenary and partial indulgences is retained, although with the stringent new condition regarding the necessary interior disposition for a plenary indulgence. The former categories of 'personal', 'real' and 'local' indulgences are abolished, and partial indulgences are no longer to be associated with specific time periods. In addition there is

[20] According to John Lawrence, Döpfner's intervention was further discussed at the Observers' meeting of 16th November where most agreed that it had set the tone and that they were well satisfied with it. See footnote 16.

[21] John O'Malley describes *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* as a 'modest revision of the original text'; see John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 282. For a more approving reception see Carl J. Peter, 'The Church's Treasures (*Thesauri Ecclesiae*) Then and Now', *Theological Studies* 47 (1986), 251-272, (p. 254).

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a particular emphasis that indulgences are not simply concerned with the expiation of punishment, but are intended to aid the individual's growth in charity and concern for the common good.[22] With this relatively short pronouncement (the document runs to only twelve paragraphs and twenty norms) a clear pontifical line was drawn under the subject, reflected by the fact that the Constitution's official teaching and canonical regulations remain in place nearly fifty years later.

Karl Rahner and the 'new theory' of indulgence

With its status of Apostolic Constitution, the teaching set forth by *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* is both official and binding and, as has already been shown, makes some reference to the chief causes of anxiety in the Council *aula*. It is, however, far from being a fully worked out theology of indulgences, let alone the hoped for *aggiornamento* of Tridentine doctrine. For this we must turn to Rahner, whose thinking has dominated the post-conciliar debate and who is the only twentieth-century theologian to come close to offering a fully worked through theology of the matter.[23]

As has already been commented, Rahner had been arguing for a substantial re-working of the theology of indulgences since the 1950's, and in 1967 produced two significant papers on the topic in his *Schriften zur Theologie* series, the latter of which deals specifically with whether his thinking is reconcilable with the official teaching set forth by Paul VI.[24] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rahner concludes that such compatibility does exist, although one suspects he is having to work fairly hard to resolve the issue of the church's disputed juridical authority over the treasury of merit. In his earlier substantial discussion of the topic, Rahner had argued that the Church could not claim jurisdiction over the remission of temporal punishments in the same way that she can juridically absolve the penitent of guilt. If she could, or so argued Rahner, then it made no sense that sacramental absolution did not both absolve guilt *and* remit punishment. Conversely, if the Church could not authoritatively act in this way *within* the sacrament, then it was implausible that she should have the means for doing so *outside* the sacrament (i.e. within the remit of an indulgence).[25] To resolve

[22] *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 8 and 9.

[23] It is doubtful, however, that Rahner himself would have considered his thinking on the matter to be complete and fully specified.

[24] Karl Rahner, 'A Brief Theological Study on Indulgence', in *Theological Investigations: Volume X*, tr. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, [1967] 1973), pp. 150-165; and the already cited 'On the Official Teaching' in the same volume.

[25] Karl Rahner, 'Remarks', p. 190.

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this apparent discrepancy, Rahner argued that the Church's action within the indulgence is (simply, but not merely) to pray for the penitent; that – standing at the throne of grace – the Church offers 'a prayer of intercession such that it draws down a remission of the punishments due to sin.'[26] In his official teaching in *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, however, Paul VI had insisted that the Church 'not only prays but by an authoritative intervention dispenses' the treasury of merit,[27] a riposte which Rahner counters by arguing that in such a case the prayer of the Church is 'made with authoritative power and [is] "in itself" infallibly effective', thus minimising the potential difference between his thought and that of the new Constitution.[28]

For Rahner, this issue of jurisdiction is not simply a moot point. Rather, central to the aims of his new theory is the desire to reformulate the theology of indulgences in a less legalistic manner. The shadows of the Middle Ages loom large over the topic, and Rahner was eager to shift thinking from a materialistic conceptualisation of the treasury of merit and a juridical view of the Church's action, towards a more anthropological or interior understanding of sin and the remission of its temporal consequences.

For Rahner then, the consequences of sin are best understood as an internal affair. Sin establishes and reinforces 'attitudes and attributes' within the person contrary to his or her nature – hardness of heart, egoism, selfishness and so on, which persist even when the individual has repented and been absolved of the guilt of their sinful action.[29] (We are all only too familiar with the depressing tendency to act out of these same old dispositions, even as the words of absolution are still ringing in our ears.) These interior dispositions, or 'after effects' of sin, are the natural consequence of sin. Rather than being arbitrarily imposed by a vindictive deity, they are simply the natural outcome of how God has created the world to be. Having to be endured, and causing considerable discomfort in the ongoing distance from perfect charity they imply, they are, in themselves, the temporal punishment of sin. Sin thus punishes itself, and it is these punishments to which the discipline of indulgences is oriented. Rahner argues that the removal of these after effects of sin requires a long process of maturation and purification which is completed both in this life and in the purifying processes completed after death in purgatory. As any practitioner of the spiritual life will know, such purification is both slow and costly, and – critically – only accomplished with the assistance of grace. It is the long, painful journey to the freedom of perfect love, and it is this journey or process which Rahner understands as

[26] Karl Rahner, 'A brief theological study', p. 162.
[27] *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 8.
[28] Karl Rahner, 'On the official teaching', p. 181.
[29] Karl Rahner, 'A brief theological study', p. 152.

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being aided or facilitated, but not circumvented or abolished, in the practice of indulgences. Here, according to Rahner, the Church asks or prays (authoritatively and with the infallible expectation of being heard) that the grace of Christ will assist the person in their journey, speeding the process of purification, but not arbitrarily 'blotting out' the need for it. Moreover, the grace which the Church calls forth in this action is 'the working of God's grace and his will to save' which is already definitively and inexhaustibly present in Christ's victory over sin and death. As such, the treasury of merit becomes less a material repository of banked up grace, but simply the saving power of Christ himself. It is then, wholly appropriate that the Church should pray that this saving grace should be effectively applied to her members and that, in the practice of indulgences, we should make the same request both for ourselves and for others. Indeed, as Rahner argues, the very actions or 'works' of the indulgence (together with the stipulated conditions) should ensure that the sinner is better disposed to receive the grace being offered within it. Finally, as Rahner points out, this conceptualisation of the work of indulgences counters the criticism of their being 'cheap grace' or a shortcut to sanctity. They are, rather, a recognition of the costly work involved in our spiritual purification and an acknowledgement that such a process cannot be achieved without the assistance of divine grace.

Following Rahner's statement of his position, and his assertion that it is consistent with the teaching of *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, little theological work has been completed on the topic. No official comment, either condemnatory or commendatory, was forthcoming from the Curia, and no further theologian offered either a significant critique or an alternative interpretation. The Code of Canon Law (1983) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) simply reiterated the teaching of *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* without further elaboration, and John Paul II's 1980 papal encyclical *Dives in misericordia* offered no consideration of the topic of indulgences at all.[30] In fact, the next pontifical intervention on the subject was not to come until the proclamation of the Jubilee Year 2000. Here, in the bull of indiction *Incarnationis Mysterium*, Pope John Paul describes indulgences as 'one of the constitutive elements of the Jubilee'[31] and decrees their 'abundant use' throughout the year.[32] The two paragraphs dedicated to the topic in the bull offer a brief theological overview which is not only consistent with Rahner's approach but suggestively reminiscent of it: the

[30] John Paul II, Papal Encyclical *Dives in misericordia*. https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

[31] John Paul II, Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 'Incarnationis Mysterium', 9. http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html.

[32] *Incarnationis Mysterium*, 10.

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'enduring consequences of sin' are something from which we need to be purified, and this purification is directly equated with the removal of the 'temporal punishment of sin', a process directed towards becoming 'ever more intimately united with the Father in heaven.'[33]

If John Paul II's bull of indiction published in November 1998 is evidently sympathetic to Rahner's theology, the papal catechesis he offered just eleven months later is Rahnerian in all but name.[34] The effects of sin are regarded as a matter interior to the person, from which they require healing or purification through a process of conversion. This process is aided by the indulgence without discounting the need to complete it. Christ himself is viewed as 'the great indulgence' and any materialistic or reified understanding of the treasury is explicitly excluded.[35] There is also a shift towards a prayer-ful understanding of the Church's action in the indulgence; she is viewed as the minister of redemption who possesses the 'gift of intercession' while possessing 'full confidence of being heard by the Father.'[36] It is, all in all, an exposition of the indulgences which Rahner could sign up to without demure, although possibly without hoping to emulate its brevity.

A Franciscan *aggiornamento*?

With this new catechesis, indulgences experienced something of a revival of fortune in recent pontificates; both John Paul II and Benedict XVI increased their numbers significantly – a fact not missed by either the secular or Catholic press and usually read under a hermeneutic of continuity.[37] Pope Francis has shown no signs of reversing this proliferation, predicting instead that indulgences will acquire 'an even more important meaning in the Holy Year of Mercy.'[38] With enthusiasm for the 'Francis effect' undimmed, the

[33] *Ibid.,* 9-10.

[34] John Paul II, *General Audience*, Wednesday 29 September 1999. https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_29091999.html.

[35] *Ibid.*, 4.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] In 2009 both the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune ran stories on the resurgence of indulgences: Paul Vitello, 'For Catholics, A Door to Absolution Is Reopened', *New York Times*, 9 February 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/nyregion/10indulgence.html?_r=0 ; and Manya A. Brachear, 'Catholics Hope to Cleanse Indulgences of their Bad Reputation', *Chicago Tribune*, 29 June 2009, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-06-29/news/0906280149_1_indulgences-catholics-parishes. For an example in the Catholic press see Thomas J. Craughwell, 'What's Behind the Revival of Indulgences', in *OSV Newsweekly*, 2 September 2009, https://www.osv.com/OSVNewsweekly/ByIssue/Article/TabId/735/ArtMID/13636/ArticleID/10402/Whats-behind-the-revival-of-indulgences.aspx.

[38] *Misericordiae Vultus*, 22.

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press has (with little sense of incongruity) adopted an *aggiornamento* reading of the Pope's intentions, claiming that he is 'rehabilitating' indulgences for the contemporary era.[39] This interpretation was aided not least by his stipulating that the 'work' of devoutly participating in the events of the 2013 World Youth Day at Rio de Janeiro could be adequately fulfilled by following them on social media;[40] a development which led seamlessly to outraged claims that Francis was now selling indulgences over the internet. Despite this superficiality, the potential for a more serious theological updating underlying his approach seems worthy of consideration.

In fact, Francis almost blatantly invites such a reading of his intentions. By choosing to open the Holy Year of Mercy on the fiftieth anniversary of the close of the Council, he makes an explicit link to the Council's desire to 'talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way' and speaks of the need 'to keep this event alive' in the contemporary church.[41] With such claims it is hard to resist the idea that Francis is raising the potential for a new appreciation of indulgences, although in fact his specific discussion of the practice is, while wholly consistent with Rahner's view, largely unremarkable.[42] The legitimacy of claiming a pontifically intended *aggiornamento* thus comes from elsewhere. Throughout *Misericordiae Vultus* Francis invokes a new reflexivity of mercy: we receive the Father's mercy so that we can better extend it to others. Indeed the motto of the entire year is 'merciful like the Father',[43] and Francis insists that the jubilee is 'dedicated to living out in our daily lives the mercy which the Father constantly extends to all of us.'[44] Mercy is thus the gift we both receive and pass onto others. Consistent with this, Francis calls the faithful to a renewed appreciation and practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy,[45] and in his letter to Archbishop Fisichella indicated that performance of any one of these works constitutes the 'work' of the indulgence associated with the Extraordinary Jubilee.[46] The

[39] David Gibson, 'Is Pope Francis too Indulgent with Indulgences?', *National Catholic Reporter*, 15 January 2016, http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-too-indulgent-indulgences.

[40] Apostolic Penitentiary, *Decree according to which Special Indulgences are granted to the faithful on the occasion of the 28th World Youth Day*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/tribunals/apost_penit/documents/rc_trib_appen_doc_20130709_decreto-indulgenze-gmg_en.html.

[41] *Misericordiae Vultus*, 4.

[42] *Ibid*., 22.

[43] *Ibid*., 14.

[44] *Ibid.,* 25.

[45] *Ibid.,* 15.

[46] Following the papal announcement of an indulgence, it is usual practice for the Apostolic Penitentiary to issue a Decree stating the specified works attached to the indulgence

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reflexivity of mercy is thereby specifically attached to the action of the indulgence; we receive the Father's mercy through the enacting of it in our own deeds. This, of course, is strongly reminiscent of previous teaching on indulgences. *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* had argued that the use of indulgences is oriented to the growth of charity, and John Paul II had made performing a work of mercy a valid 'work' for the Jubilee Indulgence in 2000.[47] Nevertheless, it seems clear that for Francis the reflexivity of mercy is a key theme, and that he wishes to bring it to new prominence, at least in part by linking the acting out of mercy with its reception in the Indulgence. In doing so, Francis also helps to shift the attention of indulgences from the *post-mortem* timeframe to the here and now. There is a danger, even within Rahner's so-called new theology, that indulgences continue to be largely associated with speeding or facilitating a process that is some time distant; a purgatorial focus. Francis' new reflexivity brings the effects sharply into the present moment. Both our reception of the indulgence and its consequences result in the *immediate* manifestation of mercy; I act with mercy to receive mercy, in receiving mercy I am better able to enact it further. By emphasising this immediacy in the economy of salvation, Francis helps to shift the perception of indulgences from being a long term insurance policy against future purgatorial discomfort, to being an effective and imminent way of making present God's mercy in the sociality of his Church. Furthermore, the Franciscan development provides an elegant symmetry to one of the principles underlying Rahner's theory. For Rahner, sin itself inflicts the interior consequences or 'after effects' of sin: sin punishes itself. In the Franciscan perspective, the mirror image is also true. Goodness (mercy) rebounds on itself: my mercy brings me mercy; my reception of mercy promotes its spread through the ecclesial body. Thus mercy perpetuates itself, we 'become instruments of mercy because it was we who first received mercy from God.'[48] Finally, Francis' focus on the reflexivity of mercy reminds the Church that in insisting on her ecclesiastical authority to grant indulgences, she too must seek mercy. As Francis comments in relation to the sacrament of penance, 'We do not become good confessors automatically. We become good confessors when, above all, we allow ourselves to be penitents in

and reminding the faithful of the necessary conditions. In the event of the indulgence for the Holy Year of Mercy, however, Pope Francis took the unusual step of personally publishing a letter addressed to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150901_lettera-indulgenza-giubileo-misericordia.html.

[47] Apostolic Penitentiary, *The Gift of the Indulgence*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/tribunals/apost_penit/documents/rc_trib_appen_pro_20000129_indulgence_en.html.

[48] *Misericordiae Vultus*, 14.

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search of his mercy.'[49] Just as Francis has insisted, then, that the Church be 'a poor church for the poor' now too he reminds her that she must be capable of seeking for herself the mercy she dispenses. If the practice of indulgences is to be subjected to a radical Franciscan *aggiornamento*, the Church must herself be caught up into the reflexivity of mercy. As such, she will no longer be simply the instrument or minister of God's mercy, but will be also a locus, or pool, of receptivity to it. A deep ecclesial experience of mercy will witness to its transforming, purifying grace as the pilgrim Church journeys towards the perfecting of her nature. This, for Francis may well be the true legacy of the Extraordinary Jubilee and is entirely consistent with his desire that we become a Church of mercy: 'wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident [. . .] wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.'[50]

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[49] *Ibid.,* 17.
[50] *Ibid.,* 12.

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