

Indulgences regain relevance under Benedict

By Jennifer Reeger

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Carol Wilkinson remembers her mother's prayer books listing indulgences one could receive for reciting certain prayers.

But Wilkinson, 75, of Greensburg had no idea that indulgences — a spiritual benefit by which Catholics believe they can free themselves from the punishment of sin in purgatory — remained a part of church custom.

"Do they still do that?" Wilkinson said recently as she headed into a lunchtime Mass at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Greensburg.

What surprises Wilkinson and other Catholics is that indulgences have been emphasized more in the last few years, particularly under Pope Benedict XVI, in an effort to bring the church back to traditional practices.

And while Catholic leaders say indulgences are a way to bring the faithful closer to God, critics believe the new emphasis rejects all the progress the Church has made toward modernization.

Indulgences allow Catholics who have been forgiven for their sins to avoid purgatory and go to heaven [after death](#).

The concept of purgatory has roots in late Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic writings, said Frank K. Flinn, an adjunct professor of religious studies at Washington University in St. Louis and author of the Encyclopedia of Catholicism. Souls not cleansed of sins needed to be "purified" to enter heaven.

"By the second and third centuries, Christians believed that by prayer, alms-giving and penance a person could relieve the state of a person in purgatory and assist in an early entry into heaven," Flinn said. "The merits gained came to be called indulgences (in the Middle Ages)."

Step beyond forgiveness

The Rev. Ron Lengwin, spokesman for the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, likens indulgences to going beyond asking for forgiveness when you've hurt someone.

"You still want to do something to strengthen that relationship, to be nice to that person, to make up for the harm that has been done," Lengwin said.

Indulgences work to make up for those sins that have been confessed.

"We're forgiven. There's no question that we will be going to live eternally with God, but we need to prepare ourselves to enter into the presence of God because we've been affected by sins," Lengwin said.

Indulgences can be partial, whereby some punishment is taken away, or plenary, where all of it is.

The sale of indulgences to fund building projects was one of the protests Martin Luther had against the Catholic Church in 1517. His actions led to the Protestant Reformation and split the church into the major Christian denominations in existence today.

"Protestants came to reject the ideas of earning merit for oneself or others as well as purgatory, claiming we are [justified by faith](#) alone in Christ's saving work," Flinn said.

The practice of selling indulgences ended in 1567, but indulgences themselves still existed. There has been a resurgence that began under Pope John Paul II and picked up momentum under Pope Benedict XVI.

"They've never been taken away, they've always been there," Lengwin said. "It's much like life, it tends to be cyclical. ... I think as human beings there is within us an expectation for change. We tire of the same thing all the time. I think that can happen also with our relationship with God."

This year's requirements

Pope John Paul II declared indulgences for the church's Jubilee Year in 2000 and for the Year of the Eucharist in 2004 and 2005.

Pope Benedict XVI has declared plenary indulgences at least nine times in his papacy surrounding church anniversaries and events from World Youth Day to the 150th anniversary of Mary's appearance near Lourdes, France to the current 2,000th anniversary year of St. Paul.

Those who seek indulgences must complete an act the pope prescribes. In this year of St. Paul, that act is to make a pilgrimage to Rome or attend local events surrounding the anniversary. The person must also go to confession, receive the Eucharist, say a prayer for the Pope and make a sincere effort to turn away from weaknesses.

Flinn said indulgences were de-emphasized by the 1960s reforms of Vatican II, which modernized the liturgy.

"(The re-emphasis) goes hand-in-hand with these two popes' attempts to take Catholicism back to pre-Vatican II days in hopes of gaining more church members," Flinn said. "It is not working in most parts of the world, but many in the Third World like these sort of religious practices. They are concrete, tangible and easy to grasp and appeal to people in dire circumstances."

Setback for Vatican II

Paula M. Kane, Marous Chair of Catholic Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, believes the revival of indulgences is moving the Church in the wrong direction.

"They definitely went out of favor with Vatican II because they're not anywhere an essential teaching and they're not scripturally based at all," Kane said. "I find it quite peculiar and retrograde and not helpful that the current pope is trying to revive them."

Kane said the idea of the Church as a "great dispenser of privileges" with militaristic-style rules sets back Vatican II's emphasis on learning about Jesus through Scripture and focusing on people as the center of the church.

Bob Sherwin, managing director of evangelization and faith formation for the Greensburg Diocese, doesn't believe Pope Benedict is doing anything differently.

"I think that it's always been a teaching of the church, they've always been granted in our history. I just think they're getting more publicity lately because we're celebrating a lot more," Sherwin said. "... I think among the general public there are still myths or misperceptions on how one can receive an indulgence or how they can be used."

That includes the belief people are "buying salvation."

Flinn said indulgences can set back Protestant-Catholic relationships.

"After Vatican II Catholics and Protestants entered into serious theological dialogue on important topics such as the sacraments and justification (by faith alone)," Flinn said. "... This re-emphasis on indulgences means the Vatican is saying, in reality if not word, we are now going in the opposite direction."

Gaining credence among young

Raissa Federline, 46, a member of the Christian Mothers/Ladies Guild at Mother of Sorrows Parish in Murrysville, has received indulgences and believes more young people will be attracted to the practice.

"I think the pope's talking about it more, and on the Internet a lot. A lot more people are tied into what the pope is saying," Federline said, pointing out the Vatican's new channel on YouTube. "If they're watching that and they're hearing him talk about it, they're going to research it."

Lengwin said the resurgence simply opens people to older ways of practicing their faith.

"(Pope Benedict is) saying, 'Here's a traditional way in which we've opened ourselves to the grace of God,'" Lengwin said.

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