

A BRIEF THEOLOGICAL STUDY ON INDULGENCE

The zeal to gain indulgences has certainly declined among Catholics. The non-Catholic regards anything like an ‘indulgence’ as quite alien to him. How could one express the matter in such a way that the other understood something about it? Admittedly it is only with great difficulty that something which springs from so complex a background of ideas can be explained to one who is unfamiliar even with those ideas which it presupposes. But at the same time, supposing that we did try to answer his question, and to answer it in such a way as not to presuppose too much in the way of specialist terminology and further theological knowledge – how, in that case would our answer sound? Tasks of this kind are difficult. It is a pity that they so rarely attempted. All of us, priests and laymen, should be better versed in such techniques. If we practised them we would come across many questions upon which we ourselves had never sufficiently reflected before in our precisely worked-out dogmatic theology, in which the difficulties are too often smoothed over by convention and familiarity. And here and there we would even find an answer which opened up to us ourselves the way to a deeper understanding of the very question which we had hitherto imagined we understood inside and out.

With this end in view, and taking these considerations as our starting-point, let us attempt to say something about indulgence, even though in doing so we incur the danger of merely exposing ourselves to all kinds of criticism, i.e. of failing to satisfy any of our hearers, whether it be those who understand nothing about indulgence (because even after reading about it they find it incomprehensible) or those who already have clear ideas about the subject (because these find that now the question has become more obscure instead of more intelligible). From time to time – this is something that every reader will notice – something will be said which is addressed not to those ‘hearers’ for whom this study is properly intended, but rather to the theologians who ask themselves whether what [151] is said here agrees with the traditional doctrine on the question as this has been preserved. Such incidental remarks, therefore, should not be used as arguments purporting to show that the attempt we have undertaken is unsuccessful. Whether it really succeeds – that is a quite different question. Those who, having reached the end of this study, feel that it has failed, can always improve upon it by themselves making similar or different attempts, and can make them available in order that we can use them fruitfully to increase our knowledge. This is the sense in which we would wish this brief theological treatise on indulgence to be understood.¹

I

Man is a complex being with many levels in his makeup. The decisions he takes and the acts he initiates from the source and centre of his personal freedom, from the innermost ‘kernel’ of his personhood, take shape in dimensions of his being which are not simply identical with the centre of personhood in his being considered as the source and origin of everything else in

¹ The author has published several studies on the theology of indulgence. On the particular position he is adopting in this attempt, as compared with these other studies, cf., in particular, apart from the list of sources, the essay which immediately follows this one entitled ‘On the Official Teaching of the Church Today on the Subject of Indulgence’, pp. 166-198. Here an extensive bibliography will be found of works by the author himself as well as by others.

his makeup. He acquires attitudes and habits. He gives his character its distinctive mould and he 'objectifies' the acts in which he exercises his freedom, imposing them upon his 'environment'. The initial 'environment' which receives the impress of the act arising from his original decision, and in which it is objectified, consists of his own self in the external levels of his makeup. Here this objectified act is, so to say, frozen into permanent form and preserved. Hence when the innermost centre of the kernel of man's personhood is transformed by the grace of God – whereas previously, by a sinful decision, it was turned against God and his holy will – in other words when man 'converts' himself to God at the innermost and deepest level of his being, even then it does not always and *ipso facto* follow that all is once more well with him. It can be the case that all is immediately made well. It can be the case that this conversion is so powerful that it immediately transforms the whole man. *But it can also be the case* that this interior transformation of man is present in a certain sense like a glowing kernel at the centre of his personhood, yet that it does not simply and at one blow do away with all the ingrained attitudes, [152] encrustations and after-effects of the earlier course of life led by the individual concerned. Even the history of salvation really is a history, i.e. a process which requires time, and in which everything does not take place all at once. Only one who thinks in purely abstract and formal categories, one who imagines that time as a factor plays no part in conditioning our personal history of salvation, as though God achieved his effects upon us all at once in the sort of dimension beyond time which the Gnostics imagined – only such a one can contest the truth of what we have said. We must not therefore suppose that all that is needful has already been achieved simply when we repent, whether within the sacrament of penance or apart from it, and in doing so genuinely do obtain the gift of conversion (attained to by an act of unmerited grace coming from God himself), and so are in the state of having once more found how to orientate ourselves to God in faith and love. This grace of conversion is, in fact, intended to draw the whole nature of man into its sphere of influence, extending this to the physical side of his nature, to the unconscious movements of his nervous system, to the submerged impulses in it, in order that all may be healed and sanctified. Now this does not take place *ipso facto* in every case of conversion, not even when this is genuine, and when we can say: there is a man who has sincerely converted himself to God, one who, in the midst of his freedom, yet liberated by the grace of God, has 'radically changed the course of his life' and based his whole existence upon the grace of God. Even in such a case the possibility always still remains that 'I' am in many respects the old 'I', the one who is still unconverted or at any rate not wholly changed. In that state 'I' can still always be myself with my own egoism, which I utterly fail to notice, and with which, in many respects, I still continue to have an understanding; the 'I' that retains the hardness of heart, pharisaism and cowardice of me, and all the other attitudes and attributes which were made real in the sin of which I was formerly guilty (and which I now repent). The result of this is that I utterly fail to notice all this, or to achieve that state in which I really separate myself from it all. Such a transformation of the whole man in all his immeasurable complexity can, therefore, still mean that a long and painful course lies before him. 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! Yet at the same time how indispensable all this is! Without this how could one be 'made perfect'?

These, then, are real factors arising from our sins, and they are present in our personal human lives as these take shape in history. Springing as [153] they do from sin, they live on after it and constitute a just judgment upon it. We Christians call them 'the temporal punishments due to sin'. They are 'temporal' because they must be endured in a process of development over a period of time, and can only be overcome in this. They are punishments because they are the consequences of sin and a judgment upon it both at the same time. For when man, taking his own freedom as person as the centre and source of his action, misuses

the (rest of) his personal makeup, violating and damaging it, then in this distortion of his own nature he experiences the contradiction and the opposition of this nature, its forms and its tendencies which were created by God and are therefore ineradicable, and which are prior to this decision which man takes of his freedom. There is contradiction between that in him which is free and that which, from the point of view of God, he is intended to be and which, moreover, he inalienably is; a contradiction which arises from the condition of man following upon his sinful act. Now this contradiction is necessarily productive of pain. It is the painful protest of the reality which God has fashioned against the false decision of man. Indeed it is quite impossible to define suffering in any other way. Thus in a certain sense sin gives birth to its own punishment. To the extent that this constitutes the refusal of creaturely reality to adapt itself to the way which we, as free beings, map out for ourselves, or to reproduce itself in the material constituted by our own human natures and the world in which we live (a refusal, therefore, which is precisely not that of God himself denying himself to the sinner) – to that extent we call this painful reaction against man's sins from the side of his own nature and of the other elements that go to make up his environment 'temporal punishments due to sin'. This is different from God's refusal of himself, which can likewise be either temporal or eternal according to whether man has finally turned away from God in an exercise of his freedom which has been rendered definitive and absolute *by death itself*, or whether it has not yet reached this stage.

Of course, even though such a punishment for sin is in itself 'temporal', we must consider how it is affected in cases where man's perversion has reached a fixed and final stage – in other words in which the original contradiction of the order of created reality within and without man has been renewed again and again, and even where it is immovably adhered to. In such a case this contradiction, which is itself temporary, i.e. able to be reversed, is transformed into an eternal punishment. It should not be thought that this implies any denial of the fact that these temporal punishments are decreed by God. The world (both within and without man) [154] with which man comes into contradiction through his own guilt as objectified in his own acts, is a concrete world which in its concretion was created not by man and his freedom but by God. Who has not already experienced the fact that a sin alters in its effects according to the particular situation in which it is made actual? The sin as actually carried out always consists of a synthesis which man himself cannot calculate beforehand of two distinct elements: the original decision which he takes in his freedom, and in which he freely exposes himself to this element of the incalculable *and* the actual material in which the sinful act is made actual. It is only as realised in this material that the sinful act is brought to the 'fulness' of its nature. In the dimension of concrete reality this situation in which our sin is committed is determined not by us but by God. And there can be no mistaking the fact that in this concrete situation it is God's free disposition that determines what kind of punishment this sin is to incur. This means that this punishment for sin, considered as the reaction of 'extra-personal' reality (both within and without man) to sin is also a punishment imposed 'from without', even though it was provoked precisely by the sin of man himself. Once we have grasped this fact we can also understand what is meant by the teaching of the Council of Trent (cf. DS 1543, 1689, 1712, 1715) to the effect that for the baptised Christian who has sinned again after baptism the fact that his sin has been forgiven, whether within the sacrament of penance or outside it, still does not mean *ipso facto* that the temporal punishments due to sin are always and necessarily forgiven. Relying upon the tradition of penance which has come down to her from the time of the Fathers, the Church teaches that when one whose sins have already been blotted out by baptism, and who has thereby become a member of the holy Church, sins again, God is not prepared to bestow upon him, or to offer him straightway, in the very act in which the sacrament takes effect, all those graces which he needs in the concrete in order to accomplish the process of transformation and integration.

Yet it is only through this process that the debt of 'temporal punishments due to sin' can be paid to the full and so wiped out. God, then, is not prepared simply to bestow all the graces necessary for this in a single blessed moment in which the whole human life of the sinner is transfigured, and in which the process of transformation is a completely painless one. This is something that we notice all too vividly in our own personal experience. Viewed from this aspect it is much more difficult to explain how the baptism of an adult can constitute a remission of this kind of all the temporal punishments due to sin, as tradition teaches. This, however, is not the real question which we have to investigate at this point, although we can say that this teaching [155] applies only to those cases in which all 'venial' (as well as mortal) sins really are repented of. And, as is shown by the findings of the individual's own concrete experience precisely of the after-effects of his former sins and because of these, this kind of repentance is not so easy. We should therefore reflect upon these truths, and recognise clearly the fact that probably all that is meant by the statement in question is that with regard to the grace of God in baptism all is indeed conferred all at once which is necessary for such a total overcoming of sin. Though probably the question remains open whether the individual really uses the opportunity offered to him in this. But in the sacrament of penance taken in isolation this opportunity is not offered to him in the same way at all. If, therefore, we recognise these facts, we shall not say that the statement in question would in any sense invalidate the explanations we have given so far.

The dissolving of the after-effects of former sin, with the sufferings they cause, the total integration of the whole person, including those extra-personal levels in his makeup, can take place in various ways in the 'fresh' radical decision on man's part to orientate himself towards God. It depends on other factors besides the 'good will' of man himself. His new act and the measure of its success are also conditioned by the situation, by the circumstances, the 'material' in which and upon which it has to be made actual. Now this situation and this 'material' are contingent factors. They are subject to change and can themselves become new and different. They depend, in the last analysis, on the dispositions of God, however we may think that these are applied in the individual case. Now according to the way in which, either through natural causes which are subject to his providence or through his own personal and gracious interventions, God forms this material which is in turn presupposed to the acts and decisions of man, and which influences these at the *interior* level, this process of dissolving and transforming the after-effects of sin becomes quicker or slower and takes place with more or less suffering and pain.

Certainly everyone has already experienced in the concrete what has here been stated in very abstract terms. Who, for instance, has not already noticed that the degree of his repentance in a given case, its power to remain constant, depends not only upon the 'good will' which 'commands' him to such repentance, but also upon the situation, upon the sudden light of knowledge which is not under man's own control, upon an inward disposition such as no 'despotic' control which man may exercise over himself by the use of his own intelligence and free will, is capable of giving. Every Christian knows that 'tears of repentance' are not simply something that man can count upon in the same way that he can take as his [156] basis for the working out of his salvation the grace that is extended to him from above. Who has not already suffered from his own impotence really to turn himself into a different man? Who has not noticed after a 'good confession' that he has still, in many respects, remained the old man, that all the secret roots and impulses of his sin, the very sin that he has repented of and confessed, are still constantly present in him, and, moreover, not merely those which simply belong to man's lot, the circumstances in which he finds himself placed etc. from his birth onwards, but also those which effectively owe their existence to his own fault? God, therefore, can remit the 'temporal punishments due to sin' which we have incurred by giving us the best possible chance, the opportunity to rid ourselves as totally and swiftly as possible

of the burden of our past which is at once the consequence of, and punishment for our sins. From this point of view we can, in many cases, interpret the disposition and course of a human life under God's hand as something that is almost visibly unfolding before our eyes. Throughout the life in question God is gradually breaking down false attitudes which we have sinfully built up within us. Those who were formerly overbearing, stupid and selfish through their sins he makes mild, wise and unassuming. It is true that under certain circumstances a supreme hour may arrive, such as that of martyrdom or some other ultimate decision, in which that which has still not been attained to after a long period of ascetical striving systematically practised can be brought to its full ripeness and purity in a man (of course in such a case it still remains true that perhaps the chance of such an hour of destiny may be missed if this ascetical striving, the faithfulness which is achieved in the pettiness and monotony of everyday life, has not gone before).

There too we are not masters of our own course. We cannot discover such paths of life or such hours of destiny simply by ourselves. They have to be bestowed upon us. We know that (since flesh and blood do not inherit the kingdom of God) in the case of every man whom God admits at all to a share in his eternal kingdom in the glory of his own holiness, he will so guide him either before or after his death that he arrives at the full ripening of his own nature precisely as that particular individual. But the actual process by which this is achieved can precisely be either swifter or slower, easier or more painful. How it takes place is under God's control. In effect, then, there is – as in the very nature of the case we are supposing there must be – a 'remission' by God, in the sense just indicated, of the temporal punishments due to sin. But we do not have to think of this as though some sentence of punishment had been imposed in a merely external and juridical sense, with no intrinsic connection (apart [157] from the sin committed by the subject in the past) with his moral state. We do not have to think of the remission by God as granted simply in the way that a civic amnesty is granted (for this bestows 'grace and favour' upon the reformed and irreformable in equal measure). If this were the case then we would have to think of the temporal punishments due to sin as constituting a merely external and vindictive type of punishment such as leaves the individual who undergoes it wholly unchanged and the same man that he was before. Such a remission would only deprive the individual of the possibility of truly perfecting himself in suffering throughout all the dimensions of his being.

We have spoken above of a radical decision on man's part – we call it the love that is based on faith and hope – which has the power to justify. We have also spoken of a progressive process of integration. Now these two factors are mutually interrelated in such a way that each contributes to the other. The radical decision involves, of its very nature, the will to achieve this integration. The subject wills to achieve, in this radical decision of his, that love in which God and his neighbour are loved 'with his *whole* heart and with *all* his powers'. And conversely it is also true to say that this love is itself made perfect in virtue of the fact that it integrates within itself all the dimensions of man's being. The process of integration constitutes the mode in which this love grows and develops until it reaches the due fulness which is proper to it. In the light of this we can understand why the exponents of classic theology should regard it as immediately obvious that once it has reached this state of fulness the love of God and our neighbour also blots out all the 'temporal punishments due to sin'. This blotting out is not a 'reward' (which in the last analysis would be arbitrarily bestowed) for having achieved this fulness of love. On this interpretation how could even the theologians know that the attainment of such fulness in love had this effect? The blotting out of sin is rather the connatural consequence of this love, so that we might actually define it in the following terms: perfect love is that which has orientated 'all the powers', i.e. all the manifold levels of reality in the complexity of man's makeup purely to God, so that these, without themselves being suppressed or deprived of their true natures, become the 'material',

the ‘expression’ and the ‘manifestation’ precisely of this love. If we have managed to understand what is meant, objectively speaking, by the term ‘temporal punishments due to sin’, then it is also clear that such perfect love blots out all these punishments, indeed that, ultimately speaking, this is the only way in which they can be blotted out. This in itself is enough to enable us to understand that an indulgence, whatever further precisions [158] still remain to be added in defining its precise nature, must be an *aid towards* this perfect love which blots out all these punishments due to sin, and not a ‘means’ which excuses us from following this one essential way of compensating for our own past and the ‘after-effects’ (*reliquiae peccatorum*) which it has left behind.

It cannot be objected against this interpretation of the temporal punishments due to sin that it is inapplicable to the remission of them which we can obtain in the after-life. For this interpretation in no sense presupposes that after death man intensifies the depths of the radical decision which he took with the aid of supernatural grace in the concrete condition of his earthly life (in other words that he increases his ‘degree of sanctifying grace’). Such a view would admittedly be irreconcilable with the doctrine that with regard to the possibility of an increase in supernatural grace and merit death constitutes the boundary beyond which we cannot go. All that this interpretation does presuppose is that this definitive decision for God, which remains unchanged in respect of its degree of intensity also, must (under certain circumstances) still continue to take effect even after death by permeating and shaping all those levels in the human person which are less immediate to his actual personhood. There is no doctrine of the Church which is controverted by this assumption. Even at the biological level growth and final maturity are not simply one and the same thing.

II

Now manifestly we can entreat God that he may, as far as possible, grant us favourable circumstances in his guidance of our lives, such as will as quickly and as beneficently as possible shape this process by which our whole sin-damaged being is transformed once the basic decision of conversion and repentance has been taken. Who has not actually uttered this prayer if he is a Christian (even if he has never hitherto regarded that which he prayed for from this point of view)? Who has not already entertained the idea: ‘If I could only die one death, the “true death” in which my entire being with all that it has become throughout my entire life was made over to God in faith and love in an act of radical self-surrender down to the last fibre of my being, so that nothing was held back, nothing denied, but death was the total act of a totally committed faith!’ No theologian will deny that through so intense a degree of love for God we would be liberated from all ‘temporal punishments due to sin’ as well if this grace was bestowed in its entirety upon the individual. Nor can anyone deny [159] that one instance at least of a blotting out of the temporal punishments due to sin does exist, that namely which we regard not as *an* instance but as *the* definitive instance of this process.

We can, therefore, ask God to grant us the greatest and most favourable chance possible of achieving the maturity of the Christian man as a whole. Such a prayer need not for one moment spring from egoistical promptings or from the impulse to escape from these punishments as ‘cheaply and painlessly’ as possible. Nor need it involve any denial of the truth that for Christian living too there is a genuine attitude of ‘standing by one’s past’ and ‘bearing the consequences’, so that to flee from this would be cowardly, unchristian and ultimately speaking futile. Time is, in fact, not only God’s gift, through which the most important factor, namely salvation, must be achieved; it is also the restriction which ensures that that which must be achieved shall be achieved only gradually. Otherwise we could never in fact pray for the coming of the Lord by saying: ‘Come soon.’ The attainment of maturity

can take place in various ways: in circumstances of anguish, toil and frustration or in the midst of a tempest which we nevertheless feel as blessed; in an attitude of freedom and enthusiasm in which we experience as the blessing bestowed by a powerful love that which seems to another the anguish of a weary process of ‘dying’. Thus we can ask God that he may bestow upon us the possibility of a swift and happy maturing process.² But we cannot ask him to allow us to share in God’s own holiness and beatitude when we are only half ready and immature. Surely we can in all reason ask God to work out the destiny of those who are to be made perfect by him soon and by the more joyful way. And what we can reasonably ask for ourselves that too we can ask – one might almost say still more readily and more selflessly – for others.³

This is a prayer to which the Church can lend her support. As a source of truth and a means of grace she has never merely been the external controlling organisation. She is the one Body of Christ in which all the members live for one another, suffer for one another and are brought to [160] perfection for one another. When God regards an individual he always sees him in his place in the whole, as one with Christ the head and as one with all the brethren of this one Christ. No-one lives to himself alone, no-one dies to himself alone. Each one is beloved by God by the very fact that God regards his Christ and his Cross – beloved as part of a single reality which God creates in the midst of mankind, destined as they are to be brought to perfection. Through her prayers, therefore, the Church can give her support to this entreaty for the ‘remission of the temporal punishments due to sin’. And when she does this then she does it as that which she is, as the one great union of those who have been sanctified and redeemed, as the Bride of the Lamb, as Head and Body, the one Christ. When God hears her then he regards that which she is as she prays. She is the Church of the saints, the Church of the one Christ. He grants her a hearing for her prayer in virtue of that which he has bestowed upon her prior to any prayer, namely in virtue of the grace of Christ which has been made powerful and victorious in the Church. Indeed the Lord himself says with regard to the hearing of the prayers of the disciples: ‘The Father loves you *because* you have loved me and have believed that I have come from the Father’ (Jn 16:27). This is what is meant when we speak of an indulgence as coming from the ‘treasury of the Church’.

The ‘treasury of the Church’ is God’s own will to save – ultimately speaking, therefore, God himself – to the extent that this is present in the world with the force of an irrevocable victory in *that* Christ (as head) who has been decreed by God from all eternity, precisely *as* ‘the firstborn among many brethren’, in other words in union with his ‘Body’ which is the Church. Rightly conceived of, therefore, the significance of this idea of the ‘treasury of the Church’ is precisely not that some part of its contents is paid out as from some public fund which can be doled out in limited quantities and by instalments, something which otherwise the individual would have had to pay out of his own resources. And the fact that this is not the case means that the question of whether the treasury of the Church could ever be exhausted, seeing that so much is spent and paid out ‘from’ it, is utterly ruled out from the outset and therefore does not need to be solved by any subtle explanations. For the same reason it is also clear that God is not compelled to grant such a prayer for the remission of the temporal punishments due to sin *precisely on the grounds that* he can no longer demand that

² This point is in itself enough to show that a position adopted by the two doctors of the Church Bonaventure and Albert is incorrect. They supposed, namely, that the more perfect should not concern themselves with trying to obtain remissions of temporal punishments due to sin through indulgences, but that they should rather strive to wipe away these punishments by their own personal penitential practices.

³ Hence it is that such highly esteemed theologians as Thomas Aquinas, Cajetan, Soto, Suarez etc. uphold the view that an individual can ‘apply’ the ‘satisfactions’ he has performed but which he does not need himself to another precisely as the Church does in the granting of indulgences; in other words he can, in a certain sense lend his own indulgences, as it were, to others.

which he has already received (namely *out of* the treasury of the Church). He looks to the working of his own grace. This is the reason why he guides one to his perfection by this way and another by that. It is done according to his own free and incalculable measure, and in [161] an order proper to him and decreed by him. But because in and through this sovereign power of divine grace there is a truly effective prayer – indeed, according to Christ’s words an infallibly effective prayer – and because this prayer can be that of the entire Church, above all because it can and should be applied to the swift and happy attainment of the perfection of the whole man – for these reasons the Church can give her support as intercessor to the prayer of the individual for the remission of the ‘temporal punishments due to his sins’. Where she does this in God’s grace, where she does it well – for she must always perform such things through her members – where the individual is worthy of having his prayer heard through God’s grace, there God hearkens too to the prayer of the Church of his own Son. It hardly needs to be specially emphasised once more that this takes place through the grace of God, who supplies the seed and the final flowering of this prayer and this worthiness according to the unfathomable decrees of his own good pleasure which is in no sense conditioned by any act on man’s part.

With these provisos we can say that God gives the individual that which the Church implores on his behalf for his salvation. Thus the Church has always prayed for the sinner, who even as a penitent still bears the burden of his guilt. In the penitential practice of the early Church her intercession during and at the end of the period of penance belongs to the indispensable elements of ecclesiastical penance. She does not merely reconcile the sinner in that, by restoring him to harmony with herself, she imparts to him once more her own Holy Spirit which is the remission of sins; more than this, she actually prays with the repentant sinner for the forgiveness of the whole of his guilt with all its further effects. In view of the fact that it is, in fact, a *repentant* sinner that is being treated of, this applies in practice primarily (if we adopt the theological distinction and terminology current today) to the remission of the temporal punishments due to sin, to the total overcoming of the guilt. Even today this prayer is constantly being made. It is true that except for a small remnant it has vanished from the penitential liturgy used in the sacrament of penance itself because for practical reasons the accusation, considered as the initiating act of the penitential process, and sacramental forgiveness by the Church have been brought together in a single process, and the result of this is that the period of penance, the full overcoming of sin with all its consequences within man, is left almost exclusively to the Christian penitent who receives the sacrament. Yet for this reason the Church still continues constantly to be she who prays for the blotting out of the sins of her members and the punishment due to these sins, in the prayer of the [162] Our Father, in the sacrifice of Mass, in the penances performed by her saints and of all upon whom the guilt of the age weighs as the Cross of Christ and who bear this Cross in faith and love, in the explicit prayers of intercession which are constantly being made in the most varied forms on behalf of sinners. It is to be hoped that in the projected renewal of the liturgical forms of penance these aspects will be brought out still more clearly.

From such a prayer as this no-one can be excluded from the outset unless he has himself renounced his share in it by separating himself from the Church so that he can no longer be named in the liturgical intercessions in the manner in which the children of the Church have the privilege of being named (cf. 1 Jn 5:16). But in a special way we can include anyone in this prayer of the Church, and God’s help can be extended to him in particular by means of an explicit and solemn intercession. Those who believe in the meaning of prayer, and who know what is meant by the Church, can be seized with awe at the following idea: the holy community of the redeemed, the Bride of Christ, stands at the throne of grace on my behalf! From her heart which is unceasingly and inalienably filled with the wordless sighings of the Spirit of God, prayer rises up on my behalf! It is *she* who says to me ‘May Almighty God

have mercy upon you, forgive you your sins . . . ’ It is *she* who promises this prayer to me, and she does this not merely in general terms or implicitly, but explicitly and as pledged by an act of her supreme authority to pray on my behalf.

III

Such prayer remits, ‘bestows’ not simply in an authoritative remission of the punishments due to sin as though it were a simple ‘amnesty’ of a punishment to be imposed in purely external terms that was in question, as though this punishment served *only* as a manifestation of the majesty of the law. In fact, as the Council of Trent explicitly declares, the Church does not ascribe to herself any power precisely of *this* kind, of granting an ‘amnesty’ from a punishment imposed in the sacrament of penance in a purely external (‘vindictive’) sense, even though precisely in this she is still exercising her power of binding and loosing as defined in Mt 16 and 18 (DS 1667 ff.). Even less, therefore, can she intend to use any such power outside the sacrament, especially since in fact the theologians commonly derive her power to grant indulgences from the same power of binding and loosing as spoken of in the gospels. But the holy Church which – as Tertullian has already said in a similar context – is always hearkened to, [163] can assure the sinner in a special and explicit act, of a prayer of intercession such that it draws down a remission of the punishments due to sin. Now provided that we understand this *special* prayer in the right way and in the way in which we have attempted to interpret it, we can say: This is precisely what takes place in what we call an indulgence.

In earlier times the Church combined an assurance of prayer of this kind with the remission of a specific ecclesiastical penance which she had, of her own power, previously imposed upon the penitent in the sacrament of penance. But in a certain sense she replaced the effects of the performance of this penance by the penitent with her own intercession. And because of these facts she still gives expression, even today, to the intensity and urgency of this assurance of prayer in the form of sentences of the old canonical penances which in earlier times she remitted for the penitent in such a case. Because the Church prays, because she prays for salvation (and not for earthly things) – on these grounds she knows that she is ‘always heard’. But because from the side of him for whom the prayer is offered the effectiveness of this prayer is always dependent upon his prior subjective dispositions (which themselves in turn fall under the powerful and also incalculable dispositions of the grace of God) – because of this we never know in the particular case when and how this prayer attains its goal. In the light of this we already see that the remission has not, and cannot have, the function of either diminishing or replacing the personal penance of the individual concerned. Of its nature the remission can only be aimed at securing that through the help of God that may really take place swiftly and easily which penance itself is also designed to achieve: the total cleansing and total maturing of the individual throughout his entire being, in which his initial endowment with grace is the heart and centre of the whole process. This remission, therefore, can only achieve its due effect where the individual genuinely has the dispositions necessary for penance. For without this there can be no question even of true repentance. Now if this is not the case even a forgiveness of the actual sins themselves is not possible, and therefore neither is it possible to obtain a pardon or remission of the temporal punishments due to sin.

We are presupposing that the process by which the individual is brought to full maturity, a process which is not merely psychological but in a true sense religious also, is not always and necessarily simply completed with death. This is not so even in the case of those individuals who, under the grace of God, have made their orientation towards God definitive and final in

their lives and through their deaths. Even from the purely empirical point of view we cannot have the impression that a final and complete [164] integration, in which the individual's basic decision pervades the whole of his being at all of its levels, coincides in every case with his death. Certainly according to Christian doctrine death is the end of that period in which an eternal destiny is worked out. What comes 'afterwards' is not a prolongation of the period or its continuation in an endless series of new ages, but rather the definitive fixing and the eternal validity of what has come to be in time. But unless we wish to regard man as simply 'coming to an end', so that we can then go on to say that he undergoes a 'resurrection' of the flesh, thereby becoming something absolutely new (which, however, would be tantamount to a radical denial of his continuing identity and of eternity as the fruit of time), then, precisely upon a Christian conception of the history man as an individual, we must recognise the existence of a further period of time between death and the final consummation of all things, during which the acts performed in freedom during man's time on earth are brought to their maturity. For this history of man precisely as human only attains its ultimate end and consummation in the resurrection of the flesh, in the transfiguration of all that is real in man taken as a whole, and not merely in a sort of Platonist history of the individual spirit. We cannot picture to ourselves what takes place in it, but this is no reason for denying such a possibility. Every attempt at describing this possibility serves in its result to show how impossible it is to deny that the possibility itself does exist. But even while renouncing any such attempt we can still say this much: supposing that the *history* of the individual as such is not simply terminated with death; supposing that with death considered as the outcome of a specific and determinate stage in this history belonging to the dimension of space and time man enters still more into an open relationship to the totality of the world (though he does not become 'liberated from the body' in the sense of a negative and empty separation from the cosmos); supposing all this is true, then he experiences the contradiction between the divinely ordained nature of his own being or that of the world on the one hand, and that which he still is through the still surviving effects of his own acts, in which his guilt has been objectified. He experiences these as the painful and punitive consequences of his sin. Now the painful process by which this contradiction is overcome is his purgatory. But just as in this life, so too even after death this process can be slower or quicker, more or less painful or happy, according to the particular circumstances and the prior conditions which determine this in each individual case. That the 'poor souls' may be granted a swifter and more happy maturing process – that is what we pray for when we pray for them, and that is the object of that [165] intercessory prayer of the Church which is promised to us in an indulgence which we gain 'for the holy souls'.

An indulgence, then, implies that the Church agrees to offer her official intercession on behalf of the repentant sinner. And it is expressed in the form of a remission of some (hypothetically imposed) canonical penance (when it is a case of indulgences for the living). The necessary prior condition for this to be achieved is that the individual gaining the indulgence must perform some good work which is specifically prescribed. In earlier times, in which the indulgence properly so-called emerged, this good work constituted primarily some part of the canonical penance which had been imposed or else some other penance, generally easier, which had to be performed in place of the original one. Today the conditions laid down by the Church for gaining an indulgence consist only of some very small task, almost symbolical in its effect. This should not lead us to the point of no longer taking indulgences seriously, as though they were 'cheap' and to be had in great quantities. Many indulgences are offered. Whether many are also 'gained' in *reality* is another question. An indulgence is only gained in the definitive sense when the intercessory prayer of the Church achieves its goal. But in the last analysis this can only take place in a heart that is disposed to penance, in an individual who, working from a basis of faith and grace, strives through his

actions and sufferings to ensure that he may become more and more a new creature fashioned after the image of Christ in all the dimensions of his being. It is in order that this may be achieved that the holy Church assures the Christian, by granting him an indulgence, of her help and intercession.