



Boston Catholic Journal

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Questions & Answers



about *Authentic Catholic Teaching*

QUESTION:

- **Can the Conditions under which a Plenary Indulgence is granted ever *really* be met?**

Dear Editor,

I read an article recently by an American priest who said in his opinion a plenary indulgence is never ever gained by anyone. He bases his opinion on the fact that one of the stated requirements to gain a plenary is for one to be totally free from the disposition to sin either venial or mortal. And in his opinion given our human nature not one of us is ever free from this disposition. So is therefore not in a position to gain one of these indulgences.

This disturbed me greatly. And I found myself giving much thought as to whether I am in fact ever going to be capable of gaining a plenary indulgence, which means so very much to me .

One COULD not or indeed SHOULD not be at confession on a daily basis to try and keep oneself free from all sin. The danger here as I see it one could easily develop a disposition to scruples which is a very unhealthy state of mind.

Can I ask you editor to please comment on the article by the priest. In the hope that I will be reassured that my attempts to release a little soul from purgatory and so fulfil the needful heart of my Jesus are not in vain.

Thank you.

TMC
09 March 2010

Dear T.M.C.

The American priest is, presumably, expressing his *opinion* as a person and not as a priest, for he is not expressing the *authoritative and indisputable* teaching of Holy Mother the Church.

That his personal opinion is divergent from, and in conflict with, what the Church teaches --- a teaching to which he is *bound* to assent not just as a priest but as a Catholic, is most regrettable but hardly surprising. What is more, his statements are a scandal to the Church and to the faithful in that they cause confusion among the faithful in regard to genuine Catholic doctrine. The priest is bound to unambiguously teach authentic Catholic doctrine --- not to express his “opinions” about matters of the Faith that have been established and are not subject to dispute or question. “What”, the confused Catholic asks, “is the truth of the matter at hand? The Church holds and teaches the unique, profound, and unquestionable value of Indulgences, particularly Plenary Indulgences. But the Church’s representative in the person of this priest, is declaring otherwise. Who is right? The Church and her countless Saints who have spoken clearly over the centuries on this matter -- or “*Father-knows-best-but-really-doesn’t?*” The question is rhetorical. The Church is right and Father so-and-so is clearly wrong.

On what basis does he make the pronouncement, “*Given our human nature not one of us is ever free from this disposition (to sin) ... and therefore [no one is] in a position to gain one of these indulgences.*”? Not in virtue of his priesthood. No priest has the authority to interpret authentic Church teaching to accord with his misguided opinion. No bishop, no theologian, no Catholic whomsoever has this authority. This misguided and incorrect “opinion” does not reflect what the Church teaches, what the Sacred Deposit of the Faith holds, and what Catholic Dogma maintains.

The statement that, “*Given our human nature not one of us is ever free from this disposition*” (requisite to a Plenary Indulgence) in and of itself reveals a defective knowledge of the norms outlined for the gaining of a Plenary Indulgence, which ***makes no reference whatever*** to a “***disposition to sin***”:

“To acquire a plenary indulgence it is necessary to perform the work to which the indulgence is attached and to fulfill three conditions: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion and prayer for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff. It is further required that all **attachment** to sin, even to venial sin, be absent.” (Norm 7 of the *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*) http://www.boston-catholic-journal.com/Indulgentiarum_Doctrina.pdf

As you can see, it stipulates that one must be free from “**attachment**” to sin --- not from the *disposition* to sin. The two are quite different. To be free from “attachment to sin” is not to be free from the allurements of sin which would constitute *freedom from temptation* (something to which Christ Himself was subject in His sacred humanity in the Three Temptations - *St. Matthew 4.1-11*). It is not possible to be free from temptation in our fallen state because we are not free of the Tempter who ever assails those who follow Christ. (cf. 1 Peter 5.8)

We cannot be free from temptations to sin, (cf. St. Matthew 18.7) but we can be free of our attachment to sin itself. It is within the will of man, even when falling into sin, to have no attachment to the sin beyond the hapless occasion itself. It is of the essence of repentance to resolutely and genuinely express the intention to sin in that way no more --- that is to say, to renounce any *affinity for the occasion of sin*, which, in other words, to refuse attachment to the sin into which one had fallen.

To say that this is not possible is contrary to human experience and history. Many --- having sinned and repented --- have returned no more to sin. Mary Magdalene was among them. In our own lives we find that we renounce any attachment to a sin that has brought us untold misery. To say otherwise is to deprive man of freedom by holding that he is *not free not to sin*. But if he is not free *not to sin*, then he cannot be held culpable for it --- for he was unable to do otherwise. In this case, there is no sin and no sanctity, nothing praiseworthy and nothing blameworthy. This is called “determinism”. We are not responsible for our behavior and choices because they are pre-determined for us by our very constitution as human beings, a constitution that does not include freedom in its inventory. What we do, we must do. And if we must do it, and *cannot* do otherwise, there is no sin, and *eo ipso*, no guilt.

But this clearly is not the case. In exercising the freedom to disagree with Church teaching (to disagree with what is true --- which one *can* always do, but which is not understood as coherent behavior) Father so-and-so instantiates the very point he repudiates. He is free to disagree, even if he ought not. It is even within Father’s power to renounce his attachment to this error, however compelling he may find it to be. It is within his power to state it no more --- even while it may not be within his will. He is even free to hold himself not be free, but in so doing utters an inescapable contradiction. The “mind” of Father so-and-so is not the “mind of the Church” --- nor does it accord with human experience and a coherent notion of free agency.

Regrettably, much of what he often hear from the pulpit, you will notice, is not , “**what the Church teaches**”, but “what the priest “thinks about” and “the way he look at it”, or “it seems to him” --- on a given matter that most often has only marginal relevance to the Gospel reading in any event. We are not in Church, presumably, to listen to the opinions and quirks of

interpretation of any given priest --- but to the Word of God as *the Church* sees it ... and not as "*Father so-and-so* sees it.

We hope that you find this answer satisfactory.



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