

Indulgences

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Indulgences appeared during the Middle Ages in connection with the sacrament of penance as it became a private rite administered by the priest. In its simplest form an indulgence did not remit sin but set aside part or all of the satisfaction that a penitent was required to perform after confessing and being absolved. Satisfaction consisted of religious acts like giving alms, saying prayers, or fasting, and performing these acts paid the earthly or temporal penalty for the sins committed. The guilt incurred by those sins had already been removed by virtue of the atoning death of Christ. An indulgence, therefore, did not forgive sin or its guilt but exempted the penitent from some or all of the satisfaction that had been imposed by the priest.

During the later Middle Ages indulgences became effective tools of episcopal and papal power. In the form of letters or pronouncements they offered special benefits to crusaders and to the faithful who supported papal projects like the new basilica of St. Peter in Rome. Only higher clergy authorized by the pope could grant indulgences, and their potency was said to emanate from a treasury filled by the endless merits of Christ and the saints—merits which they did not need and could be transferred to the accounts of ordinary believers to cover the satisfaction they owed. The language of accounting presented the acquisition of indulgences as a pecuniary transaction in which they were offered in exchange for money. Money did not technically buy the indulgences but acquired them through contributions.

The faithful were also offered indulgences for the souls of their loved ones in purgatory. These indulgences would reduce the time in purgatory that was necessary to complete the earthly satisfaction left unfinished by the death of the penitent. The notorious indulgence that provoked Martin Luther's ninety-five theses (1517) and ignited the Reformation was advertised as a guarantee both to forgive sins and to shorten the time that sinners would have to spend in purgatory. The income from that indulgence was designated for the building fund of St. Peter's basilica; unbeknownst to Luther, part of the revenue would also pay the Roman curia for the elevation of Albert of Brandenburg to the archbishopric of Mainz.

Pope Leo X authorized the same Albert of Mainz to issue the indulgence translated on this page. In return for their contributions to the construction of St. Peter's, priests outside Rome were given privileges that enabled them to celebrate mass in locations under interdict where no public rites were allowed. In these locations they could also be buried with a proper funeral mass; and, before they died, they also obtained the right of receiving "indulgence and remission of sins" by visiting churches at the same time that inhabitants of Rome were acquiring the same indulgence by visiting the designated churches where the pope was celebrating mass ("stational churches"). Protestant reformers rejected many

features of indulgences, but their harshest criticism was reserved for the claim that an indulgence could forgive sins. If that claim were true, indulgences would become more important than faith, the sacraments, and even the atoning of death of Christ.