

Synapse Technologies, Inc. Columbus: Discovery and Beyond

Article Name: Indulgences: Buying Time-off in Purgatory

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About: An explanation of the Roman Catholic concepts of sin, the soul, purgatory, and indulgences --issues which led to the Protestant Reformation.

Notes: This is a supportive (i.e sibling) article to the "Pay Now, Sin Later" article. While "Pay Now, Sin Later" paints an imaginative and humorous picture showing indulgences being sold on a church steps, this article provides (in a straight-forward style) the solid informational foundation needed for non-Catholics to fully appreciate the dialogue of the scene.

If graphics are added to this text, images could be: a priest giving absolution in a confessional; penitents in a confessional line; a Catholic church; a priest, etc.

Video/Graphics/Anim.

Audio/Text

To understand the concept of "indulgences" in the Roman Catholic religion, you first need to know a little about the concept of the soul, the types of sin, the sacrament of penance, and the purpose of Purgatory.

Catholics believe that each human being possesses an eternal soul, a spirit which lives on after the body dies. How you live your life, whether you were good or bad, determines where your soul will spend eternity -- in heaven, with God; or in hell, with the devil.

In the Catholic faith, there are essentially two types of sins: mortal sins and venial sins. Mortal sins are serious offenses against the law of God (as interpreted by the Catholic religion), and venial sins are minor offenses.

The state of your soul at the moment of death is the all-important factor determining where your soul will spend eternity. If you die in a state of grace, that is, with no sins on your conscience, you go straight to heaven; if you die with a mortal sin on your soul, you go straight to hell; if you die with venial sins, your soul goes to purgatory.

Purgatory is the reform school of the afterlife. It works just like hell, with one important difference: purgatory will come to an end when the world ends. Hell is eternal, but purgatory is finite. The temporal punishment due to venial sins may condemn a soul to burn in purgatory for thousands, or millions, of years, but eventually the punishment will end. After completing the sentence, the soul can go to heaven.

The sacrament of penance allows Catholics an opportunity to remove the eternal punishment due to sins. By confessing your sins to a priest, and through him asking God to forgive you for your sins, you can be relieved of the burden of spending eternity in hell. However, since all sins are crimes against God, they carry a temporal punishment that must be completed either in this life, or in the next. That's where "indulgences" come into the picture.

Indulgences are opportunities to reduce the amount of time you might have to spend in purgatory. Initially, you could gain indulgences by doing good works, by prayers, by fasting, or by making charitable contributions. By the fourteenth century, however, the Church began to sell indulgences, a practice which led to much abuse and corruption.

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By the early sixteenth century, Martin Luther and other Reformers demanded that the Church correct this flagrant abuse of spiritual power. It wasn't until after the Council of Trent in 1562 that Pope Pius V revoked all indulgences which could be obtained by the payment of money. By then, it was too late. The Protestant Reformation had gained momentum, and Christendom was splintered into various sects.