



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



31ST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

ON PURGATORY AND INDULGENCES

By Fr. Ambrose Bennett

Today's gospel story of Zacchaeus is one that shows the pattern of divine grace and human response in effecting a true conversion in Christ.

For Zacchaeus was certainly one who needed conversion. He was a tax collector for the Romans: that made him not only a collaborator with Israel's oppressors but also one whose daily business put him in situations that were likely to render him ritually unclean through forbidden contact with pagans. In addition, the tax collectors were prone to extortion and to lining their own pockets with other people's money. It is no surprise that they were despised and regarded as notorious sinners and outcasts, however wealthy they might become.

This account of Zacchaeus's conversion depicts for us how God in Christ effectually calls sinners to conversion. For the grace of God precedes any human response: Jesus's reputation has already reached Zacchaeus, and the Savior comes to Jericho before Zacchaeus comes to him. Then the secret call of grace, at work in Zacchaeus' heart, prompts him to seek the Savior, perhaps with only a very imperfect and half-conscious desire to amend his life. And then he beholds Christ himself, who calls Zacchaeus and comes to stay in his house. Zacchaeus, overwhelmed by the Savior's love for him, responds in gratitude with works of charity and reparation: "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over" (Lk 19:8). And Jesus replies, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 1:10).

There is a Hebrew play on words here: for the Hebrew form of Jesus' name is Yeshua. Yeshua means "the LORD saves" or (in a slightly different form) "salvation". Our Lord's words can be taken as saying either that salvation has come to this house, or that Jesus has come to this house. Either way, it means the same thing: Jesus is salvation, and salvation is Jesus.

It so happens that our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, has cited this very episode in his recent Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist. The Pope writes as follows: truly spiritual, life-changing worship

is before all else the joy-filled discovery of love at work in the hearts of those who accept the Lord's gift, abandon themselves to him and thus find true freedom. The moral transformation implicit in the new worship instituted by Christ is a heartfelt



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



yearning to respond to the Lord's love with one's whole being while remaining ever conscious of one's own weakness. This is clearly reflected in the Gospel story of Zacchaeus (cf. Lk 19:1-10). After welcoming Jesus to his home, the tax collector is completely changed... The moral urgency born of welcoming Jesus into our lives is the fruit of gratitude for having experienced the Lord's unmerited closeness (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 82).

It is in this perspective that the Pope has called upon us to rediscover two much-neglected practices of Catholic piety: indulgences and prayers for the holy souls in Purgatory. In this month of November, which is especially dedicated to prayer for the faithful departed, it is fitting that we heed the Pope's words.

Now I have met many Catholics, even among those who attend Mass regularly, who are under the impression that the Second Vatican Council did away with Purgatory and indulgences. When I asked them if they have ever heard these doctrines publicly retracted, they tell me no; but they haven't heard anything about them in so many years that they think these beliefs have gone the way of the dinosaur or the dodo bird. It's a case of what the theologian Karl Rahner called "cryptogamic heresy"—a practical denial by omission rather than overt rejection. Rahner asked,

How often do preachers, talking to educated people in our part of the world, still speak to their audiences about the temporal punishment [due to sin], about indulgences, angels, fasting, the devil; of Purgatory, of prayer for the Holy Souls, and similar old-fashioned things? (Karl Rahner, *What Is Heresy?* in *Theological Investigations*, vol. V, p. 506).

The silence on these matters has been deafening. Well, then: let us now break that silence on indulgences and Purgatory.

Let's begin by asking the obvious question: why do these doctrines matter?

They matter because of certain truths of human nature and of the way God's grace acts upon our humanity. Yes, indeed, the forgiveness of God is absolutely free, a gift of pure grace; and yet, the grace of God does not always immediately cancel the personal, spiritual, and social effects of sin.

Think for a moment about today's gospel. Zacchaeus is aware that he is pardoned, and yet he fulfills the demand of the Law of Moses, which demanded fourfold restitution for the theft of goods essential for another's livelihood; and Zacchaeus does not stop even there, for he gives half of his goods to the poor. It is then, when repentance is fruitful, that the Lord says that salvation—that is, Jesus himself—has come to Zacchaeus's house. Indulgences are based on this same understanding of what true conversion entails; indulgences heal the after-effects of sin that has already been repented and confessed. Like Zacchaeus, we, too, need to do penance.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



In view of our Holy Father's call to us to rediscover indulgences, I make this simple suggestion: try to go more frequently to confession, perhaps once a month or once every couple of months. When you go to confession, make a mental intention to receive all the indulgences attached to any prayers or spiritual exercises that appeal to you, such as the rosary or the prayerful reading of Scripture or a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. And then do one of these in a spirit of recollection and gratitude. It's easiest to do one of these spiritual exercises or devotions right in the church, when you go to confession. And in this way, without any legalistic misunderstandings, you will have gained the indulgence.

I especially urge you to think of indulgences and in a relational rather than in a legalistic or mechanical way. The purpose of indulgences is the healing of the effects of already-forgiven sin within the body of Christ; it's not at all like putting a coin in a slot so that grace will come out, as in a sort of spiritual vending machine. If perhaps in the past some people thought of indulgences in this way, then they were mistaken; and we should not make the same mistake again. However, that is no reason for discarding indulgences; instead, we need to understand them better and to make reverent use of them.

The doctrine of Purgatory is based on the same principle as indulgences. Many people deny the existence of Purgatory because they say, quite rightly, that the only cleansing needed for salvation is the cleansing in the precious Blood of Jesus, poured out on the Cross for sinners. And they are absolutely right in saying so: to have Christ is already to have salvation. Imagine, then, someone who was penitent like Zacchaeus but who in his earthly life had not yet made the desired reparation for the temporal effects of his forgiven sins. Purgatory allows this to happen, and allows us to assist this final purification with our own prayers and indulgences.

The holy souls in purgatory are not experiencing a *different* or *additional* cleansing, but only the final effects of the one cleansing in the blood of Christ, since nothing unclean shall enter heaven (Rev. 21:27). Purgatory is not a temporary hell. Hell is the absence of God's love, and Purgatory is the presence of God's purifying and transforming love. So hell and Purgatory are utterly different in nature. The "fire" of Purgatory is the living flame of God's love that makes us fit to receive vision of God in heaven. And what Catholic dogma calls the "purifying pains" or Purgatory are not pain in the sense of some sort of torture; rather, these pains are more like the pain of letting go at last of those things that stand in the way of perfect union with God. Or perhaps they are like the "pain" of having to change in order to adapt to a new situation, a change we desire and need and yet may find difficult for a time. Or, better yet, we can think of these purifying pains as the pain of being delayed in attaining the union with the Savior for whom the holy souls long.

As we pray for the living, that as members of Christ's body they may become holy, so we pray for those who have died in Christ, that their holiness may be perfected in



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



the Savior whom they have followed and loved. Let us then respond to the Pope's call to pray for the holy souls, who in turn will intercede for us in heaven. For our salvation is not the salvation of isolated and disembodied souls but rather a transformation in Christ's image that takes place within the body of Christ. Let our use of indulgences and our prayers for the holy souls then be seen, not as a burden, but as the spiritual fruitfulness of grateful hearts, so that we can truly say, "Today salvation has come to this house."

QUOTATIONS FROM POPE BENEDICT XVI'S APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION, *SACRAMENTUM CARITATIS*:

A balanced and sound practice of gaining indulgences, whether for oneself or for the dead, can be helpful for a renewed appreciation of the relationship between the Eucharist and reconciliation. By this means, the faithful obtain "remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven" (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 21). The use of indulgences helps us to understand that by our efforts alone we would be incapable of making reparation for the wrong we have done and that the sins of each individual harm the whole community. Furthermore, the practice of indulgences, which involves not only the doctrine of Christ's infinite merits but also that of the communion of saints, reminds us "how closely we are united to each other in Christ... and how the supernatural life of each can help others" (Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 18-19). Since the conditions for gaining an indulgence include going to confession and receiving sacramental communion, this practice can effectively sustain the faithful on their journey of conversion and in rediscovering the centrality of the Eucharist in the Christian life (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 21).

The Eucharistic celebration, in which we proclaim that Christ has died and risen, and will come again, is a pledge of the future glory in which our bodies too will be glorified. Celebrating the memorial of our salvation strengthens our hope in the resurrection of the body and in the possibility of meeting once again, face to face, those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. In this context I wish, together with the synod fathers, to remind all the faithful of the importance of prayers for the dead, especially the offering of Mass for them, so that, once purified, they can come to the beatific vision of God. A rediscovery of the eschatological dimension inherent in the Eucharist, celebrated and adored, will help sustain us on our journey and comfort us in the hope of glory (cf Rom 5:2; Ti 2:13) (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 32).