

Cardinal: Explain Indulgences to Help Ecumenism

Says Key Is Understanding Sin, Grace, Church's Role

VATICAN CITY, MARCH 10, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity is calling for a clarification of Catholic doctrine on indulgences, in order to foster ecumenical dialogue.

Cardinal Walter Kasper noted that the granting of indulgences for the Pauline Year is an occasion to clarify this issue that continues to divide Christians, L'Osservatore Romano reported Thursday.

The cardinal explained that there is no contradiction between the Catholic doctrine on indulgences and ecumenical dialogue, and called for a "correct understanding" of this topic.

He was responding to criticisms received from some representatives of the Reformation communities, who criticized the Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary announcing the granting of indulgences to those who go on pilgrimage to the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, the article reported.

The cardinal acknowledged that this subject continues to be a point of disagreement between the two confessions.

He noted that the Protestants' criticisms are "understandable," given the "trauma" that indulgences caused in Luther's time, but he pointed out that today indulgences "at least in practice, are not those of the 16th century."

He continued, "Today not even Catholic historians argue over the fact that in the Middle Ages grave inconveniences were created that caused controversy over the practice of indulgences."

Cardinal Kasper affirmed that this practice "has existed in the Church since the beginning," linked to the "expiation of sins through temporal punishment" and to the value of the intercession of the martyrs, which was practiced in the early Church.

In the wake of the degeneration of this practice during the Low Middle Ages and the Reformation, the Council of Trent reformed indulgences "in a radical way," he explained, returning to "the former and proven use of the Church," as a "valid, though not binding, pastoral offer."

The cardinal also stressed the importance of Pope Paul VI's apostolic constitution "Indulgentiarum Doctrina" saying that it is "still today almost unknown," but suggesting that it "might put ecumenical dialogue on this topic on a new basis."

In this sense, he highlighted the importance of the symposium on indulgences, held in February 2001, to which Protestants were invited, to explain that indulgences do not contradict the joint declaration on justification signed with Lutherans in 1999.

Essential topic

Cardinal Kasper pointed out that the question of indulgences, far from being a secondary issue, is an essential topic, as it is connected with the doctrine on the sacraments, especially reconciliation, and ecclesiological issues.

He affirmed that "the fact that misinterpretations and controversies arise constantly is due to the close connection between the theology of penance and of indulgences and ecclesiological issues, in which differences persist among the confessions which are yet to be surmounted."

The Protestants' main objection, namely, to what point the Pope or a bishop can grant indulgences, is addressed "not only to indulgences but to the Catholic interpretation of the ministry in general," he said, which states that the minister acts "in persona Christi," something that the Reformation communities do not admit.

The cardinal clarified that "when we speak of the treasure of grace of the Church, we do not understand a material reality or a sort of deposit."

"The treasure of grace is," he said, "in a word, Jesus Christ himself, his incommensurable mercy and infinite satisfaction, in which we are able to participate as his Body."

This idea of penance is difficult to accept even by "many Catholics," as it is in contrast to "a soft Christian life that does not take seriously the reality of sin and its consequences," he asserted, as well as "with the individualist error, which is so widespread, of thinking that Christians can relate to God on their own."

He added that it is also difficult for those for whom "salvation is no longer a problem."

If the doctrine of indulgences is well understood, it makes manifest among separated Christians "more common elements than it seems," noted the cardinal, exhorting readers "not to trivialize the question."

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