



BISHOP SANTER

Silence on indulgences

ARGUMENT over the granting and abuse of religious indulgences once assumed sufficient proportions to help prompt the Reformation. But, at a press conference in London on Monday, it was explained that ARCIC II's agreed statement on salvation and justification pays scant attention to indulgences because they are now felt to be unimportant.

There is no direct mention of indulgences in the statement; and this was defended by the Commission's co-chairmen, the Right Rev. Mark Santer, Anglican Bishop of Kensington, and the Right Rev. Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, RC Bishop of Arundel and Brighton.

Bishop Santer said of indulgences: "We believe they are a minor issue." To have gone into them would in his opinion have disturbed the overall balance of the statement and would have given indulgences a prominence "which frankly they don't deserve."

Similarly, Bishop Murphy-O'Connor said that they had not wanted to highlight such issues because to do so would have distorted the underlying agreement on the fundamental doctrine.

However, both bishops agreed that there had been one or two working papers on indulgences produced for the ARCIC discussions. But, although an appendix on the subject had been mooted, it had been decided not to publish. Both men said firmly that there had been no disagreement among ARCIC members which had prevented publication of material on indulgences.

Bishop Santer added, that, if people "of sufficient representative authority" were to ask for more work to be done on indulgences, then of course ARCIC II would attend to the question because they were the servants of the Church.

A minor matter?

MARGOT LAWRENCE on
the missing indulgences

I HAD expected that someone better qualified than myself would have commented upon the "silence on indulgences" report in the *Church Times* covering the ARCIC II agreed statement (January 23).

Indulgences are not referred to in so many words in the statement, *Salvation and Faith*, but, apparently in answer to a question at the Press launch, the Bishop of Kensington said: "We believe they are a minor issue." Discussing them in the report would "have given them a prominence which frankly they don't deserve."

The Roman Catholic co-chairman, Bishop Murphy O'Connor, was more cautious. He did not deny the importance of indulgences, but said that highlighting such issues would distort the underlying agreement on doctrine.

How "minor" is the question of indulgences? Most people who are nominally Christian and Protestant, if they have heard of indulgences at all, think of them as a practice that finally got its come-uppance under Good Queen Bess. Others, more literate in religious studies, may know in theory that indulgences are still the practice of the Roman Church (after all, they are mentioned in the novels of Evelyn Waugh), yet still see them as a concept the Christian can take or leave alone at individual discretion.

Simple idea

How true is this? I am not taking a stance here for or against ARCIC II, but if Anglicans en masse, or the people of the British Isles, are sold an idea of unity that suppresses major differences, they will feel seriously cheated. Indulgences deserve clarification if only because they are a relatively simple concept which most people can grasp once it is explained. (Whereas I would venture to say that many ordinary people who are not trained theologians would have difficulty in even grasping, let alone remembering, the precise difference between justification and sanctification.)

As I understand indulgences, the general idea is that, by performing faithfully certain religious observances, such as attendance at Mass, the devout can earn them-

selves a diminution of their time in Purgatory, a kind of good-conduct remission. The precise amount is announced by a bishop or other Church leader at some appropriate time.

Some years ago my sister, then a social worker responsible for children in care, attended a Roman Catholic confirmation at an abbey. It was in the days of the Latin rite; and she, relying on schooldays Latin, could hardly believe her ears when she heard the bishop pronounce an indulgence, or remission of Purgatory, for all present who had also attended Mass the previous Sunday.

A glance at the monks' faces reassured her that her Latin had not let her down. "They looked like schoolboys when the Prize Day speaker announces a holiday." When she remarked on this over tea to the other social workers present, they were disbelieving. Then one consulted a monk and came back saying: "You were quite right, Barbara."

Last year readers of *The Daily Telegraph* were startled and possibly entertained by a headline (I quote from memory), "VATICAN BANS VIDEO INDULGENCES." The report explained that to gain the promised indulgences, a ruling had decreed, attendances at Papal Masses had to be in person, or by watching live television coverage. You could not do yourself any good by recording the Papal blessing and storing it till some more convenient moment. This, surely, shines the bright light of the technological age upon the "minor" and "outdated" issue of indulgences—and demonstrates its relevance for millions today.

The Vatican statement coincided with a Papal journey abroad. It made clear to me something I had not previously understood: namely, that the vast crowds attending Papal functions are not drawn simply by what we prosaic C. of E. members would call simple devotion, nor yet by the personal charisma of the present Pope. For

many, perhaps most, the great thing is that being there on the spot, or riveted to live TV, earns some useful remission of Purgatory. If the Queen were claiming to award indulgences, she too would draw far greater crowds even than she does already.

I make this comparison not out of frivolity, but to highlight the claim being made for the Roman bishops that they actually have power not just in this world but also over the next. The question left unanswered by ARCIC II is: can there be a real future for a united Church some of whose members believe this while others reject it?

Understanding of this concept of indulgences is also, it seems to me, important in understanding some of the near-newspeak terminology of *Salvation and Faith*. I would like to draw attention especially in this context to the expression "good works," as in the section *Salvation and Good Works*.

Good works

Nowhere in the report is it clarified that "good works" means different things to Protestants and Roman Catholics, though *The Times* did print an extract stating that Roman Catholicism lays more stress on good works than does Protestantism. This must have made some people blink when they thought of all the secular effort which in England goes into organisations such as Oxfam, Samaritans, Help the Aged, etc, and which is much less conspicuous in societies where Roman Catholicism is dominant.

The point of course is that "good works" in a Protestant country like Britain implies a variety of concern for others which is only loosely linked to "Sunday religion," which certainly is not seen as earning either justification or salvation, but which is nevertheless a socially valuable expression of a "charity" such as St. Paul enjoined. And, if undertaken by Christians, it comes under the heading of "Let your light so shine before men," etc.

Whereas to a Roman Catholic "good works" means strictly prayers, attendance at Mass and so on. And it is apparently in this sense that the words are used—so far as I can judge—in *Salvation and the Church*. "Defunissez les termes" was Pascal's most important rule of logic and discussion; and this *Salvation and the Church* has notably failed to do in a simple and easily-understood area affecting most people's everyday lives.

Clarification

In the *Church Times* is headed "Silence on indulgences" Bishop Santer was quoted as saying that, if people "of sufficient representative authority" were to request more work on indulgences, ARCIC II would of course consider it. Since both co-chairmen of ARCIC II agreed that working papers on the subject had been produced, it is to be hoped that our Church representatives will indeed press for further clarification of the question—starting perhaps with publication of those working papers which, for some reason, "it" has been decided not to publish.

What could have been the reason? Perhaps, if we could see the papers, we might get some idea.

Church Times 6/3/84
Indulgences still 'minor'

From the
BISHOP OF KENSINGTON

SIR.—Margot Lawrence (February 27) contests my view that, in the process of reconciliation between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, indulgences are "a minor issue." This I believe to be the case.

Indulgences were certainly an important issue in the sixteenth century. But (to quote a standard and up-to-date Roman Catholic textbook, *The Concise Theological Dictionary*, edited by Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler): "After centuries of abuse and misunderstanding, the practice of indulgences has now been largely abandoned."

The issue of indulgences is also minor in the sense that it is theologically secondary to the major issues of inherited dispute which are dealt with and, I believe, resolved in ARCIC II's agreed statement on *Salvation and the Church*. The basic

doctrinal agreement which should be applied to the question of indulgences is contained in paragraph 22 of the statement, which should be read as a whole, including the sentence: "Such penitential disciplines, and other devotional practices, are not in any way intended to put God under obligation."

Should the Churches officially ask for a further statement on this issue, I am confident that it could be produced on the basis of the doctrinal principles already agreed. However, this would certainly take time which many of us believe should be given to issues which bear more obviously and immediately on the reconciliation of our Churches, such as the ordination of women and Anglican orders.

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Indulgences 'a minor issue'?

From the

BISHOP OF THETFORD

SIR.—Successive reports of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission have sought to demonstrate considerable doctrinal convergence between our Churches—a convergence greater than the formularies or practices of either, taken as a whole, can justify. It is understandable, therefore, that the Anglican co-chairman of ARCIC II should want to dismiss the question of indulgences as "minor" and assert them to have been "largely abandoned" by the Roman Catholic Church (letters, March 6).

This is quite unconvincing (to use no stronger word) in the light of the recent publication by the Vatican of the third edition of their *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum* ("A Treasury of Indulgences")—a book of 124 pages which has seen three editions since it was published in 1968, this present updated edition having appeared as recently as May, 1986.

It was this book which led to the *Daily Telegraph* headline mentioned by your original correspondent, Margot Lawrence. That article quoted a Vatican spokesman, Cardinal Luigi Dadaglio, as saying (the direct opposite of what Bishop Santer suggests) that "there is a growing interest in the Roman Catholic Church on the matter of indulgences."

Enchiridion Indulgentiarum must surely, in one edition or another, be among the documents necessarily considered by ARCIC II in their discussion of Salvation and the Church. I note three things about it:

- (1) It is not an unofficial manual of popular devotion, but an authoritative publication of the Vatican.
- (2) It is no mere restatement of medieval tradition. It refers, for example, to receiving "with pious devotion" a Papal or episcopal blessing by means of radio or television as linked with "a plenary indulgence."
- (3) The conception of salvation

and forgiveness conveyed by these pages is alien both to the faith of the Scriptures and to the teaching of the Church of England. There can surely be no informed and balanced exposition of a Roman Catholic understanding of sin and salvation which does not take account, for example, of indulgences for the dead (p.21), indulgences for the worship of the Sacrament (p.46), indulgences for the use of objects of piety—partial if the object has been blessed by a priest or deacon, plenary if by a bishop or the Pope (p.61). In all, some seventy specific acts are quoted as linked with partial or plenary indulgences.

The General Synod was invited recently to declare earlier ARCIC documents as "consonant in substance" with the faith of the Church of England. It cannot in fact be difficult to demonstrate consonance or convergence if evidence to the contrary is to be disregarded.

TIMOTHY THETFORD,

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SIR.—I think Margot Lawrence's idea of indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church (February 27) is somewhat wide of the mark. Is not an indulgence a remission of punishment set as a penance, rather than a remission of the "time" to be spent in Purgatory?

Indulgences are the administration by the Church of a fund of merit built up by the good deeds of the saints. In medieval times they were especially used for the relief of some of the more severe penances imposed on sinners.

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Church Times

13/3/87

Letters to the Editor

Indulgences: 'setting record straight'

SIR.—My attention has been drawn to the recent exchange of views in your pages concerning indulgences. As Margot Lawrence expressed several misconceptions about Roman Catholic teaching on this subject, I would be grateful if you would accord me a little space to set the record straight.

The normative document setting out the Church's understanding of indulgences is Paul VI's Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (January 1, 1967). The various editions of the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum* published since that date have all been practical applications of the theory contained in Pope Paul's document.

This document abolished the determination of indulgences by years and days. But even before 1967, when a period of time was often attached to an indulgence, the indulgence was not conceived as a "diminution of time in Purgatory" by the fixed number of days.

The canons of the Council of Nicaea show that at least as early as the fourth century the Church's penitential discipline assigned defined periods of penance to particular sins. It is to these periods of penance that the time-scale which came to be attached to indulgences referred.

The system of indulgences, as explained by Paul VI, rests on several premises:

1. The one source of the process of the reconciliation of the sinner with God is the infinite merit of Jesus Christ.

2. Sinners are not merely passive in the process of reconciliation, but

through the grace that comes from Jesus Christ "make amends" for offending God in two ways. First, they must undergo conversion. Secondly, "all the personal and social values . . . which sin has lessened and destroyed must be fully made good" (n. 3).

3. Accordingly, even after sins are forgiven, there may remain "vestiges of sin." These are the engrained harm which sin does to the psyche of the sinner and to the community. The removal of these vestiges is called "temporal punishment."

4. The doctrine of the communion of saints implies that believers help one another to get free of these vestiges of sin not only through prayer, but also through offering penitential works for one another.

5. To express the source of this communion in prayer and penance, writers traditionally have had recourse to the metaphor of the "treasury of the Church." This treasury consists fundamentally of the infinite merits of Christ; these are the source of the value of the prayers and good works of the members of the communion of saints, which are also said to form part of that treasury.

6. In granting an indulgence the Church is not forgiving sin, but freeing the individual from "the vestiges of sin by applying to him the merits of Christ and the saints" (n. 7).

7. "In granting an indulgence the Church uses its power as minister of Christ's Redemption" (n. 8). (One recalls ARCIC's explanation of the "stewardship" which the Church is called to exercise in the process of salvation: *Salvation and the Church*, para. 27.) By virtue of this power the

Church has "authority to dispense the faithful, provided they have right dispositions, the treasury satisfaction which Christ and saints won" (n. 8). (This authority is one aspect of the power of the Church which Christ entrusted to the Church. cf. Mt 18. 18; Jn 20. 23.)

Karl Rahner believed that with regard to indulgences practice developed faster than theory, and that an adequate theological understanding of them has not yet been achieved (*Sacramentum Mundi*, Eng. ed. 126-127). It is therefore not surprising that the Bishop of Thetford should find the system of indulgences scriptural and alien to the teaching of the Church of England.

So perhaps ARCIC will have to produce a statement on indulgences. But the Bishop of Kensington is surely right in implying that he has incorporated an adequate treatment of the subject within the statement *Salvation and the Church* which have unbalanced the document, distracted attention from its main argument.

Some critics of ARCIC I declare that its agreed statements were worthless until agreement was reached over justification. It is now said that the agreement over justification is worthless until agreement is reached over indulgences. What if agreement is reached over indulgences? (Cf. *rejection of indulgences the articuli stantis et cadentis ecclesiae?*)

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Church
Times
3/4/87

Indulgences

SIR.—Fr. Yarnold's letter last week comes as a welcome relief after the howlers in Margot Lawrence's article on indulgences.

As to the Church of England, it is worth taking a look at the Communion Service in the Book of Common Prayer. This comes close to the character of an indulgence. It declares that the restoration of canonical penance is "much to be wished," and what follows is described as "instead whereof."

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Indulgences

SIR.—Would you allow me to trespass upon your space to thank those correspondents who have written to me privately, and also to thank Fr. Yarnold for his detailed clarification of indulgences.

I am sorry if my "howlers" distressed Mr. K. D. Smith, but perhaps they served a useful function in revealing what an averagely-knowledgeable person knows or thinks about indulgences; and obviously such knowledge has its gaps and failings. I did explicitly state, at the start of my article, that I had hoped some more knowledgeable person than I would have taken the matter up.

However, all that said, my original query, "How minor is this matter of indulgences?" must still stand. One or two of the Roman Catholics who wrote to me privately stated that indulgences *are* a minor matter. But it must be noted that, of the Roman Catholics who have been willing to go on record, e.g. Fr. Yarnold and Bishop Murphy O'Connor as Co-Chairman of ARCIC II, none has been willing to state categorically that this is a minor issue. It is therefore much to be hoped, as Fr. Yarnold suggests, that ARCIC II will devote further attention to clarifying this issue.

My own view, as a mere private person, is of course irrelevant. However, for what it is worth, I would suggest that the whole of Fr. Yarnold's defence of indulgences is demolished by one single verse of Scripture. John viii, 36: "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

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the course of his splendid work, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. Sir Richard Southern recounts the following story.

In 1476 Pope Sixtus IV was paying a visit to some nuns at Foligno. He granted the convent a plenary indulgence for an approaching feast. Whether the nuns looked disappointed or not Sir Richard does not say, and the sources may not record; but Sixtus clearly felt that something more was needed: "You can have full immunity from *poena et culpa* every time you confess."

The cardinals in the Papal entourage were taken aback. "Every time?" they asked. "Every time," said the Pope. The cardinals threw themselves on their knees. "Then us, too," they cried. "You too" said the Pope, generously.

Richard does not seem unduly moved by the story, but it is I guess, to give any staunchly Protestant soul the vapours. I was amused by it by a remark in Margot Lawrence's article in this paper on February 27. She tells how her sister had noticed the delight on some monks' faces when the presiding prelate announced an indulgence at the end of a ceremony he had been conducting. "They looked," she wrote, quoting her sister, "like schoolboys

Indulgences: major or minor issue?

when the Prize Day speaker announces a holiday."

I am a little at a loss, I must confess, to know what to make of that incident. Such a proclamation of indulgence at the end of an episcopal ceremony was a conventional practice. I am not sure how much notice Roman Catholics took of it. My memory is that it was precious little.

That is not to say that they were wholly indifferent. There was—still is, for all I know—the *toties quoties*. It had the faithful popping in and out of churches like yo-yos. Each time you went in and said the requisite prayers, a soul could be released from Purgatory and sent speeding to eternal bliss.

Despite what Cardinal Luigi Dadaglio may have meant in the remarks cited by the Bishop of Thetford (*Church Times*, March 13), indulgences no longer loom large in the life of most RCs. Even the

Enchiridion he was launching is a much slimmer volume than its predecessors—little more than 100 pages, compared to the nearly 700 of earlier editions.

Known in the vulgar tongue of RCs as *The Raccolta*, this chubby book had to be kept near at hand to check up on the benefits of climbing the Scala Santa on one's knees (nine years a step, but more profitable during the octaves of All Saints and Christmas), or to discover how to make the most of the approach of a minor Vatican penitentiary (check that he is carrying his wand and get tapped).

I have myself never been a dedicated collector of indulgences. I have only known a handful of Roman Catholics who fell, if such is the word, into that category. But the origin of the practice lies too far back in the history of Christianity for it simply to be rejected out of hand.

It starts, if I read my history aright, with the practice, sanctioned by Cyprian among others, of those who had lapsed from the faith during persecution seeking immediate reconciliation through the intercession of the (still imprisoned) martyrs. By the middle of the eleventh century it had developed into a form of commutation of the harsh ecclesiastical penalties attached to the forgiveness of sin: the prelate substituted his prayers,

and the prayers of his community, for whatever benefit might be gained, say, by so many years of pilgrimage or of fasting.

"Plenary," or full, indulgences, frequently granted at the hour of death, signify that the deceased will go before God freed from all ecclesiastical impositions. The Church, in other words, is remitting the punishment which it has itself imposed.

That, at least, is how I understand it. Maybe the Church should not im-

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pose penance, but people have a sense, I believe, that, if the right moral order has been upset, there should be public evidence of order being restored. Penance, a form of good works, is precisely such evidence.

No doubt the commutation of penance into alms-giving looks too much like buying salvation. That was an abuse against which the Reformers rightly protested. But that a custom may be abused does not imply that it is in itself an aberration.

Dr. Edward Yarnold, in his

magisterial theological summary (*Church Times*, March 27), clearly feels a mite miffed that, having swallowed so many ARCICian camels, members of the Church of England are now straining at the gnat of indulgences.

For myself, I feel that, if there is to be ecumenical advance, rather more sympathy will need to be shown to cherished religious foibles. And we might refrain from apparently invidious comparisons between different ways of behaving.

I thought, for instance, that Margot Lawrence's contrast between Protestant and Roman Catholic varieties of good works was misplaced. She forgets that the effort which she says goes into Oxfam and so on, has gone in RC societies in the past, and long before Oxfam, into the work of religious orders and congregations.

However, since she ventured a contrast, so will I. It strikes me that what lies behind much of the different texture of our two variants of Christianity is a greater RC sense of the reality of the supernatural—a sense that the Church is co-terminous between this world and the next, a feeling that the lives of those who have gone before are still tied up with the life of the present generation.

I am reminded of St. Augustine, when he was pushed into a corner by Pelagius—or was it Julian of Eclanum? He could no longer see why there should be prayers for the dead. But he still thought that Christians ought to pray even if, for him, logic could provide no reason.

No doubt it is all rather anthropomorphic. But then religion is for our sakes, not for God's.

MICHAEL J. WALSH