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Catholic tradition revived

By Dan Horn
dhorn@enquirer.com

Mary Schatzman knew right away what she would do last week after learning that a church near her Green Township home was offering "indulgences" to interested Catholics.

While some parishioners seemed indifferent or confused by the offer, Schatzman didn't hesitate.

"I'm going to get one," she said.

Her eagerness reflects a renewed interest among Catholics in a tradition that had for decades all but vanished from their religious life.

In the past year, Catholics across the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and thousands more around the world have gone to confession, taken communion and said the prayers necessary to receive what is known as a "plenary indulgence."

For the indulgence, a blessing that helps Catholics avoid punishment in the afterlife, it is a remarkable comeback.

The practice suffered a precipitous fall from grace 500 years ago when the Catholic Church began selling them to rich people looking to buy their way into heaven.

Although the church stopped selling them long ago, the stain on the indulgence's reputation endured for centuries.

The church never abandoned the indulgence, however, and it now is part of a broader campaign by Pope Benedict XVI to revive some fading church traditions and to draw Catholics back to teachings that younger generations know little about.

"Most people, if they've heard anything about indulgences in the last 40 years, it's been negative," said the Rev. Earl Fernandes, dean of Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Cincinnati. "What we're trying to do is bring about a more mature understanding of the process."

Catholics like Schatzman welcome the change. Her Sunday school lessons made no mention of indulgences when she was growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so she had to educate herself when she started hearing about them a few years ago.

"You receive this great grace and you are freed from sin. I think it's beautiful," said Schatzman, who plans to get an indulgence at St. Teresa of Avila in Price Hill, one of six archdiocese churches offering them this year.

"It's always been there," she said. "It's just that we are rediscovering it."

Purifying the soul

Much of that rediscovery is being spurred by the pope's offer of indulgences as part of the celebration of the Year of St. Paul, the 2,000th anniversary of the saint's birth.

The Vatican gave bishops the authority to designate certain churches as pilgrimage sites for indulgences and to declare the acts necessary to get one.

Explanations of the process now appear on the archdiocese's Web site and in the weekly bulletins of most parishes.

Sometimes, though, the explanation raises as many questions as it answers for Catholics who, until recently, had never heard of an indulgence, let alone why they might want one.

A notice in St. Teresa's bulletin recently asked "What is a Plenary Indulgence?" The answer - "the remission of the temporal punishment due for sins" - sent several parishioners to Pastor Tom Bolte for more details.

"People had a lot of questions," Bolte said. "What do they do? How does it work? We explained it so people understand it's not magic or superstition."

The confusion is understandable, considering the indulgence's checkered past and the failure of so many Catholics to regularly go to confession, a crucial component of an indulgence. A recent Georgetown University study found that almost half of adult Catholics never participate in the sacrament of Reconciliation, or confession.

"We're struggling just to get people to do that, or to go to Mass," Fernandes said. "So to get people to understand something this complicated is difficult."

While most lay Catholics will never master all the rules and history - church scholars actually have a "Handbook of Indulgences" to keep track of it all - the value of indulgences is clear to anyone who closely follows and believes the faith's teachings on the afterlife.

The shorthand version of the rules goes like this: Confession removes the "eternal punishment" of sin that can condemn a soul for all eternity, but a "temporal punishment" remains. This punishment is meted out in Purgatory, where Catholics must wait to be purified before moving on to heaven.

That's where indulgences come into play. They can shorten or eliminate the purification process, clearing the path to heaven.

"We must be purified, either here on Earth or after death in Purgatory," Fernandes said. "What an indulgence seeks to do is remit the temporal punishment."

There are different kinds of indulgences: Plenary indulgences eliminate all of the punishment while partial indulgences remit some of it. Catholics can get an indulgence for themselves or for someone else, as long as they go to confession, Mass and Communion and perform the required combination of prayers and good deeds.

"You don't get a certificate," said archdiocese spokesman Dan Andriacco. "You don't get a 'Get Out of Purgatory Free' card. It's a self-administered process."

Embracing an old tradition

The church is downplaying the "pray now, avoid punishment later" aspect of the indulgence, focusing instead on the spiritual benefits of the acts required to get one.

The hope is that by going through the process, Catholics grow closer to God and their church.

"You have to say prayers. You have to do acts of charity. You have to receive Communion and Reconciliation," Fernandes said. "We want people to build up good spiritual practices so they can lead the life God has called them to live."

The archdiocese doesn't know how many people have taken up its offer so far, but Bolte and others say at least a few Catholics a day show up at the pilgrimage sites seeking details about indulgences.

Older Catholics, in particular, seem to have embraced the practice, which, like the Latin Mass and other traditions, was de-emphasized by the Second Vatican Council's reforms in the 1960s. But younger Catholics are asking questions, too.

"Our older parishioners pick it up and want to do it," said Tom Lynd, a deacon at Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Reading, one of the pilgrimage sites. "Our young ones say, 'What are they?'"

So far, the renewed interest in indulgences hasn't stirred the kind of controversy that church traditions sometimes do among liberal and conservative Catholics. That may be because indulgences aren't mandatory and Catholics can choose to ignore them if they wish.

Schatzman isn't complaining. She said the process of getting an indulgence last year deepened her faith and enriched her life.

"I think they're the greatest thing in the world," she said.

Additional Facts

Indulgences

What is an indulgence? The indulgence is a centuries-old practice that allows Catholics to perform acts in this life that will hasten their journey to heaven in the afterlife.

How do you get one? The details sometimes vary, but those offered this year require Catholics in good standing to attend Mass, receive Communion, go to confession and say a series of prayers. For details, Catholics can check their church bulletins or the archdiocese's Web site: www.catholiccincinnati.org.

Where can you get one? Six churches in the area are approved as pilgrimage sites. They are: Sts. Peter and Paul (Reading), St. Paul (Englewood), St. Paul (Yellow Springs), Sts. Peter and Paul (Newport), St. Paul (Sharpsburg) and St. Teresa of Avila (Price Hill).
