Indulgences: Practice v. Theology

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This paper was written for Dr. Shirley’s Medieval Church and Papacy course. It was presented at the 2009 Regional Phi Alpha Theta Conference at St. Leo University. It is presented here in abstract.

In 1095, Pope Urban II granted the first full – or plenary – indulgence to those who died fighting, or intending to fight, the Muslims in the First Crusade. Soon, indulgences were used to raise an army and revenue for the Catholic Church. The increased use of indulgences led to a dramatic increase in the power of the Medieval papacy. It was not until a century after the first use of indulgences, however, that the theology of indulgences began to be developed. The fact that the practice of granting indulgences preceded the development of indulgence theology suggests that indulgences were necessary for reasons unrelated to theology.

A plenary indulgence was the complete remission of penance for sin. This remission required no service or exchange from the penitent. All forms of commutations and indulgences required the penitent to have confessed and received absolution. These different types of indulgences evolved over time based on the needs of the church. They allowed the Church to compete with secular powers and also clearly defined the church hierarchy, headed by the pope.

Having developed the practice of granting indulgences, the church needed to develop a theology to support it. Because of the belief that the Church was infallible, it was necessary to create theology to support the Church’s practice. The theology was influenced by, and served to justify, the practice.

Indulgence grants increased the power of the Church by serving as a tool in the conflict between the Church and secular powers. Indulgences – especially plenary – also reinforced the hierarchy within the Church itself. Granting an indulgence was considered an act of jurisdiction and could not be performed by all clergy. Plenary indulgences could be granted only by the pope. However, abuses of indulgence grants – which had once dramatically increased the power of the Church – eventually sparked the Protestant reformation and the dissolution of the universal church.