

Chapter 18

The Church Fails to Reform Itself in Time

As historians look back on the two centuries preceding the Reformation they are practically unanimous in their judgment that the failure of the Church to reform itself was the major cause of the initiation and the “success” of the Reformation. Certainly many in those centuries wanted to reform the Church as was clear, for example, in the Councils of Constance and Basel. However, those who were willing to attempt reform seemed unable to bring it about and others, especially the popes, who could have had the power to initiate reform were unwilling to take up the task. Certainly, the Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism not only made clear the drastic need to reform the papacy, but the loss of papal prestige and power and the disorganization within the Church which they brought about made the needed reform of the Church in “head and members” most difficult.

By the mid-point of the 15th century, the Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism were matters of history, but the authority structure of the Church had been dealt a severe blow. The popes were back in Rome and Conciliarism had been defeated. However, Christendom was a thing of the past as a new nationalism was spreading throughout Europe and neither emperors nor popes would ever again be in control of the Christian lands of the West. Furthermore, the Church of the 15th century, by any measure, still cried out for major reform in “head and members”. As usual, the great need and an obvious place to start was with the Curia.

The Roman Curia of the 15th century

Those who longed for reform in the 15th century looked first to the Roman Curia. The main charge of corruption in the Curia related to the long standing system of simony. Simony referred primarily to the sale of Church offices and it was linked to the interplay of money and power. Those who wanted power in the Church - the offices of bishops, cardinals, abbots - had to pay for it and the payment went to the Curia.

Simony had gone on so long that it was accepted as part of the funding structure of the papacy and its bureaucrats, the Curia. The system went something like this. The office of bishop would often be put up for “sale” to the highest bidder. Interested parties would pay money not only for the prestige and power of the office, but also because they could accumulate money and property through taxation of individuals and institutions within their jurisdiction.

The next step in the process was the imposition of taxes by the Curia on those who had won the bidding for bishop. Next, in order to fund the purchase of the diocese and to pay the taxes levied by the Curia, bishops would not only levy their own taxes, but would often make a deal with the Curia to collect money through such practices as the promotion of a papal indulgence. The sale of indulgences would be a primary objection

of Martin Luther.

Another Curial practice related to simony was that of “pluralism” which involved selling more than one office to the same person. Thus one man, like Albrecht of Brandenburg, was not only archbishop of Mainz, but also held two other bishoprics and a large number of rich abbeys. This practice spawned the phenomenon of “absenteeism” where a bishop would not reside or even visit the diocese or place of the ecclesiastical office which he had purchased. With no proper authority present, the abuses in the local diocese went unchecked. This also applied to pastors. For example, the historian J.Lortz (*The Reformation in Germany*) reports that in 16th century Germany only some seven percent of the pastors maintained their residence.

Another feature of the curial practice of simony was that the nobility developed a near monopoly of the high offices in the Church. It took money to buy these offices and the nobility had most of the money. Thus, princes and dukes would place their sons in bishoprics to obtain for them positions of prestige, power and money, which they felt their royal blood entitled them. Again, Lortz gives the example of Geneva, where between 1450 and 1520 no fewer than five ducal princes were bishops, and two of them were only eight years old at the time of their nomination. Needless to say the interests of these “bishops” would not likely include Church reform or spiritual values.

The Lower Clergy and the Religious Orders of the 15th Century

With the offices of the papacy, the curia, the bishops and the cardinals in need of drastic reform, the same could be said of the lower clergy and lay religious orders. There was no formal seminary training. The advent of formal seminaries would not take place until after the Council of Trent in 1545. Thus, few clergy had adequate education, much less university experience. As mentioned above, many of the pastors were not even in residence. Local clergy were also into power and money at their level of administration. Their lives were also a scandal as celibacy and the rule of poverty were ignored by many priests and monks.

Since entrance into the clergy was a step up socially and financially, historians judge that clerics constituted as much as ten percent of the urban population. Many were not involved in the preaching of the gospel or works of charity, but were known as “Mass priests” whose main clerical function was to say daily Mass for a cash payment, or an offering, known as a stipend, for which they made a special remembrance of someone in the celebration of the Eucharist.

While some of the religious orders continued to thrive, like the Cistercians who held to strict observance of the Benedictine rule and valued education, many other religious orders had come on hard times. The ravages of the Hundred Years’ War (actually 116 years - 1337-1453) between France and England and the Black Death of the 14th century, which often took thirty percent of the urban populations, had damaged the orders numerically, spiritually and financially. Other civil strife in Germany and Italy and the disaster of the Great Western Schism had also taken their toll. The rule of St. Benedict, which had been once widely adopted, had been largely abandoned and the practice of

simony had left many monasteries without resident abbots, many of whom were secular nobility with no true knowledge of nor concern for the monastic life. Many monasteries had also abandoned their role as centers of secular learning. Communal life and communal prayer had disappeared as monks received permission to live outside their monasteries. This sad state of monastic life had become the target of satirical writers like Erasmus and well known loyal Catholics like Ignatius Loyola, who founded the Jesuits in 1491, and the deeply religious St. Thomas More who gave up his life in opposition to Henry VIII.

The Failure of Reform from the Top Down

Many of the intellectual and clerical leaders of the Church in the 15th century were well aware of the drastic need to reform the Church, as the Councils of Constance and Basel had illustrated. Thus, during the latter half of the 15th century there were many who called for another council. However, with conciliarism at least operationally defeated by the papacy, it seemed that if another council would be called and be successful it would have to obtain the support of the popes.

If it was generally agreed that reform was needed and that reform must have the support of the popes, why was that support not forthcoming? Perhaps it is too simple to say, but they were concerned with other things, other “worldly” things. The papacy was deeply involved in Italian politics - corrupt politics - and by 1450 the Renaissance was firmly in place in Italy, especially Venice, Milan, and Rome and the attentions of the popes were caught up in the Renaissance fever of secular humanism.

The Renaissance is a complex phenomenon. Historians speak of a Southern and a Northern Renaissance. Both were a return to the “sources”, however, in the South this meant a return to classical Greek and Roman culture, while in the North this meant a return to Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers.

The Southern Renaissance began in Italy and saw a return to the ancient sources of classical Greece and Rome - to their philosophy, literature, language, art, architecture, law, politics and humanistic spirit. The Renaissance recalls names like: Petrarch who found forgotten works of Cicero, translated Homer into Latin and left an unfinished life of Julius Caesar; Machiavelli who wrote of practical politics - what works in the real world - in his famous work, *The Prince*; the Lorenzo de' Medici family who dominated Florentine politics, promoted the arts and, as bankers, were among the richest families in Europe; Leonardo da Vinci who left us some 5,000 sketches on a wide variety of subjects; Raphael who was one of the most famous painters of the Italian Renaissance and later appointed by Pope Leo X as chief architect of the new St. Peter's; finally, there was Michelangelo whose study of the human body led to such masterpieces of sculpture as the *Pieta* and *David*. His most famous work, which changed the history of art forever, was the painting of the ceiling in Sistine Chapel, commissioned by Pope Julius II.

Mention of Pope Julius II leads us to a brief comment on the “Renaissance Popes”, their life styles, interests in worldly pursuits and politics that left Church reform on the

backburner:

1) Nicholas V (1447-55), the second pope after Martin V who had ended the Great Schism, was called the first Renaissance pope. He was a patron of literature, the arts and architecture. After the Turks had defeated the Eastern Empire with the sack of Constantinople, he tried to mount a crusade, but was unsuccessful.

2) Callistus III (1455-58) was a member of the famous and often notorious Borgia family who tried and successfully interfered with the politics of the Church. One of Pope Callistus' sons was the infamous Cesare Borgia who was appointed a cardinal, but later received a dispensation to marry. He then became a captain general of the Church and waged violent wars to recover lost papal territories.

Callistus tried to recapture Constantinople, but lacked political and military support. He was famous for his nepotism (appointments based on family relationships) as he appointed one son and two of his nephews cardinals, one of whom became pope Alexander VI one of the most immoral and corrupt popes in Church history.

3) Pius II (1458-64) was at first a conciliarist who supported the Council of Basel and its anti-pope, Felix V, but later he abandoned conciliarism and decisively strengthened papal power his bull *Execrabilis* which prohibited any appeal of papal decisions to a future council. His energies were focused on opposing the Turks invasions of the West and on promoting humanism in arts and letters and the lavish pageantry popularly associated with the papal courts of the Renaissance.

4) Paul II (1464-71) again tried to mount a crusade against the Turks, but failed. He had been elected as a reform pope, but soon gave up any reform efforts. He was famous for his love of luxury, sport and entertainment.

5) Sixtus IV (1471-84) was deeply involved in retaining political power over the Papal States and in transforming the city of Rome into a Renaissance city. He was infamous for his immoral life style and his nepotism. He appointed six of his relatives - nephews and cousins - as cardinals, one of whom died of his vices at the early age of twenty-eight. His own life of luxury and expensive civic and political projects left the Vatican deeply in debt and papal prestige in tatters.

6) Innocent VIII (1484-92) sunk the papacy into a new low of immorality and worldliness. To raise money he practiced simony and by his bull *Summis desiderantes*, gave powerful stimulus to the witch craze and infamous witch hunts. He died leaving Rome insolvent and the Papal States in anarchy.

7) Alexander VI (1492-1503) was a member of the Borgia family and, as noted above, was the nephew of Callistus III. He restored political order in Rome and promised to address the Turkish threat, however, his family interests trumped all other concerns.

He led an immoral life before and after being elected pope. As a cardinal he fathered

several illegitimate children. As pope he fathered four more illegitimate children by his mistress. As with his uncle he put the interests of his family as his highest priority. Nepotism and unbridled sensuality were the hallmarks of his papacy. Like his predecessors, he filled the college of cardinals with relatives and friends.

Not only did Alexander ignore the need for Church reform, he excommunicated the great Dominican religious reformer and preacher of penitence, Savonarola. Savonarola preached constantly against the abuses and failings of the Church. He wrote a poem entitled: *On the Decline of the Church*. He attacked the Curia and Pope Alexander. Savonarola was arrested, imprisoned, and tortured into making a false confession. At the authorization of the Pope, he was hanged in Florence, after which his body was burned.

8) Julius II (1503-13) was a beneficiary of the nepotism of his uncle Sixtus IV and through political skill, exaggerated promises and bribery ascended the papal throne. He was the primary example of a “Renaissance Pope” as he became forever famous for his support of the arts and the artists Raphael and Michelangelo.

He also commissioned the plans for a new St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and laid the cornerstone in 1506. However, he decided to finance the building through the “sale” of indulgences, which Martin Luther would challenge some 12 years later. He was a powerful figure in politics and a highly successful military general. Under his military leadership, the Papal States were freed from foreign control and became a leading power in European politics.

Julius also called the Fifth Lateran Council in 1512 which intended to initiate some Church reform. However, he died while the Council was still in session and ultimately this Lateran Council failed to initiate the reforms needed to prevent the Reformation, which began with Luther in 1518.

This rather dismal sketch of the “Renaissance Popes” highlights the desperate need for reform and the refusal and/or the inability of the popes to initiate it. These popes and their cardinals were too interested in the worldly pursuit of pleasure and power. Nepotism, personal immorality and political intrigue were the marks of their reigns, rather than a deep spiritual life and a dedication to Church reform. Unfortunately, they contributed greatly to the advent of the monumental upheaval in Christianity, the Reformation.

Failure of Reform and Conciliarism

While the theory of conciliarism that had permeated the Council of Constance and Basel had been operationally defeated by the papacy, its intellectual legacy still lingered on. Thus, even if the Renaissance popes had considered answering the call to summon a council for the purpose of reform, the confusion over the authority of the pope versus the authority of the councils was, at least theoretically, still an issue and a cause of concern for the popes.

The assertions of Eugenius IV and the bull of Pius II (see above) which denounced conciliarism were not well received anywhere but in Rome. They met with strong opposition in France and Germany. Up to the Reformation, secular rulers and some bodies of bishops still held to the conciliar theory.

Given this situation, popes perceived the calling of a council as providing another opportunity for the council fathers to attack the supreme authority claimed by the papacy as they had at Constance and Basel. Thus even if a pope was concerned about reform, he would tend to choose other methods than a General Council, e.g., papal bulls, decrees and negotiations with secular rulers through papal legates.

This had been the method chosen by Pius II in his bull, *Pastor Aeternus*, which addressed some limitations of papal power, but this bull was never issued. The notorious Alexander VI had also prepared a papal bull that had comprehensively addressed needed reforms, e.g., the political ambitions of cardinals and the problem of absenteeism, it too was never issued.

However, in 1512, on the eve of the Reformation, the Fifth General Council of the Lateran was called by Julius II to address issues of reform. This call for a Council was in reaction to the efforts of King Louis XII of France to attack Julius. Julius had alienated Louis and, in response, the King, with the support of some cardinals, decided to call a General Council in Pisa in 1511. He claimed that the reign of Julius II had placed the Church in a state of emergency as outlined in the Council of Constance and thus a Council could be called without the pope's permission. It is a long story, but the Council of Pisa failed.

The Fifth General Council of the Lateran did treat a number of reform issues, especially regarding simony in the election of the pope. It also made a number of other reform decrees concerning clergy education, restrictions on reading certain "dangerous" books, political activities of popes and bureaucratic centralization. In the end, however, the Council actually did not effect any of the significant reforms of Church life and organization that were so desperately needed. It ended in 1517, just months before Martin Luther began his "reforming" career.

Attempts at Church Reform from the Bottom Up

Reform from the bottom up was initiated by a number of movements in the religious orders, the secular clergy, the laity, by secular rulers and those in intellectual circles.

Religious Orders - One religious order, the Carthusians, were little affected by the upheavals of the Church and society in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Founded in the 11th century, they were one of the strictest and most contemplative orders in the entire Church. They were removed from the world and from the beginning their rule included silence, personal isolation, and many hours of personal prayer. They only came together in the morning for Mass and in the evening for Vespers. Communal meals were only allowed on feast days.

Thus, their characteristic removal from society provided few opportunities to reform society in general. Some religious orders - Franciscans, Benedictines, Dominicans - attempted reform, but none were completely successful, in part due to the failure of Church leaders to support them..

Secular clergy - Local bishops and priests (the secular clergy) in their efforts to preach the Gospel initiated many reforms, but due to their localization it was difficult to diffuse their efforts, therefore, their reforms remained unorganized and specific to their locality. The historian Hubert Jedin reports many such reforms in 15th century Germany and judges that the success of these reforms made the laity more “reform conscious” and, ironically, paved the way for the success of Luther’s efforts in Germany.

The laity - Lay reform movements were also evident prior to the Reformation in such organizations as The Oratory of Divine Love. There were also various devotions used by the laity to deepen their inner spiritual life. For example, books like the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis provided meditation materials for many lay people.

The Rosary had been in a process of development since the 9th century and early in the 15th century (1409) a Carthusian monk, Dominic the Prussian, linked 50 biblical “thoughts” about Jesus and Mary to each bead of a Rosary of 50 Hail Marys. Eventually, these fifty thoughts and Hail Marys were divided into groups of ten, with an Our Father in between.

Later, in 1470, a Dominican, Alan of Rupe, founded the first Rosary Confraternity. He promoted the 150 Hail Marys with a “special thought” for each bead. He called this the New Rosary. Later it was referred to as the “Medieval Rosary”. Still later, the Medieval Rosary was replaced with the short Rosary of 5 decades (ten beads) with no “special thoughts” for each bead. The “special thoughts” - biblical references or mysteries - were now recited on the Our Fathers only, as is the general custom today.

Secular rulers - Certain secular rulers also saw the need for reform. It was needed not only for the health of the Church, but also for political stability. In 1485, German dukes were permitted to encourage monastic reform and the French kings who held great power over the Church in their territories were able to effect some need reforms. The Kings of Spain had the greatest success in working with their monasteries and with reform minded bishops like Ximenes of Toledo. He established the University of Alcalá which functioned as a seminary for bishops who were introduced to humanistic studies as they related to older theological traditions. The result was reform without a revolt against tradition, rather older traditions were seen in a new light of humanistic scholarship.

The intellectuals - These scholars were products of the Renaissance and promoted types of humanism that criticized long-standing Scholastic methods and assumptions in philosophy and theology. They felt that the Scholastic tradition was wedded to the corrupt institutional Church and unable to effect reform. They promoted a critical and historical approach to education, urging the study of ancient languages, cultures and ancient classical writings found in the arts and letters curricula of the universities.

This humanistic movement began in the early Southern Renaissance of the 14th century with Petrarch (see above) who took a critical and historical view of the customs and abuses in the Church and encouraged the reading of the ancient Greeks and Romans. He remained deeply religious, and once said: "Theology is a poem that has God for its subject". His love of reading is illustrated in his attitude toward books:

Books are welcome, assiduous companions, always ready to appear in public or to go back in their box at your command, always disposed to speak or to be silent, to stay at home or to make a visit to the woods, to travel or to abide in the country; to gossip, joke, encourage you, comfort you, advise you, reprove you, and take care of you; to teach you the world's secrets, the records of great deeds, the rules of life and the scorn of death, moderation in good fortune, fortitude in ill, calmness and constancy in behavior. These are learned, happy, useful, and ready spoken companions who will never bring you tedium, expense, lamentations, jealous murmurs or deceptions.

As mentioned earlier, the Northern Renaissance turned more to the Scriptures and the Church Fathers than to the "classics" of Greece and Rome. In the North we can now speak of true Christian Humanism, which held that reformation in the Church could be best brought about by personal example and especially by education using sacred as well as secular sources. While very critical of corruption and abuses in the Church, they remained in the Church. For them, reformation was an internal matter and not a call for division within the Church or a rejection of the pope. Three major scholars in this tradition stand out: John Colet, Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus.

John Colet (1466-1519) lectured at Oxford on the Epistles of St. Paul and as he applied to them the textual, critical and philosophical tools of the humanists, he cultivated a deep dislike for Scholasticism. He was also critical of the abuses and corruption of the Church and his teaching and writings were to have a significant impact on the English reformers under Henry VIII.

Thomas More (1478-1535) is best known for his confrontation with Henry VIII, but his Christian humanism influenced many of the great thinkers of his day. He defended the critical study of Scriptures, e.g., a return to the Hebrew text, against the Scholasticism of his day. His most famous book was *Utopia* (meaning "nowhere") which was a semi-satirical account of an imaginary place run according to natural law and simple logic. In it he critiqued many of the failings of his contemporary culture.

More defended Henry VIII's treatise on the sacraments which had been attacked by Martin Luther and prepared various treatises against Luther that were issued in the King's name. More broke with Henry on the matter of his divorce and was executed.

Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536) has been called the "Prince of Humanists". He was ordained an Augustinian priest in 1492. Later, he studied under John Colet and was a friend of Thomas More. He was dedicated to a study of scripture and the Church Fathers.

He even published a new Greek edition of the New Testament, for which he was criticized by Church authorities. His concern for reform was evident in his three major works: *The Enchiridion* (lit. handbook), *Praise of Folly* and *Julius Excluded*.

In the *Enchiridion* he instructed those in power how to reconcile Christian ethics with the exercise of their offices. The *Praise of Folly* was a work of cutting satire in which Lady Folly, unwittingly exposes many the abuses of the Church. In *Julius Excluded* the infamous Pope Julius II (see above) arrives at the Pearly Gates where St. Peter does not recognize him and will not let him enter.

Later in his career, Erasmus will argue with Luther's position on the freedom of the will. Erasmus held to the freedom of the will and to the Christian humanists' position that human beings could improve themselves through education and good works.

Although many of his works were condemned by the Church and some of his critiques of the Church were used by Protestant reformers, he remained a faithful Catholic and refused to join in the type of reformation initiated by the Protestant reformers in Europe and England. His work also influenced the successful reforms introduced - too late - by the Council of Trent in 1545.

In the final analysis, it was not the critiques of the Christian humanists that caused the Reformation, but the abuses spawned by the Avignon Papacy, the Great Schism and the reign of the Renaissance popes. Most importantly it was the failure of the institutional Church to respond to the many calls for reform in "head and members" that ultimately divided Christianity in the 16th century and still today.

Some Definitions

Simony

Simony refers to the buying and selling of church offices - the office of bishop, abbot, cardinal. The name "simony" derives from a man named Simon (later as Simon Magus -- magician in Latin) who was condemned for trying to buy spiritual gifts in Acts 8:9-24:

But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is that power of God which is called Great."

And they gave heed to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, that they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they revived the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying of on the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying "Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

Simony was a wide spread abuse throughout the Middle Ages up to the Reformation. Popes, kings and emperors were involved in the buying and selling of Church offices. Popes often sold Church offices to the highest bidders as a revenue source to support the papacy. Kings and emperors bought offices for relatives and friends and, when they could, sold them as a source of control and revenue.

Curia

The designation "curia" originally referred to a division of the Roman tribes or patricians (fathers) in the Roman Senate. It was also used to designate the Roman senate house or meeting place or simply the assembly or governing body.

The Roman Church adopted many of the customs of the Roman Empire and thus came to use the name curia to designate the governing bureaucracy that assists the Pope in governing the universal Church. These assistants were needed quite early in Church, however, the first formal organization of the curia was not made until 1588.

The modern curia is divided into seven sections. The first and most important is the Secretariat of State which is the pope's liaison with the rest of the Curia and handles all international diplomatic relations.

The other six sections include:

1) nine **Congregations** (ex. Doctrine and Faith, Oriental Churches, Divine Worship.)

- 2) three **Tribunals** (ex., the Rota, for marriages)
- 3) twelve **Pontifical Councils** (ex., the Laity, Christian Unity, Justice and Peace)
- 4) seven **Offices** (ex., Statistics, Pontifical Ceremonies)
- 5) ten **Commissions** (ex., Theological, Biblical)
- 6) twenty-one **Institutions** (ex., Vatican Radio, Library, Archives)

Historically the Curia has always been a target for reform, but as with most bureaucracies this has proven to be a difficult task. Bureaucracies tend to be conservative and interested in exercising as much control as possible. The current trend towards centralization of power in Rome has many people concerned.

Indulgences

The subject of indulgences can be viewed from two perspectives - the history of indulgences and the theology of indulgences.

History - Indulgences probably have their roots in the early forms of the Sacrament of Penance. During apostolic times (30-70 AD) Baptism was seen as the rite that wiped out sin and reconciled one with God and the Christian community. After Baptism, Christians were to live a new life in Christ and serious sin was to have no part in their lives.

Problems arose when persecutions started and some Christians denied their faith to escape death. After the persecutions the question arose whether or not these Christians could be readmitted into the Christian community. Some said yes, others no. The yeses won the day. The Church decided that those who had committed serious sin after Baptism, - murder, apostasy, adultery or blasphemy - could be readmitted to the community after publically confessing their sin to the bishop and undergoing a severe penitential rite that could last for years. This public penance had to be completed before the penitent could be fully reconciled with the Church and again receive the Eucharist. However, this early Sacrament of Penance could only be received once in a lifetime. These severe public penances could be cut short by the “indulgence” of the bishop. If a person had been given a penance of begging alms in public for three years, the bishop could commute the penance by a year or so, through his “indulgence”.

The practice of a “once in a lifetime” Sacrament of Penance was the rule up until the 6th century when private confession to a priest was introduced by Irish missionaries. Penances were still given, but they were not severe and reconciliation with the Church took place immediately and the penance could be privately completed at a later time.

Later the notion arose that while sins were immediately forgiven in the Sacrament of

Penance, there was some “temporal punishment” due to sin that had been “satisfied” by the early practice of severe public penance, but now would be treated in another way. Between the 6th and the 10th century certain liturgical rites were performed where the community would pray for the reconciled sinners. While guilt was taken away, some “punishment for sin” -- seen as separation from God -- remained and the intercession of the Church community was seen as beneficial in interceding with God to overcome the punishment due to sin and promoting the process of recovery of spiritual health and of sanctification.

The first actual indulgences appeared first in France during the 11th century. They were seen as a juridical act by the bishop to assure the penitent of the effective intercession of the Church which relieved the penitent of any severe penance imposed by the confessor and also assured that the “punishment due to sin” would be removed in the same manner as would have resulted from the penitent doing penance on his own behalf. Later, some substitute work of penance was required of the penitent to obtain the indulgence from a harsher penance and for the remission of temporal punishment due to sin.

Theology - A theology of the practice of granting indulgences did not begin until the 12th century. At first theologians challenged the whole notion of indulgence. Later they justified it by positing a Treasury of the Church which held the infinite merits of Christ’s redemptive work and these merits could be doled out by the Church to remit temporal punishment due to sin.

Today theologians take a somewhat different view of “temporal punishment due to sin”. It is now seen as a relational issue. When we sin we effect our relationship with God, God accepts us even in our sin, but like the Prodigal Son when we sin we remove ourselves from the open embrace of God. When we repent of our sin, we are aware of our acceptance by God, but it takes time for us to heal our own estrangement from God. Thus, while we are always accepted by God or “forgiven”, it takes time for us to overcome our sinful tendencies and return to God.

Of course, the “sale” of indulgences in the Middle Ages was contrary to any sane theological construct. One cannot sell salvation.