

INDULGING WITH INDULGENCES

The *New York Times* took the occasion of the opening of the Holy Door at St. Paul Outside the Walls Basilica in Rome to lecture the Catholic Church on its teaching concerning indulgences. The story, by Alessandra Stanley, appeared in the January 19, 2000 issue under the headline, "The Pope Opens a Door, but Not All Christians Feel Welcome."

"Indulgences, the Roman Catholic practice of remitting punishment for sins in exchange for prayer, repentance and, in the Middle Ages, even money, helped set off the Protestant Reformation," was the lead for the *New York Times* story on the opening of the Holy Door. According to the Times, "some Protestant leaders, including Baptists, Presbyterians and Calvinists, chose to skip an event they viewed as an affront."

The *Times* then reported that "after the Second Vatican Council reforms, progressive Catholics sought to play down indulgences, viewing them as a hindrance to ecumenical dialogue." The Times cited no sources for these "progressive Catholics," which generally means the statement resulted from listening to the shared wisdom of reporters over a few glasses of wine.

The *Times* story provides a good mix of classic anti-Catholicism with new media trends in Catholic coverage. First, the titillating reference to indulgences in exchange for money feeds old-fashioned nativist attitudes about Catholics. The secular media rarely takes the time to understand and accurately present the Catholic teachings they question, usually relying on age-old anti-Catholic prejudices to define it for the audience. (As indulgences could be gained through acts of charity, giving was long held as one means. Overly aggressive solicitation of almsgiving for indulgences spurred on Luther's protest. Shortly thereafter the Church would forbid indulgences for financial donations.) Resurrecting a

practice abandoned 450 years ago was done purely for its anti-Catholic appeal.

Conjuring up unnamed “progressive Catholics” to downplay Church teaching is a newer twist in media coverage of the Catholic Church. The media sets itself as judge and jury in alleged debates within the Church, and usually comes down endorsing internal dissent to support its own secular outlook in supposedly objective news stories. The practice is not only anti-Catholic, but also rotten journalism.