

According to canon law, a pardoner or *quaestor* of alms did not have the right either to forgive sin or to sell indulgences to any purchaser. Indulgences remitting punishment for sin could be legitimately granted only to the contrite persons who confessed their sins to their own parish priests. If this condition was met, the purchasers of indulgences could draw on the treasury of grace and thus be relieved of a stated period of purgatorial punishment.

Many pardoners were commissioned directly from Rome, and offered indulgences to all those subjects who contributed to the support of Christendom. Some pardoners were sent from the Church-supported hospitals that existed all over the continent. Such hospitals, often the repositories of relics efficacious in curing the sick, commissioned pardoners to take these relics on tour and to offer indulgences to anyone who was moved by belief in the relics to donate money toward the upkeep of the hospital.⁵

The practice of offering indulgences inevitably grew corrupt. Selling indulgences became a financial expedient resorted to whenever the Church required money for some special object,⁴ such as the construction of the Vatican palace in the sixteenth century. The pardoners engaged to distribute indulgences were prone to exaggerate the efficacy of their indulgences—that is, they sometimes pretended to have the authority to grant indulgences that would release the buyers from hell as well as from purgatory. They might further claim that those who purchased indulgences needed neither to repent nor to amend their lives in order to be pardoned. In short, they created a general belief that their pardons sufficed to free the sinner from all the consequences of his sins.

As early as 1212 the Church acknowledged the corrupt practices of many pardoners, and the Council of Paris attempted to impose controls on them.⁶ Bull after bull recommended that pardoners be restricted to the office for which they were licensed; that they not be allowed to preach but only to read their letters; that every precaution be taken to ensure that only fully licensed pardoners could solicit alms.⁷ At the same time, popular literature satirized pardoners. When the preaching friar in *Piers the Plowman* wishes to hold up the Augustinians to scorn, his worst accusation is that they lived by the "pur pardoners craft."⁸ Restricted by the Church and ridiculed by the poets, pardoners nevertheless flourished even after the Council of Trent in 1562 forbade their employment completely;⁹ it was difficult to enforce the Council's ruling when pardoners could collaborate with archdeacons¹⁰ and share their profits with parish priests.¹¹ Even if local clergymen and officials were honest, the hospital-commissioned pardoners enjoyed almost complete immunity from punishment, because complaints against them had to be registered with the Pope himself.¹²