

INDULGENCES: HOW DO THEY BENEFIT THE LIVING AND THE DECEASED?

WHAT ARE INDULGENCES?

- "Indulgences are the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. The faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains the indulgence under prescribed conditions for either himself or the departed. Indulgences are granted through the ministry of the Church which, as the dispenser of the grace of redemption, distributes the treasury of the merits of Christ and the Saints" (*Compendium of the Catechism*, n. 312).
- "The Gift of the Indulgence shows forth the fullness of God's mercy which is expressed primarily in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. This ancient practice, which has sometimes not been lacking in misinterpretation down through the centuries, should continue to be understood and adhered to. Reconciliation with God, which is a gift of God's mercy, involves a process in which man is actively involved in terms of his own personal responsibility. The Church takes a role therein as part of its sacramental mission. The path of reconciliation is centred on the sacrament of Penance but even when the sin is forgiven through this sacrament, man continues to be left with certain "traces" which impede his total openness to grace. For this reason he needs to be purified and totally renewed

by the grace of Christ in virtue of a gift of the Indulgence which is of enormous assistance to him" (APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY, *The Gift of the Indulgence*).

- The practice of Indulgences is to be understood as an expression and realisation of God's mercy that comes to the assistance of his sons and daughters by cancelling the penalties due to their sins, but also and more especially to urge them on with greater fervour towards a greater expression of charity.

IN WHAT WAY ARE INDULGENCES LINKED TO THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION?

Indulgences are intimately linked to the sacrament of Confession since they effect the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin whose guilt has already been forgiven before God.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF INDULGENCES?

- An Indulgence:
 - is the remission of the temporal punishment for sins
 - is obtained through the action of the Church
 - may be:
 - partial
 - plenary
 - can always be applied either to oneself or to the souls of the deceased.

- Let us examine each of these elements in greater detail.

1 - AN INDULGENCE REMITS THE PENALTY:

WHAT ARE THESE PUNISHMENTS?

- Sin, whether mortal or venial, even when it is forgiven in terms of "guilt" in the sacrament of Penance, leaves behind certain "residues", "traces", "areas of shadow" in the person who has committed the sin.
- Such "residues", "traces", "areas of shadow", are expressed in:
 - bad habits
 - affections and disordered attachments to created things
 - a tendency towards venial sin (egoism, pride, laziness...)
 - urges, both weak and strong, to relapse into sin
 - the weakness of the will to resist the tendency to sin
 - a kind of interior apathy regarding prayer, love of God and the works of charity.
- These "residues" of sin merit a "temporal punishment" that the Christian must make amends for either here in this life or in purgatory in order to be totally purified and, in this way, be admitted to the vision of God in paradise.
- Punishment is, therefore, the effect of sin which brings with it both the guilt (*remitted by the sacrament of Confession*) as well as the penalty.
- "It is a divinely revealed truth that sins bring punishments inflicted by God's sanctity and justice. These must be expiated either on this earth through the sorrows, miseries and calamities of this

life and above all through death, or else in the life beyond through fire and torments or "purifying" punishments" (PAUL VI, *Indulgentiarum doctrina, Whereby the revision of sacred indulgences is promulgated*, n. 2).

WHAT KINDS OF PUNISHMENT ARE WE SPEAKING ABOUT?

There can be two types:

- 1) eternal
 - this involves everlasting separation from God
 - this is the consequence of mortal sin
 - this sin, as well as the guilt attaching to it, can be remitted in the sacrament of Confession
- 2) temporal (the effect of venial sin).

WHAT DOES THE PUNISHMENT INDICATE?

The fact that there is a punishment indicates:

- the existence of sin:
 - its gravity
 - the consequences / harm that sin causes to us, other persons, and to the world of creation;
- the necessity to repair this harm;
- the punishment that we deserve: castigation/punishment are to be understood as medicinal or salutary. In this way we are helped to:
 - have an awareness of sin,
 - seek a remedy for the consequences of sin,
 - free ourselves from sin;
- the infinite mercy of God, which justly and rightly condemns sin, is at the same time also boundless, merciful and patient towards the sinner whose sins are forgiven. God condones the punishment that he has meted out but at the same time gives mankind the gift of his grace;
- that there is a new life beyond death;

- the need to be completely purified before gaining admittance to paradise;
- purgatory for the expiation of those remaining punishments;
- our unity and the reciprocal sharing with those who have died. An Indulgence sought by the living on behalf of those who are deceased helps to purify those who are in Purgatory awaiting admission into Paradise.

2 - AN INDULGENCE IS OBTAINED THROUGH THE CHURCH:

- Christ wants to associate the Church with himself for the growth and spread of his spiritual riches which he gained by the Sacrifice of his Death and Resurrection.
- This is manifested and actuated in the following way:
 - first of all by the unity, solidarity and interdependence of the Church on: the communion of saints (cfr. CCC 1475), the exchange of spiritual graces, the bond of communion among Christians in:
 - conversion,
 - reparation,
 - public and private condemnation of sin,
 - beseeching God to mitigate and/or cancel punishments;
 - the ministerial role of the Church: the Church 'ministers' like a mother who, according to the will of Christ, the Head of the Church, distributes the benefits that Christ himself has won for the spiritual welfare of its members and for the whole of humanity.

3 - AN INDULGENCE CAN BE PLENARY OR PARTIAL:

- The Indulgence is partial or plenary in as much as it frees a person in part or enti-

rely from the temporal punishment attaching to sins.

- The Indulgences, whether partial or plenary, can always be offered up and applied to those who are deceased.
- A partial Indulgence can be gained several times a day, unless there is an explicit indication to the contrary. The plenary Indulgence can only, however, be gained once a day.
- The Plenary Indulgence can be daily, annual or occasional.

HOW DO I GAIN A PLENARY INDULGENCE:

A) DAILY?

It can be gained in various ways. By:

- adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament for at least half an hour;
- prayerful reading of the Sacred Scriptures for at least half an hour;
- prayerful recitation and completion of the Way of the Cross (Stations of the Cross);
- recitation of the Holy Rosary (also a third party) in church or as a family;
- by visiting a cemetery: a person who visits a cemetery from 1st to 8th November and prays there with devotion, even if the prayers are said silently for the deceased, will gain the Indulgence which is applied only to the deceased.

B) ANNUAL OR OCCASIONAL?

The Church offers various ways by which a plenary Indulgence may be gained throughout the year:

- devout reception, including by way of radio, of the Holy Father's blessing to the world (*Urbi et Orbi* - to the City and to the World);

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- by taking part in a retreat or spiritual exercises for at least three days;
- a devout visit to a parish church on the occasion of its titular feast or on 2nd August on which the "Porziuncola" Indulgence is offered (Pardon of Assisi);
- renewal of baptismal promises on the Vigil of Easter and on the anniversary of one's own baptism;
- on other particular circumstances indicated by the Holy See.

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS ATTACHING TO THE GAINING OF A PLENARY INDULGENCE?

- The believer must be disposed to receive the plenary Indulgence by fulfilling the following interior and exterior conditions:
 - 1) One must undertake to foster within oneself a disposition of affective and effective detachment from all sin.
 - 2) To celebrate worthily the Sacrament of Penance (either in the preceding or subsequent 15 to 20 days) in order to open one's heart to God's mercy. When a person makes a sacramental confession further plenary Indulgences may be gained.
 - 3) To participate with devotion in the Holy Mass (either in the preceding or subsequent days).
- When the plenary Indulgence requires there to be a visit to a Church, the Profession of Faith, the Our Father and a prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father must be recited there.

HOW DO I GAIN A PARTIAL INDULGENCE?

There are many ways of gaining a "partial" Indulgence. These are ordinarily linked to the recitation of a specific prayer or a spontaneous petition, and/or by completing an act of charity and penance, for example: pilgrimages, prayers, works of charity for the poor, public witnessing to the faith, the renunciation of something, voluntary asceticism, abstaining from unnecessary and luxurious goods (smoking, alcohol, etc.), fasting, abstaining from meat (or another food indicated by the Bishop) making an appropriate donation of money to the poor, putting up with one's sufferings, praying and performing works of mercy for the deceased ... All of these help us to express our conversion of heart.

*Primicerio
of the Basilica of Saints Ambrose and Charles
in Rome*

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NB: For further information about the topics discussed, please see the following Pontifical documents:

- PAUL VI, *Whereby the revision of sacred indulgences is promulgated*, 1st January 1967;
- APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY:
 - *Enchiridium Indulgentiarum*, 4th Edition (16 July 1999);
 - *The Gift of the Indulgence*, 29 January 2000;
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church (ccc)*, nn. 1471-1479; *Compendium of the Catechism (ccc)*, 312.

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