

INDULGENCES

If a friend asked you about Indulgences, what would you say? Would you look away sheepishly, and mutter something about “we don’t do that anymore”? Do you see Indulgences as a sort of “magic eraser” for the soul, a way to earn forgiveness of sins, or an ecclesial “Get-out-of-jail-free” card worth so many days off of Purgatory? It is clear that Indulgences are not well understood and, as a result, we tend to stay away from these helps on our journey of conversion.

Definition of an Indulgence

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1471)

“An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.”

From the *US Catholic Catechism for Adults* (p. 244)

“Every sin has consequences. It disrupts our communion with God and the Church, weakens our ability to resist temptation, and hurts others. The necessity of healing these consequences, once the sin itself has been forgiven, is called temporal punishment. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other works of charity can take away entirely or diminish this temporal punishment. Because of the fullness of redemption obtained for us by Christ, the Church attaches to certain prayers and actions an *indulgence* or pardon, that is, the full or partial remission of temporal punishment due to sin. Christ, acting through the Church, brings about the healing of the consequences of sin when an individual uses such a prayer or engages in such an action.”

The official definition of an Indulgence is found in the sidebar. It is a pretty dense definition that we need to take apart. Let’s begin with the word itself: indulgence. At its root, it means to show kindness or tenderness, leniency or mercy. Indulgences are about grace, God’s gift to us—not something we “earn.”

Next: remission. To “remit” is to lessen or reduce. What is remitted? The “temporal punishment” due to sins that have *already been forgiven*. Indulgences do *not* forgive sins (address the “guilt” due to sins) but are about healing the consequences or effects of that sin. Some Indulgences remit *all* of the effect (a “plenary” indulgence) and some remit only part (a “partial” indulgence).

Some may remember Indulgences referred to in terms of “days.” Unfortunately, such a way of talking about Indulgences resulted in significant misunderstandings, as if

the numbers referred to “time off of Purgatory.” That was never the case. The “days” referred to in older texts are a measure of the equivalent days of penance. That kind of moral mathematics has no role in Indulgences today.

In reforming the practice of Indulgences in the wake of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI wanted to make clear that the ultimate purpose of Indulgences is conversion, about helping us to become more Christ-like by freeing us from the effects of sin (especially our attachment to it). Paragraph 4 of the Introduction to the *Manual of Indulgences* states: “The Apostolic Penitentiary [the Vatican office that oversees Indulgences] therefore, rather than stress the repetition of formulas and acts, has been concerned to put greater emphasis on the Christian way of life and to focus attention on cultivating a spirit of prayer and penance and on the exercise of the theological virtues [faith, hope, love].”

Who may be helped by an Indulgence? As the definition states, only a baptized Christian who is properly disposed (not excommunicated, in a state of grace) may gain an Indulgence. The benefits of the Indulgence may be applied to the person him or herself, or to the dead.

From where do Indulgences come? How do they “work”? While ministered by the Church, the efficacy of Indulgences is based solely in what Christ has done—directly or in the lives of the saints. Traditionally, we have referred to the “treasury” of “merits” (“satisfactions”) of Christ and the saints that the Church dispenses. If we take this metaphor too literally, we end up thinking of some kind of divine bank account that Christ and the saints put deposits into and then the Church makes withdrawals on our behalf. On the one hand, this way of talking about indulgences reminds us that we do not earn anything; this is a gift in which we cooperate. On the other, we need to be careful not to turn the journey of conversion into a financial deal, and grace into a “thing.”

Perhaps another way to think about it is this: First, we must always keep in mind that Christ is the ultimate agent of reconciliation; what the Church does is carry on Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. Second, in the case of Indulgences, what the Church does is intercede for the penitent, in a sense asking that conversion (the fruit of penance) would come more easily and quickly. Third, Indulgences are efficacious (they “work”) only because Christ has promised to answer such a prayer. Fourth, the answer comes in the form of grace, help in the journey of conversion. The effects of such grace are conditioned by the openness/contrition of the penitent (conditions of the indulgence). Finally, because of our communion in Christ, the prayers of the saints also aid us in our journey of conversion.

There are two kinds of indulgences: partial and plenary. The Church’s rules concerning indulgences are spelled out in the *Manual of Indulgences* (4th edition, 1999; English edition, 2006). The citations below (“Norms”) refer to this document. What we will do here is go over some of the basics, but you should see that document for important details. The conditions for obtaining each type of indulgence are listed in the sidebar below.

In order to gain any indulgence, the recipient must be baptized, not excommunicated, have the intention of gaining the indulgence, and be in a state of grace at least by the time the indulgenced works are completed (Norm #17). The acts or prescribed works should not be seen as “magical” (forcing God to do something in an automatic way) but as evidence of and aids in conversion of heart (Introduction, 4). If you do these works by yourself, do they help? Of course! But if you make them part of an indulgence, you are also helped by the prayer of the Church (Norm #4).

The conditions for a plenary indulgence require some brief comments (Norms #20). Confession, Communion, and the prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father (which can be as simple as an *Our Father* and *Hail Mary*) may take place several days before or after the indulgenced work. A single celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation may be applied to several indulgences, but Communion and the prayers for the Holy Father may only apply to one. The issue of attachment to sin is the most difficult, and points to the ultimate purpose of indulgences. It means not only committing to avoid sinning, but also includes any affection for or attraction to sin. That does not mean that one is not tempted; it does mean that temptations are immediately set aside and any venial sin is immediately repented of and addressed.

When Pope Paul VI reformed the practice of indulgences after Vatican II, he wanted to stress that what indulgences try to bring about (conversion) should be connected to daily Christian life. Therefore, he provided a new category of partial indulgences: the four general concessions or grants (see sidebar #1). It is easy to see what Pope Paul VI was getting at, namely, that the patient and prayerful bearing of adversity, charitable service, self-denial, and giving witness to the faith are part of the Christian life.

The *Manual* lists a number of other indulgenced works or concessions (the specific grants); most are partial but some are plenary. These take the forms of specific prayers or actions, and may be associated with special occasions or events.

One particular specific grant needs mention: the indulgence at the time of death. Under ordinary circumstances, the apostolic blessing at the time of death—given by a priest or bishop—carries with it a plenary indulgence. It is usually granted as part of the celebration of Viaticum (Communion of the dying) but may be granted in the context of the Anointing of the Sick or Reconciliation. Importantly, *even if a*

Conditions for Gaining a Partial Indulgence

- Be baptized, not excommunicated, and in a state of grace.
- Have the intention of gaining the indulgence (including being contrite).
- Perform the work or offer the prayers as described.
- May be obtained more than once per day.

Conditions for Gaining a Plenary Indulgence

In addition to the above:

- Exclude all attachment to sin.
- Go to sacramental confession.
- Receive Eucharistic Communion.
- Pray for the intentions of the Holy Father.
- May only be obtained once per day.

If any component is lacking, the indulgence will be partial.

The Four General Concessions

A partial indulgence is granted to the Christian faithful who:

- (1) while carrying out their duties and enduring the hardships of life, raise their minds in humble trust to God and make, at least mentally, some pious invocation;
- (2) led by the spirit of faith, give compassionately of themselves or of their goods to serve their brothers in need;
- (3) in a spirit of penance, voluntarily abstain from something that is licit for and pleasing to them; and
- (4) in the particular circumstances of daily life, voluntarily give explicit witness to their faith before others.

priest cannot be present, the Church still extends this indulgence to those Christians who were in the habit of praying regularly, even in the absence of the usual three conditions (Confession, Communion, prayers for the intentions of the Pontiff). The other basic conditions for obtaining a plenary indulgence always apply, including the complete detachment from sin. In other words, far from being some last-minute attempt to magically get into heaven in a manner somehow disconnected from the rest of life, the indulgence teaches that the Church accompanies her children in this final act of conversion, of trustful turning towards and abandonment into God's hands, with her prayers. Different from other plenary indulgences, it may be gained in addition to other plenary indulgences that day.

Indulgences during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Church has granted a plenary indulgence to those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As underlined in the decree, the indulgence applies differently to 3 different groups: the sick and isolated, caregivers, and the faithful in general. In addition, we are reminded of the Church's indulgence for those at the point of death. If the usual conditions for obtaining the Indulgence (such as Communion and Confession) cannot be met at this time, the intention to do so as soon as possible is enough.

The Plenary Indulgence is granted to [1] the faithful suffering from Coronavirus, who are subject to quarantine by order of the health authority in hospitals or in their own homes if, with a spirit detached from any sin, they unite spiritually through the media to the celebration of Holy Mass, the recitation of the Holy Rosary, to the pious practice of the Way of the Cross or other forms of devotion, or if at least they will recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and a pious invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, offering this trial in a spirit of faith in God and charity towards their brothers and sisters, with *the will to fulfil the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion and prayer according to the Holy Father's intentions), as soon as possible*.

[2] Health care workers, family members and all those who, following the example of the Good Samaritan, exposing themselves to the risk of contagion, care for the sick of Coronavirus according to the words of the divine Redeemer: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15: 13), will obtain the same gift of the Plenary Indulgence under the same conditions.

This Apostolic Penitentiary also willingly grants a Plenary Indulgence under the same conditions on the occasion of the current world epidemic, also to [3] those faithful who offer a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or Eucharistic adoration, or reading the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour, or the recitation of the Holy Rosary, or the pious exercise of the Way of the Cross, or the recitation of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, to implore from Almighty God the end of the epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those whom the Lord has called to Himself.

The Church prays for those who find themselves unable to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and of the Viaticum, entrusting each and every one to divine Mercy by virtue of the communion of saints and granting the faithful a Plenary Indulgence on the point of death, provided that they are duly disposed and have recited a few prayers during their lifetime (in this case the Church makes up for the three usual conditions required). For the attainment of this indulgence the use of the crucifix or the cross is recommended (cf. *Enchiridion indulgentiarum*, no.12).

In addition to the usual conditions for obtaining an Indulgence (if possible to meet at this time), and with a spirit detached from sin, the specific works or prayers for this Indulgence are:

For those suffering from COVID-19 or in quarantine or self-isolation; and for those caring for them (health care workers, families, etc.):

- Unite themselves spiritually through the media (TV, radio, Internet) to the celebration of the Mass, recitation of the Rosary, the Way of the Cross, or other devotion; OR
- Recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and an invocation to Mary, offering the trial of their illness (or risk of exposure) in a spirit of faith in God and love of neighbor

For the rest of the faithful:

- visit to the Blessed Sacrament or Eucharistic adoration, OR
- reading the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour, OR
- the recitation of the Holy Rosary, OR
- the Way of the Cross, OR
- the recitation of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy; AND
- implore from Almighty God the end of the epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those who have died