



INDULGENCES AND OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Indulgences have been a part of Catholic devotional life for centuries. While often misunderstood, the practice of granting and obtaining indulgences is deeply rooted in Sacred Scripture and Church teaching. Indulgences inspire us to live more fruitful and holy lives, and thereby lead us to a more intimate union with Christ and with his Church.

In 2006, the English edition of the Holy See's 1999 revised *Manual of Indulgences* was published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This bulletin insert provides the opportunity to explain briefly the meaning and importance of indulgences for the spiritual life of the Christian faithful.

WHAT ARE INDULGENCES?

Indulgences are a part of the Church's teaching on the forgiveness of sins. Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we receive forgiveness for our sins, and all punishment is remitted. Through the Sacrament of Penance, sins are also forgiven, and the *eternal* penalty that is due to sin—namely, damnation, the eternal loss of the presence of God—is taken away. However, consequences still remain that the sinner must bear. This is what is traditionally called the *temporal* punishment for sin.

By its very nature, every sin inevitably causes suffering for the one who has committed it. Every sinful act creates disorder within the soul of the human person. Sin also disrupts one's relationships with God, with the Church, with other people, and with the world as a whole. Those who have received forgiveness for their sins may still have an obligation to undergo a process of purification and to restore these disrupted relationships. The necessary and painful process that brings this reconciliation and purification can take place either in this life or in Purgatory, because whatever part of the process remains unfinished at death must be completed in Purgatory.²

Through an *indulgence*, God grants that through the prayer of the Church the temporal penalty for sin due to someone be reduced (as in the case of a *partial* indulgence) or be eliminated (as in the case of a *plenary* indulgence). By God's grace, participation in a prayer or action that has an indulgence attached to it brings about the necessary reconciliation without the suffering that would normally accompany it. The granting of an indulgence by the Church is "the expression of the Church's full confidence of being heard by the Father when—in view of Christ's merits and, by his gift, those of Our Lady and the saints—she asks him to mitigate or cancel the painful aspect of punishment by fostering its medicinal aspect through other channels of grace."³

HOW CAN INDULGENCES REMOVE SOME OR ALL OF THE TEMPORAL PUNISHMENT OF SIN?

It is because of the Communion of Saints and the graciousness of God, our Father, that some or all of the temporal punishment for sin is removed. Although we always have to face the consequences

of our sins in the form of the temporal punishment for sin, as members of the Body of Christ we are never simply on our own. We are linked with Christ and with the martyrs and saints, and we benefit from their holiness in such a way as to be freed from at least a portion of the temporal punishment for sin. "In this wonderful exchange, the holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others."⁴

As a result of the communion that exists between Christ and all the members of the Church, the Church has a treasury of inexhaustible benefits that flow from Christ's Passion, death, and Resurrection. Since the martyrs and saints have accomplished all that they have in union with Christ, these benefits also include the value of their prayers and good works. "This treasury also includes the truly immense, unfathomable and ever pristine value before God of the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, who following in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have sanctified their lives and fulfilled the mission entrusted to them by the Father. Thus while attaining their own salvation, they have also cooperated in the salvation of their brothers in the unity of the Mystical Body."⁵

Through her union with Christ, the Church has the authority to dispense these benefits. As a means of encouraging the faithful to perform good works and acts of devotion, and so to grow in holiness, the Church offers indulgences. To receive a *plenary* indulgence, in addition to a good work or act of devotion prescribed by the Church, it is required that we (1) make a sacramental confession, (2) receive Holy Communion, (3) pray for the intentions of the Holy Father, and (4) be completely detached from all sin.⁶ If these conditions are only incompletely fulfilled, the indulgence obtained will be only *partial*.

In receiving indulgences, we should not think that we have *earned* them. Our efforts express our openness to receiving God's mercy. As a result, we grow closer to Jesus and so are able to reap the benefit of his salvation.

HOW DOES ONE GAIN AN INDULGENCE?

Plenary indulgences are attached to certain prayers and to certain devotional or charitable practices that we undertake with the intention of making the needed reparation. Examples of such practices approved by the Church include Eucharistic adoration that lasts at least one half hour, devout recitation of the Marian rosary, prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture, the making of the Way of the Cross, participation in a Eucharistic procession on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, and participation in a parish mission.⁷

Besides particular prayers and devotions, the Church also grants partial indulgences connected to the following four general areas of action, which can be undertaken in the more ordinary circumstances of everyday life:

- **Pious invocation.** Recalling St. Paul's exhortation to "rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer" (Rom 12:12), the first general area applies "to the Christian faithful who, 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."⁸
- **Gift of self or goods.** St. Paul also teaches, "Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. . . . Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality" (Rom 12:11, 13). This second general area applies "to the faithful who, led by the spirit of faith, give compassionately of themselves or of their goods to serve their brothers [and sisters] in need."⁹
- **Voluntary abstinence.** Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). The third general area applies "to the Christian faithful who, in a spirit of penance, voluntarily abstain from something that is licit for and pleasing to them."¹⁰
- **Witness of faith.** Jesus promised, "Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father" (Mt 10:32). The fourth general area applies "to the Christian faithful who, in the particular circumstances of daily life, voluntarily give explicit witness to their faith before others."¹¹

The Church's longstanding tradition of granting and obtaining indulgences inspires within us a desire to live more virtuously as Christian disciples. In drawing closer to Jesus, we renew our hope for reconciliation, and we bear witness to our trust in our merciful Father.

NOTES

1. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), nos. 1471-1479.
2. The pains of Purgatory are, to be sure, "a purification altogether different from the punishment of the damned." Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter on Certain Questions Regarding Eschatology—Recentiores Episcoporum Synodi (Epistola de Quibusdam Questionibus ad Eschatologiam Spectantibus)* (May 17, 1979): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71 (1979), 939-943.
3. Pope John Paul II, General Audience (September 29, 1999), no. 4, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_29091999_en.html (accessed February 2007).
4. CCC, no. 1475.
5. Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Constitution on Indulgences (Indulgentiarum Doctrina)* (January 1, 1967), no. 5, in United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Manual of Indulgences* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), 119.
6. *Apostolic Constitution on Indulgences*, Norm 7. See also *Manual of Indulgences*, Norm 20.
7. See the *Manual of Indulgences* for a complete list of prayers and devotional practices.
8. *Manual of Indulgences*, 25. See also Mt 7:7-8; 1 Cor 10:31; Eph 6:18; Col 3:17 and 4:2; and 1 Thes 5:17-18.
9. *Manual of Indulgences*, 28. See also Mt 25:35-35, 40; Jn 13:34-35; Gal 6:10; Jas 1:27; 1 Jn 3:17-18.
10. *Manual of Indulgences*, 31. See also Rom 8:13; 1 Cor 9:25-27; 2 Cor 4:10; and Ti 2:12.
11. *Manual of Indulgences*, 34. See also Acts 1:8; Rom 10:9-10; 2 Tm 1:8; and 1 Jn 4:15.

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EXAMPLES OF PRAYERS TO WHICH INDULGENCES ARE ATTACHED

The following prayers are from the *Manual of Indulgences*.

Prayer After Holy Communion (Anima Christi)

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within thy wounds hide me.
Suffer me not to be separated from thee.
From the malicious enemy defend me.
In the hour of my death call me.
And bid me come to thee,
That with thy saints I may praise thee
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Prayer Before the Blessed Sacrament (O sacrum convivium)

O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.

Prayer Before Any Work (Actiones nostras)

Direct, we beseech thee, O Lord, all our actions by thy holy inspiration, carry them on by thy gracious assistance, that every word and work of ours may always begin from thee and by thee be happily ended. Amen.

Prayer to One's Guardian Angel (Angele Dei)

Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom his love entrusts me here, enlighten and guard, rule and guide me. Amen.

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