

Indulgences

ISSUE: What is an indulgence? How do you obtain them? For whom can an indulgence be gained?

RESPONSE: An indulgence remits *temporal* punishment¹ or consequences due to sins for which we *have already been* forgiven. The Church dispenses indulgences when, as a minister of Christ's Redemption, "she dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfaction won by Christ and the saints."² We gain an indulgence when we are properly disposed and perform prescribed penitential actions. Indulgences are either partial or plenary, so named because they remove either part (partial) or all (plenary) of the temporal punishment due to actual sin.³ Through God's grace and the intercession of the saints, indulgences magnify the power of our penitential actions, remitting the temporal consequences of some or all of our sins.

Christians living on earth and in the state of grace can obtain indulgences, and they may do so only for themselves or a deceased member of the Body of Christ.

DISCUSSION: To understand the Church's teaching on indulgences, one needs to understand the doctrine of binding and loosing. In addition, the teachings on justification, communion of saints and purgatory are intimately connected with the teaching on indulgences; to understand one fully requires and enables an understanding of the others.⁴

When we sin, there are both eternal and temporal consequences. Through the ministry of forgiveness, the eternal consequences of sin—namely, hell—are remitted simultaneously with the guilt of sin. Temporal consequences remain, requiring one to atone for or repair the wrongs we have committed. Atonement serves as a teaching device for the sinner to learn discipline according to the mind of Christ. Penance disciplines our human nature, repairs the wrongs and lessens the temporal consequences of sin.

Adam's original sin broke man's communion with God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 402-06). Christ died and rose from the dead to reestablish and greatly improve this communion (*Catechism*, no. 412), so that we might be freed from all consequences of sin:

For, if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through whom we have now received our reconciliation (Rom. 5:10-11).

Justification is the process by which we are reconciled to God (Titus 3:3-8), partake of God's nature (2 Pet. 1:4) and become "new creations" (2 Cor. 5:17). Scripture attests that justification not only involves the redemptive act of Christ's death, but also the continued sacrifices of the People of God, the Church (Jas. 2:14-24).⁵ As St. Paul puts it, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the Church" (Col. 1:24). This is not because the objective redemption that Christ merited for us is insufficient, but because we must all personally participate in that redemption here and now, in our own lifetimes. The Catholic teachings on justification, the communion of saints, indulgences and purgatory help explain Col. 1:24.

Christ established the Church to mediate His salvation, and He promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Mt. 16:18-19). To minister this salvation, Christ gave St. Peter, the other apostles and their successor popes and bishops the power to mediate His forgiveness and merits. Jesus told Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 16:18-19). The granting of indulgences is an expression of this power to bind and loose.

If we recognize that God works through the Church to freely remit the *eternal* consequences of our sin through forgiveness, it shouldn't be difficult to accept that He can do similarly regarding less significant—though still important—*temporal* consequences through indulgences.

The principle of temporal consequences remaining after forgiveness has strong roots in scripture. God forgave Adam and Eve but, because of their sin, temporal punishments remain, including that the earth would labor against man's efforts to bring forth fruit rather than submitting to him; women would labor in pain to bear children; and, most significant, men and women would suffer death (Gen. 3:16-20). Although Christ overcame the power of sin, the temporal consequences of Adam's sin remain.⁶ When the Israelites balked at the Jordan and refused to enter the Promised Land, Moses interceded so that God would not destroy them all. Because of Moses' prayer, God forgave the Israelites but caused them to wander for 40 years and die in the desert as reparation for their sins.⁷ The stories of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-12:25), David and the census (2 Sam. 24) and Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 20; 2 Chr. 32:24-31) also reflect the principle that temporal consequences of sins remain after forgiveness.

Acts of penance include prayer, fasting and charity. Rooted strongly in Scripture, the greatest of these is charity.⁸ Through acts of penance, we discipline ourselves to live in a godly manner, that we might be conformed to Christ. As Scripture attests, "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed; your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."⁹

As God teaches us, the prayers and good works of one, when offered on behalf of another, atones for sins:

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude for sins (Jas. 5:19-20).

This exchange of graces is one example of the communion of saints. "In this wonderful exchange, holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others (cf. Rom. 5:20). Thus recourse to the communion of saints lets the contrite sinner be more promptly and efficaciously purified of the punishments for sin."¹⁰

We . . . call these spiritual goods of the communion of saints the *Church's treasury*, which is "not the sum total of the material goods which have accumulated during the course of the centuries. On the contrary the 'treasury of the Church' is the infinite value, which can never be exhausted, which Christ's merits have before God."¹¹

In exercising her authority to bind and loose, the Church uses indulgences as a means to lessen the temporal consequences of sin and apply the effects of penance. As noted, one obtains an indulgence after having received forgiveness and performing the prescribed acts of penance.

If one dies without having repented of sin, as Scripture teaches, he suffers eternal damnation (Mt. 25:41-46; Rev. 2:5; Rev. 20:11-15). If he dies after having repented, but not having repaired his wrongs, he must be purified before entering heaven. Purgatory is the place of this purgation.¹² Indulgences lessen the temporal punishment for sin and apply the merits of penance more efficaciously.

To obtain an indulgence, certain general conditions apply. One may obtain indulgences for oneself or for souls in purgatory. Indulgences cannot be gained for other persons who are living on earth. In order to receive the indulgence, the person seeking an indulgence must be free from mortal sin at the completion of the prescribed actions. He must have the intention of gaining the indulgence. A general intention of gaining this grace is sufficient, and a person should renew this intention on a regular basis. Finally, there is a condition of accuracy. Individual indulgences have particular conditions that must be met in order to receive the indulgence. If there is a great deviation from the specified conditions of the indulgence, the indulgence is not obtained.

As noted, the Church recognizes two kinds of indulgences, partial and plenary. A partial indulgence removes some of the temporal consequences due for past sins. A plenary indulgence removes all temporal punishment incurred by sins.

To obtain a plenary indulgence, one must complete five requirements: 1) completion of the prescribed act itself; 2) be free from the attachment to any sin, even venial; 3) receive absolution through the Sacrament of Reconciliation; 4) receive the most Holy Eucharist; 5) pray for the intentions of the Holy Father.¹³ Even if a person is not conscious of grave sin, he must go to Confession. Though the last three conditions may be fulfilled within one week of performing the prescribed act, it is fitting to receive Communion and pray for the Pope's intentions on the same

day that the prescribed work is completed.¹⁴

Generally, one may acquire a plenary indulgence once in a single day. However, one can obtain a plenary indulgence for the moment of death, even if another plenary indulgence has already been acquired on the same day.¹⁵ A partial indulgence may be acquired once a day, unless otherwise expressly indicated.¹⁶

Some people argue that the guidelines governing indulgences are meant to bind legalistically; **just the opposite is true**, for they help the penitent to realize better: 1. his sinfulness and God's great mercy regarding that sinfulness; 2. his God-ordained need to participate in his redemption (Phil. 2:12-13; cf. Col. 1:24); and 3. the true nature of justification, which involves not simply being declared clean but actually being *made* clean (cf. Rev. 21:27).

Although the terminology differs, the principles used by the Catholic Church to understand and apply indulgences reflects a universal understanding of natural law and justice. If a man is caught stealing money from a convenient store, the money is returned and the man is put on trial. If he is sincere in his desire for reform and pleads guilty, he will probably receive a lesser sentence than otherwise. While in jail, if he acts with good behavior, he could receive parole much more quickly and easily. In fact, our legal system promotes such clemency to encourage good behavior and genuine reform.

Protestants also apply these principles in their family lives. Though children admit a wrong, it remains necessary to discipline them, at least mildly, lest they continue to do wrong (Prov. 13:24; 23:13-14). If no consequences follow bad behavior, a child will presume clemency and never be disciplined in right living. Further, Protestants also encourage the use of societal justice, as outlined in the example above describing the thief's imprisonment. The use of indulgences in the Catholic Church is simply a recognition of this natural law principle of atonement.

¹ When we speak in this FAITH FACT of canceling or satisfying the "temporal punishment" due because of our sins, we refer to atoning for or repairing the wrong done to God and the Body of Christ, the Church. Receiving an indulgence does not exempt a person from undergoing the temporal punishment of society, i.e., repairing the wrong to society through such actions as restitution of property and doing time in prison. However, given the proper spiritual disposition, our penitential actions to society can also have the salutary effect of atoning for our sins to God and the Church.

² Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, Norm 1.

³ Ibid., Norm 2; cf. Norm 3. See also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1471. It is also crucial to say "actual" sin, because there are consequences from *original* sin, including death and suffering, which cannot be remitted or avoided (Catechism, no. 405).

⁴ FAITH FACTS on these topics are available from CUF; see details at the end of this FAITH FACT.

⁵ For a more thorough discussion on the issue of justification, see our FAITH FACT entitled "It 'Works' for Me, The Church's Teaching on Justification."

⁶ Catechism, no. 405.

⁷ Num. 14:1-38.

⁸ Tobit 4:5-11; Prov. 19:17; Is. 58:1-8 1 Pet. 5:7-8; James 5:16-20.

⁹ Is. 58:8.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1475.

¹¹ Ibid., no. 1476.

¹² Rev. 3:18; 22:12. See also our Faith Fact on Purgatory.

¹³ *Enchiridion of Indulgences*, norm. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, norm 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, norm 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

AVAILABLE FROM CUF BOOKS AND TAPES BY MAIL:

Catechism of the Catholic Church; \$29.95 • CUF Member . . . \$22.00 (Hardcover).

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FAITH FACTS (Free to Members):

“It ‘Works’ for Me: The Church’s Teaching on Justification.”

“All in the Family: The Communion of Saints.”

“Christ’s Descent Into ‘Hell.’”

“Purgatory.”

“Sola Scriptura?: Not According to the Bible.”

OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

James Akin, “A Primer on Indulgences”; *This Rock*; November 1994 (1-888-291-8000).

Last edited: 2/98

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