

## WHAT IS AN INDULGENCE?

*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. An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin. The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1471)*

The first thing to understand about indulgences is that they are concerned with the lingering consequences of sins already forgiven. An analogy might be the situation of a married couple who have reconciled after the infidelity of one of the parties. The infidelity has been forgiven, the broken relationship has been restored, but it will still take some work to repair the relationship to what it should be. Similarly, through the sacrament of Penance sin is forgiven and one's relationship with God, if ruptured by serious sin, is restored. All sins, however, even venial sins, do damage to one's relationship with God, requiring repair during one's life through prayer and good works or after death through further purification (the process known as Purgatory).

The second thing is that indulgences are a practical expression of our belief in "the communion of saints" - that "perennial link of charity" that exists among the saints in heaven, the faithful departed still in process of purification in purgatory, and the faithful on earth. Just as in human relationships people can be of help to one another and intercede for one another, so too in the communion of saints the infinite merits of Christ's saving activity on our behalf and the prayers and good works of the saints are of help to us. We in turn are able by our prayers and actions to intercede for the faithful in purgatory.

The Church, to which Christ has given the power of binding and loosing (*Matthew 16:17-19*) intervenes on our behalf to assist us in this process of purification, by applying to our prayers and acts of charity additional value from the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints. By attaching such an "indulgence" to particular prayers and actions, the Church seeks not only to give spiritual assistance to its members but also to encourage them to do acts of devotion and charity. Besides benefiting personally from such indulgences, the faithful may also receive an indulgence and apply it instead to benefit a deceased person.

To receive an indulgence assigned by the Church to a particular prayer or action, one must be baptized and in the state of grace, must have the intention of gaining the indulgence, and must fulfill any particular requirements are attached to the specific indulgence.

In the past, partial indulgences were measured in units of time. This meant that the Church was applying to, for example, a particular prayer the added benefit (“indulgence”) of one’s having performed so many days or years of canonical penance as performed in the early Church. It did not refer to any actual amount of purification the person required – something only God knows. To avoid such confusion, the Church now simply refers to such an indulgence as “partial” without any time attached to it.

A “plenary” indulgence frees one from all further purification required for one’s sins. To be properly disposed to receive a plenary indulgence, one must be free from all attachment to any sin. If one is less than fully disposed, then the indulgence obtained is correspondingly “partial.”

In addition to the above requirement, a plenary indulgence requires sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion, and prayers for the Pope’s intentions. These may normally be done in the days preceding or following the indulgenced prayer or action, but it is recommended that communion and the prayers for the Pope’s intentions take place on the actual day.

During this Year of Saint Paul (through June 29, 2009), a plenary indulgence may be obtained by visiting the Parish Church of Saint Paul the Apostle, with a heart united to the spiritual ends of the Year of Saint Paul as declared by the Pope, and while there either attends a sacred rite in honor of Saint Paul or prays individually before an image of Saint Paul, to be concluded by a the recitation or singing of the Our Father and Creed and with an invocation of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary as well as Saint Paul.

One may gain this indulgence at the Church of Saint Paul the Apostle on the final Sunday of each month, also as often as one visits as part of group for the sake of a devotion, and once during the year on a day freely chosen by the individual, and finally on June 29 (the Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul).