



## THE GIFT OF INDULGENCES

St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † October 2015



### Requirements for Receiving a Plenary Indulgence by Attending a Parish Mission

Persons who attend at least several of the mission services during the week, including the Closing Mass on Thursday, have the opportunity to receive a plenary indulgence, which remits all temporal punishment due to sin that the person has incurred to that point in his or her life. The requirements to receive this plenary indulgence are: attendance at Mass and reception of Holy Communion in the state of sanctifying grace; confession within eight days of the close of the mission; prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father (at least one Our Father and one Hail Mary); and detachment from all of one's sins. (*From the Fathers of Mercy website: <http://fathersofmercy.com/parish-missions-retreats>.)*

**ISSUE:** Please explain the meaning of indulgences, including partial indulgences. Many of my family and friends do not understand their purpose, what they really are in terms of remission of sins, their connection with purgatory, length of time involved, etc.

**DISCUSSION:** As Catholics, we do hold to the doctrine of indulgences and to the practice of granting them. Motivated by the doubts and confusion over indulgences that arose after Vatican Council II, Pope Paul VI in his *Apostolic Constitution on the Revision of Indulgences* (1967) stated, "They would appear to be solidly founded on divine Revelation, handed down from the Apostles." Nevertheless, many people, including Catholics, misunderstand indulgences or in recent times may never even have heard of them.

The *Catechism* properly presents the teaching on indulgences in the section on the Sacrament of Penance. By definition, "an indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain defined conditions through the Church's help when, as minister of Redemption, she dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfaction won by Christ and the saints" (*Catechism*, no. 1471, citing the *Apostolic Constitution*, no. 1). Now, what does this mean?

We believe that when we sin, we commit a free-willed offense against God and our neighbor. God in His love and mercy forgives the guilt of any sin for which we are truly sorry. However, God in His justice requires that we expiate sin, or heal the hurt caused by sin. We call this the temporal punishment for sin. For example, if I damage my neighbor's car, I can sincerely plead for forgiveness and my neighbor can genuinely forgive me; yet, I will also in justice have to pay for the repair of the car. In the same sense, during our lives, we perform penances here to expiate sin and purify our souls. If we die with venial sins, we will expiate these sins in purgatory.

Since sin has a communal dimension, i.e., sin affects the whole body of the Church, salvation also has a communal dimension. This is why we pray for each other's intentions at Mass or privately. From the earliest days of the Church, individuals have offered prayers and good works for the salvation of sinners. In those times when absolution was not granted until both confession and penance had been performed (and the penances were very lengthy in duration), penitents asked martyrs facing death for aid (to offer their sufferings for the atonement of the penitents sins) so that full reconciliation with the Church and re-admission to the sacraments could be obtained more speedily. When a martyr offered his sufferings to expiate the sins of a penitent, the Church recognized this charitable act and granted absolution. For example, St.

Cyprian (d. 258) stated, “Those who have received certificates from the martyrs and are able to be assisted by their privileged position before God” may be absolved and “come to the Lord with the peace which the martyrs, as indicated in letters sent to us, desired to be given them” (*Letter to the Clergy*, 18 (12), 1). Truly, herein lies part of the basis for indulgences. The communion of the Church also includes the faithful in purgatory and the saints in heaven. These saints intercede on our behalf and pray for us. The Treasury of the Church includes the infinite, inexhaustible value of the merits of Our Lords death and resurrection, and the prayers and good works of the Blessed Mother and all of the saints. Just as they aided those in the journey of salvation while living on this earth, they continue to do so now. As the Minister of Redemption, the Church invokes their aid to help fully reconcile penitents and to alleviate the temporal punishment due to sin. St. Cyprian, for example, preached that “the merits of the martyrs and the works of the just will be of great avail with the Judge” for all of the faithful on the Day of Judgment (*The Lapsed*, 17).

Also, in the early Church, bishops allowed penances, which were oftentimes severe, to be substituted with other works (indulgences) which may have been easier to fulfill but which promoted piety and strengthened the person spiritually. Eventually, Popes decreed that certain practices could replace imposed penances. Note the Church has consistently condemned any abuse of indulgences, and the person performing the indulgence must have a sincere, contrite, and humble heart.

Along this same understanding, an indulgence may be applied to the faithful departed, namely the Poor Souls in purgatory. Looking to the example of Christ who died for our sins, all members of the Church must help each other on the way of salvation through prayers and good works. Just as we pray for each other here on earth and we too rely on the prayers of the saints in heaven, the Poor Souls rely on our prayers and good works to help atone for the hurts of their sins. Pope Paul VI taught, “Thus there is indeed a perennial bond of charity and an abundant exchange of all goods among the faithful, whether they have already taken possession of the heavenly home, or expiate their failings in purgatory, or are still on their pilgrimage on earth; thereby, all the sins of the entire mystical body are expiated and the divine justice is placated; and the divine mercy is moved to forgiveness so that the contrite sinners be brought sooner to the full fruition of the goods of Gods family” (*Apostolic Constitution*, no. 5). We must not forget to offer prayers and other penances for the Poor Souls in purgatory.

An indulgence is considered plenary or partial according to whether it expiates all or part of the temporal punishment due for sin. To gain a plenary indulgence, one must perform the work attached to the indulgence and make a sacramental confession, receive Holy Communion, and pray for the intentions of the Holy Father (reciting one Our Father and one Hail Mary, or any other suitable prayer). The conditions may be met several days before or after performing the work of the indulgence. A partial indulgence is gained by doing the particular work sincerely. The *Enchiridion of Indulgences* (1968) lists the norms and grants. [...]

The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, summarized the teaching on indulgences as follows: “This doctrine on indulgences therefore teaches firstly how sad and bitter it is to have abandoned the Lord God. When they gain indulgences, the faithful understand that by their own strength they would not be able to make good the evil which by sinning they have done to themselves and to the entire community, and therefore they are stirred to saving deeds of humility” [quoting Paul VI]. Furthermore, the truth about the communion of saints which unites believers to Christ and to one another reveals how much each of us can help others living or dead to become “ever more intimately united with the Father in Heaven” (*Incarnationis Mysterium*, no. 10).