

JUBILEE YEAR 2025:

THE NATURE OF INDULGENCES EXPLAINED

We often hear about “indulgences”, for example on feast days such as All Souls’ Day or Divine Mercy Sunday. Indulgences are also very much a feature of our 2025 Jubilee Year. However, indulgences are frequently misunderstood and have, of course, been the source of much controversy. They need to be understood *radically*; that is in their very root, source and purpose, or what we might call their principles. Otherwise they may be grasped only in a superficial sense, or do not make any sense at all! So, what are these principles?

First of all, indulgences only make sense when we remember *God’s love and mercy* that is offered to each one of us. As St. John Paul II noted: “The crucified Jesus is the great ‘indulgence’ that the Father has offered humanity through the forgiveness of sins and the possibility of living as children of God (cf. *John* 1: 12-13) in the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gal* 4: 6; *Rom* 5: 5; 8: 15-16).” In fact, the very word “indulgence” shows this clearly. The word comes from a double root: to show kindness (*indulgentia*) and to forgive (*indulgere*)

In addition, we also need to recall our life long journey of conversion and development in discipleship, with all our joys and sorrows, our spiritual growth and our sins and failings. This is why the theme for the 2025 Jubilee Year is “pilgrims of hope.” In other words, indulgences are very much about God’s gifts to us as pilgrims and our response to those gifts: what we may call our relationship or covenant with God. Sadly, we sometimes or perhaps often do not live up to this covenant or relationship, or that our spiritual journey goes off course. Indulgences are a special gift, helping to restore that relationship. Indulgences offer us great hope indeed!

Again, as Saint John Paul II noted: “in the logic of the covenant, this gift does not reach us without our acceptance and response. It is not difficult to understand how reconciliation with God, although based on a free and abundant offer of mercy, at the same time implies an arduous process which involves the individual's personal effort and the Church's sacramental work. For the forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism, this process is centered on the sacrament of Penance, but it continues after the sacramental celebration. The person must be gradually healed of the negative effects which sin has caused in him or her (what the theological tradition calls the "punishments" and "remains" of sin).”

This is where the ancient practice and discipline of indulgences comes in. They are part of a bigger picture of restoring and living that covenant or relationship with God and of realizing that our actions, good or bad, have significant consequences for this life and for the life to come. A good visual image here is of dropping a stone in a pond: the ripples spread out far and wide. So too with what we say or do: for good, or for bad.

What then is the purpose of indulgences...what do they do or give? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains things well and the following quotes can help us greatly...

“[First], it is necessary to understand that sin has a *double consequence*. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. On the other hand, every sin, even venial, entails an

unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but [as consequences] following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain." (CCC, n. 1472)

The *Catechism* then continues...“The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains. While patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death, the Christian must strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace. He should strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the "old man" and to put on the "new man.” (CCC, n. 1473)

“An indulgence is [therefore] 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.” (CCC, n. 1471)

There are two main types of indulgences: partial and plenary. A partial indulgence is the remission of part of the temporal punishment that a person deserves on account of his sins. A plenary indulgence is the remission of all of the temporal punishment that a person deserves for his sins. We can gain indulgences either for ourselves, or apply them to those who have died (see CCC, n. 1471)

Finally, it is very important to remember that indulgences properly understood and even more importantly properly practiced, are not some sort of “get out of jail free card”, nor are they some sort of contract or transaction. They are a wonderful and unmerited gift from God. They also require a proper disposition and desire. Let us leave the final words with Saint John Paul II:

“We can see, then, how indulgences, far from being a sort of "discount" on the duty of conversion, are instead an aid to its prompt, generous and radical fulfilment. This is required to such an extent that the spiritual condition for receiving a plenary indulgence is the exclusion ‘of all attachment to sin, even venial sin.’ Therefore, it would be a mistake to think that we can receive this gift by simply performing certain outward acts. On the contrary, they are required as the expression and support of our progress in conversion. They particularly show our faith in God's mercy and in the marvelous reality of communion, which Christ has achieved by indissolubly uniting the Church to himself as his Body and Bride.”

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