

# *Indulgences*

## *Their Doctrine and Current Practice in the Catholic Church*

*by Fr Justin Ford*

The Catholic teaching on indulgences is often little known today. A fuller awareness of this great spiritual benefit made available to us by God opens us to receive all the blessings he wishes to give us by this means.

- A **‘plenary indulgence’** is a complete remission of the debt of punishment in purgatory remaining for an individual’s *past* sins, the guilt of which has already been forgiven. (A **‘partial indulgence’** remits only some of this punishment.) An indulgence is applicable either to **oneself**, or can be used to intercede by way of suffrage for the **souls in purgatory** already being purified (prior to their coming into full union with God in heaven).
- The remission takes place through a sharing in the infinite merits of Christ, as well as those of the saints, which is possible because we are all one Body. It is made available by the authority of the Church, which in Peter and the Apostles received from Christ the ‘keys of the kingdom’ and the power of ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ (*Mt* 16:19; 18:18). It is a spiritual ‘bonus’ from the Church, substituting for what would otherwise need to be long penances on our part; it’s also a wonderful way of helping the faithful departed.
- In times past, indulgences were sometimes subject to abuses. However, the basic power of the Church to grant them was infallibly defined (1563) by the Council of Trent, and is thus something that (like purgatory itself) no Catholic can deny if he or she is to remain in full communion with the Church. The Church continues to speak of indulgences and make use of them, and after Vatican II, Pope St Paul VI published the Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1967) reaffirming their value and modernising their practice. Pope Francis, like his predecessors, has maintained the practice of granting new indulgences, up to the present day.
- The theology of indulgences is further discussed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) (nn. 1471-79). The conditions for gaining them might seem a bit stringent or legalistic, but the benefit offered by God is correspondingly great and beyond our deserts, and one aim is that through our carefully fulfilling the conditions, we’re being trained in, and blessed by, the various means of holiness; the indulgence adds a new incentive for us to pursue these means.

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1. **To gain an indulgence, the indulgenced action or prayer must, of course, be done.**  
(See lists below.)
  2. **In addition, for a plenary indulgence, three other conditions must ordinarily be fulfilled:**
    - (a) **Confession**  
(within 20 days before or after the indulgenced action/prayer);

(b) **Holy Communion**

(within several days before or after);

(c) **Prayers for the Pope's intentions**

(e.g. 1 Our Father & 1 Hail Mary) (within several days before or after).

(One Confession suffices for multiple, even daily, plenary indulgences, but separate Communions must be received and separate prayers for the Pope's intentions be recited for each plenary indulgence we desire to gain.)

3. **Finally, for a plenary indulgence, all attachment to sin, even venial sin, must be absent.**

This is the hardest part, and might only gradually become possible for us. Still, we needn't exaggerate its difficulty – it means an attachment or affection for past, present or future sin that is freely *willed* in some degree. So, not just a non-deliberate *emotional* weakness (e.g. irritability) that might lead us to future sin (which no one on earth can be free of). Simply do your best, and leave the rest to God – ask for his grace, and make a sincere Act of Contrition before completing the indulgenced works (with the will to completely reject all sin because of its offence to God's goodness, and firmly resolving not to sin again).

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- One can gain indulgences even without being specifically aware of each individual one, as long as all the conditions happen to be fulfilled, and as long as one has at least the *general intention* of gaining them (see *Code of Canon Law* 996.2). So, it is good to form, and often renew, a general ongoing intention of gaining whatever indulgences one can.
  - Except in the case of the indulgence 'at the point of death', a plenary indulgence can be gained only once a day. Among other things, this prevents an unhealthy overemphasis on them.

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– Four notable plenary indulgences are available **at any time**. These are for:

1. **Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament** for at least half an hour.
2. Devoutly **reading Sacred Scripture** (in a Church approved edition, the grant specifies) as spiritual reading, for at least half an hour.
3. Reciting 5 decades of **the Rosary**, with devout meditation on the mysteries – in a church; in a family; religious community; association of the faithful; or group of faithful gathered for any good purpose.
4. Making **the Stations of the Cross**, moving from one Station to another and devoutly meditating on the Lord's Passion and Death. (If the Stations are made publicly, and not all can easily move from one Station to another, it suffices if the leader does so.)

– There are two special plenary indulgences **for the dying**, very useful to know about:

1. A priest giving the Sacraments to someone in danger of death can and should give the ‘**Apostolic Blessing**’, which carries with it a plenary indulgence.
2. If a priest is unavailable, the faithful who are properly disposed can gain a plenary indulgence **at the point of death**, as long as they have been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime.

(In these two cases, the conditions of Confession, Communion, and prayers for the Pope’s intentions are dispensed with, on this same condition of the person having been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime.)

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– Various other plenary indulgences can be gained at special times **over the Liturgical Year**, for:

- Devoutly receiving **the Pope’s blessing ‘Urbi et Orbi’**, even by [live] TV or radio. (This blessing is normally given at noon (Rome time) at **Christmas and Easter**.)
- On **New Year’s Eve**: devoutly assisting at the recitation of the ‘Te Deum’, in thanksgiving for God’s gifts over the previous year.
- On **New Year’s Day**: devoutly assisting at the recitation of the ‘Veni Creator’, asking for God’s help through the course of the coming year.
- On **any Friday of Lent**: devoutly reciting after Communion the short prayer beginning ‘Behold, O kind and most sweet Jesus...’ before a crucifix.
- On **Holy Thursday night**: devoutly reciting or singing the ‘Tantum ergo’ (‘Down in adoration falling’) as the Blessed Sacrament is being reposed. (This hymn is often sung at that moment anyway.)
- At the **Good Friday service**: devoutly taking part in the Adoration of the Cross.
- At the **Easter Vigil**, or the **anniversary of one’s own Baptism**: renewing one’s baptismal vows.
- On **Divine Mercy Sunday** (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter): taking part in prayers held in honour of Divine Mercy in a church or chapel; or, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament (exposed or reserved in the tabernacle), reciting an Our Father & Creed (*as well as the required prayers for the Pope’s intentions*), and adding a devout prayer to the merciful Lord Jesus (e.g. ‘Merciful Jesus, I trust in you!’) [Granted 13 June 2002].
- At **Pentecost**: devoutly assisting at the recitation of the ‘Veni Creator’.
- On the **Feast of the Sacred Heart**: publicly reciting the ‘Act of Reparation’.

- On **2 August**: visiting a parish church and devoutly reciting an Our Father & Creed (*as well as the required prayers for the Pope's intentions*). This is the 'Portiuncula' indulgence, as requested by St Francis.
- On **All Soul's Day** (applicable only to the souls in purgatory): devoutly visiting a church and reciting an Our Father & Creed (*as well as the required prayers for the Pope's intentions*).
- From **1 - 8 November** (applicable only to the souls in purgatory): devoutly visiting a cemetery and praying for the departed.
- On the **Feast of Christ the King**: publicly reciting the 'Act of Dedication to Christ the King'.
- On the feast of a parish church: visiting the parish church and devoutly reciting an Our Father & Creed (*as well as the required prayers for the Pope's intentions*).

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– Other plenary indulgences can be gained on certain **special occasions**, for:

- Receiving **First Communion**, or devout participation at another's First Communion.
- Devoutly taking part in a priest's **First Mass**, or in a priest's 25<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup>, 60<sup>th</sup> or 70<sup>th</sup> **jubilee Mass**.
- Devoutly taking part in a **solemn Eucharistic procession**, such as on Corpus Christi.
- Spending three full days in a guided **spiritual retreat**.

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These and more are listed in the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum* (4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1999, Vatican City), but these are the more common occasions. (Note the frequency of the word 'devoutly' – gaining an indulgence isn't something 'mechanical', but should lead us into deeper relationship with God.)

It seems more generous, if you are often gaining plenary indulgences, to apply the bulk of these to the souls in purgatory rather than the 'default' option of having them applied to yourself. Consider, for example, if you are gaining daily plenary indulgences (say, by praying the Rosary daily in a church, receiving Communion and praying for the Pope's intentions daily, and going to Confession monthly).

If you have gained a plenary indulgence for yourself the previous day, then the new plenary indulgence applied to yourself remits only the debt of purgatorial punishment you have started building up again by your sins of just that one day – versus the possibility of releasing a soul in purgatory from the debt of a lifetime of sin. All those souls whom you thus assist into heaven will doubtless continue to pray for you, in gratitude, until the day when you join them there.

When applying an indulgence to the souls in purgatory (which is like a prayer offered for them), although you cannot guarantee that the indulgence be applied to a particular soul, naturally you can ask God for this.

One way of approaching this question of ‘applying’ the indulgences, endorsed in the spiritual tradition (for example in the ‘Total Consecration to Mary’ expounded by St Louis de Montfort), is to form in advance the habitual intention of giving all your future indulgences into the hands of Our Lady, for her to apply as she chooses. She will certainly do this in the way most beneficial to the glory of God, the good of souls, and your own good – much better than you could achieve yourself. This frees you from the burden of thinking with each indulgence how you will apply it, and is also very pleasing to God as an act of generosity and trust. And, you can ask that the last plenary indulgence of your life, whichever that turns out to be, be applied to yourself.

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**‘Partial’ indulgences** are available for numerous other prayers and actions (or for when the conditions for a plenary indulgence are not completely fulfilled). In a partial indulgence, the Church doubles the remission of purgatorial punishment that would be gained by the prayer or action simply taken in itself.

There are **four ‘general grants’** of partial indulgences, given for:

1. While carrying out our duties and enduring the hardships of life, **raising our minds in humble trust to God, and making, at least mentally, some ‘pious invocation’** (very short prayer).
  2. Led by a spirit of faith, **giving compassionately of ourselves or our goods to serve those in need.**
  3. In a spirit of penance, **voluntarily abstaining from something that is licit for and pleasing to us.**
  4. In daily life, **voluntarily giving explicit witness to our faith before others.**
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*Thanks be to God that, wherever the Christian life is lived fervently,  
the faithful love indulgences and devoutly use them.*

*Pope St John Paul II (20 March 1998)*