

What Are Indulgences?

Indulgences are a part of the Church's teaching on the forgiveness of sins. Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we receive forgiveness for our sins, and all punishment is remitted. Through the Sacrament of Penance, sins are also forgiven, and the eternal penalty that is due to sin—namely, damnation, the eternal loss of the presence of God—is taken away. However, consequences still remain that the sinner must bear. This is what is traditionally called the temporal punishment for sin.

By its very nature, every sin inevitably causes suffering for the one who has committed it. Every sinful act creates disorder within the soul of the human person. Sin also disrupts one's relationships with God, with the Church, with other people, and with the world as a whole. Those who have received forgiveness for their sins may still have an obligation to undergo a process of purification and to restore these disrupted relationships. The necessary and painful process that brings this reconciliation and purification can take place either in this life or in Purgatory, because whatever part of the process remains unfinished at death must be completed in Purgatory.

Through an indulgence, God grants that through the prayer of the Church the temporal penalty for sin due to someone be reduced (as in the case of a partial indulgence) or be eliminated (as in the case of a plenary indulgence). By God's grace, participation in a prayer or action that has an indulgence attached to it brings about the necessary reconciliation without the suffering that would normally accompany it. The granting of an indulgence by the Church is "the expression of the Church's full confidence of being heard by the Father when—in view of Christ's merits and, by his gift, those of Our Lady and the saints—she asks him to mitigate or cancel the painful aspect of punishment by fostering its medicinal aspect through other channels of grace."

How Can Indulgences Remove Some or All of the Temporal Punishment of Sin?

It is because of the Communion of Saints and the graciousness of God, our Father, that some or all of the temporal punishment for sin is removed. Although we always have to face the consequences of our sins in the form of the temporal punishment for sin, as members of the Body of Christ we are never simply on our own. We are linked with Christ and with the martyrs and saints, and we benefit from their holiness in such a way as to be freed from at least a portion of the temporal punishment for sin. "In this wonderful exchange, the holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others."

As a result of the communion that exists between Christ and all the members of the Church, the Church has a treasury of inexhaustible benefits that flow from Christ's Passion, death, and Resurrection. Since the martyrs and saints have accomplished all that they have in union with Christ, these benefits also include the value of their prayers and good works. "This treasury also includes the truly immense, unfathomable and ever pristine value before God of the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, who following in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have sanctified their lives and fulfilled the mission entrusted to them by the Father. Thus while attaining their own salvation, they have also cooperated in the salvation of their brothers in the unity of the Mystical Body."

Through her union with Christ, the Church has the authority to dispense these benefits. As a means of encouraging the faithful to perform good works and acts of devotion, and so to grow in holiness, the Church offers indulgences.

To receive a plenary indulgence, ***in addition to doing an indulgenced work*** prescribed by the church, it is required that we:

- (1) make a sacramental confession within 21 days before or after doing the indulgenced work. (To gain indulgences, whether plenary or partial, it is necessary that the faithful be in the state of grace at least at the time the indulgenced work is completed.)
- (2) receive Holy Communion on the day of the work
- (3) pray for the intentions of the Holy Father
- (4) be detached from all sin (which means you are working on overcoming any habitual sins)

If these conditions are only incompletely fulfilled, the indulgence obtained will be only partial.

A plenary indulgence can be gained only once a day but there is no limit to the number of partial indulgences one may obtain.

Indulgences can always be applied **either to oneself or to the souls of the deceased**, but they cannot be applied to other persons living on earth. In receiving indulgences, we should not think that we have earned them. Our efforts express our openness to receiving God's mercy. As a result, we grow closer to Jesus and so are able to reap the benefit of his salvation.

How Does One Gain an Indulgence?

Plenary indulgences are attached to certain prayers and to certain devotional or charitable practices that we undertake with the intention of making the needed reparation. Examples of such practices approved by the Church include Eucharistic adoration that lasts at least one-half hour, devout recitation of the rosary with another person or in the presence of Our Lord, prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture for at least 15 minutes, the making of the Way of the Cross, participation in a Eucharistic procession on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, and participation in a parish mission.