



WHAT ARE INDULGENCES?

The doctrine about indulgences is part of our Catholic faith. However, it remains unclear and clouded in the minds of most of the faithful. For some people, this doctrine is something from the Middle Ages, something passé, or even worse, something “a modern believer should not accept.”

The Jubilee of Mercy is giving us a new opportunity to reflect upon indulgences, and to experience them as part of “the holiness of the Church, who bestows upon all the fruits of Christ’s redemption, so that God’s love and forgiveness may extend everywhere” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 22).

To understand what indulgences are, we need to understand, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains “that sin has a **double consequence**” (nn. 1471-1473). Yes, **double**. Not everyone is aware of this. It seems that this concept has been forgotten, along with an adequate understanding of the nature of sin, or the distinction between mortal and venial sin. That is why the Jubilee Year, bringing the true doctrine of the Church and the opportunity to be reconciled with God and the Church, gives us the opportunity to rejoice, experiencing the mercy of our Lord.

Double consequence. What does it mean? Again, the Catechism explains: “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 following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain” (n. 1472).

Let me try to illustrate this concept with something that happened to me years ago. When I was a child, I used to go to an outdoor playground with my brothers and our friends, even during the rainy season (the tropical weather in Costa Rica allows that). One day when we were playing after a heavy storm, there was a lot of mud around. Suddenly, one of the boys “out of the blue” threw mud on my best friend’s new shirt. Was it just “a game”? Or was he jealous because my friend was sporting a brand new shirt of our favorite soccer team? After so many years, we are still talking about that incident.

Naturally, my friend had mixed feelings: he was furious, and hurt. He did not want to play anymore, especially with that child. His shirt was a mess, as well as his heart.

Some of us tried to help him, cleaning his shirt as much as we could. Then he calmed down. Children have gentle hearts, so he forgave the other boy, and about half an hour later we were all playing together again, as if nothing had happened! But his shirt was still dirty. It took his mother an extra effort to clean the leftover mud.

I think this story may help us to understand what indulgences are.

Sin, specifically mortal sin, destroys our communion with God and with the Church (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1472). But our merciful God is always willing to restore that loving relationship. That is what we experience every time we go to Confession. “May God the Father of mercies... through the ministry of the Church... grant you pardon and peace” (*Formula of absolution of the Sacrament of Penance*).

God forgives. Always. He “never gets tired of forgiving. It is we who get tired of asking for forgiveness.” (Pope Francis, *Angelus*, March 17, 2013). That unconditional forgiveness is given to us after we acknowledge our sins, repent and celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Yet something else is still needed.

Going back to my little story, when my friend forgave the child who threw mud at him, communion was restored. But the consequences of what happened were still apparent: his shirt was still dirty. Something else had to happen: the shirt had to be carefully washed. At that point, forgiveness was granted, communion was restored... but somebody had to deal with the consequences of that mud fight.

That would be what the indulgences bring to us: the remission of the “temporal punishment” of sin.

This is part of our faith of everlasting life, and in the different stages present there: Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. The “eternal punishment of sin” happens in Hell. The “temporal punishment of sin” leads a soul to Purgatory, which is not a definitive state: those souls will be delivered and brought to Heaven at some point. Our intercession for the souls in Purgatory is essential for that, and that is why we can apply indulgences for them as I will explain later.

PARTIAL INDULGENCES AND PLENARY INDULGENCES

“An indulgence is partial or plenary according to whether it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due sin” (Apostolic Penitentiary, *Manual of Indulgences*, Norm 2).

Let's say: a plenary indulgence is like taking all the mud from the shirt; a partial indulgence is taking *some* of it.

Saint John Paul II once explained that indulgences are "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" [emphasis added] (General audience, September 29, 1999).

INDULGENCES FOR THE LIVING AND FOR THE DEAD

"The Church lives within the communion of the saints...Their holiness comes to the aid of our weakness in a way that enables the Church, with her maternal prayers and her way of life, to fortify the weakness of some with the strength of others" (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 22).

Indulgences are part of those graces exchanged in the communion of saints. During our earthly life, we, the Pilgrim Church (also called the Militant Church) live in communion with those in Heaven (the Triumphant Church) as well with those in Purgatory (the Suffering Church), and "our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 958).

That is why we believe we can apply indulgences to those souls in Purgatory. Isn't that beautiful? In the communion of saints, we, while in this world, can impact what is happening in eternity! We can help those souls in Purgatory to go to Heaven!

HOW DO I OBTAIN AN INDULGENCE DURING THE JUBILEE OF MERCY?

The power to grant indulgences belongs to the Roman Pontiff and those who have explicitly received from him the authority to concede them (Apostolic Penitentiary, *Manual of Indulgences*, Norm 5).

In a letter from September 1, His Holiness Pope Francis gave the conditions to obtain the indulgences during the Jubilee of Mercy. The conditions are as follows:

For able-bodied Catholics

ALL the following conditions are to be fulfilled:

- Make a pilgrimage and pass through the Holy Door. In the Diocese of Oakland, Bishop Barber designated the Cathedral of Christ the Light as the only Holy Door in the Diocese. Every Diocese will have at least one Holy Door available.

"The practice of *pilgrimage* has a special place in the Holy Year, because it represents the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a *viator*, a pilgrim travelling along the road, making his way to the desired destination. Similarly, to reach the Holy Door in Rome or in any other place in the

world, everyone, each according to his or her ability, will have to make a pilgrimage. This will be a sign that mercy is also a goal to reach and requires dedication and sacrifice. May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion: by crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God's mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us. (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 14)

- Go to confession.
- Receive Holy Communion "with a reflection of mercy."
- Make a profession of faith (Credo).
- Pray for the Pope and his intentions (i.e. One Our Father, three Hail Mary and Gloria).

Those conditions "may be fulfilled several days before or after the performance of the prescribed work; it is, however, fitting that Communion be received and the prayer for the intention of the Holy Father be said on the same day the work (i.e. the Pilgrimage to the Cathedral) is performed." (Apostolic Penitentiary, *Manual of Indulgences*, Norm 20).

For the elderly, confined and the ill

The Pope explained that they can obtain the indulgence by "living with faith and joyful hope this moment of trial", OR by attending Mass and community prayer "even through the various means of communication."

For those in prison

The grace of the indulgence will be available for them in their prison chapels: "May the gesture of directing their thought and prayer to the Father each time they cross the threshold of their cell signify for them their passage through the Holy Door, because the mercy of God is able to transform hearts, and is also able to transform bars into an experience of freedom," the Pope said.

For the deceased

As explained, the deceased can benefit from the indulgences we apply for them, through the prayers of the faithful.

"The faithful can obtain partial or plenary indulgences for themselves, or they can apply them to the dead by way of suffrage" (Apostolic Penitentiary, *Manual of Indulgences*, Norm 3). It is important also to remember that Plenary indulgences can be obtained only once a day, but multiple partial indulgences can be obtain in one day.

I hope we will all enjoy the many graces this Jubilee of Mercy is bringing to us.