

INDULGENCES

The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy declared by Pope Francis has created renewed interest in the topic of indulgences, defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) as “a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven.”

“Every sin has consequences. It disrupts our communion with God and the Church, weakens our ability to resist temptation and hurts others. The necessity of healing these consequences, once the sin itself has been forgiven, is called temporal punishment” (United States Catholic Catechism for Adults USCCA, 2006). Prayer, fasting, almsgiving and other works of charity, which are emphasized especially during Lent, can take away entirely or diminish this temporal punishment. “Because of the fullness of redemption obtained for us by Christ, the Church attaches to certain prayers and actions an *indulgence* or pardon, that is, the full or partial remission of temporal punishment. Christ, acting through the Church, brings about the healing of the consequences of sin when an individual uses such a prayer or engages in such an action.” (USCCA).

The Church has recognized from its earliest times, the importance of atoning to God for sin. The Apostles themselves urged their disciples to pray for the salvation of sinners. In the early centuries, when seeking forgiveness of serious sin was a public affair, penitents customarily asked for the intercession of the faith community. The Church of the Fathers taught the practice of offering good works for the salvation of sinners, even the deceased. The Apostolic Constitution on Indulgences (ACI, 1967) says of these early practices: “In all this, there was no thought that the individual members of the Church were acting through their personal powers for the pardon of the sins of others. The belief rather was that the Church itself precisely as it is the one Body joined to Christ the Head made expiation in its individual members.” Therefore, in the case of indulgences, the Church “authoritatively dispenses to the faithful who are rightly disposed, the treasury of the expiatory works of Christ and the saints for the remission of temporal punishment.” (ACI)

The Church has created *Norms for Indulgences* (The Handbook of Indulgences, 1988). Some are:

1. An indulgence is either plenary or partial, i.e. it frees a person either from all or from some of the temporal punishment due to sins.
2. Only the Holy Father has the authority to grant indulgences or persons recognized in law or granted the power by the Pope. Diocesan Bishops can grant partial indulgences.
3. To be capable of gaining indulgences a person must be baptized and in a state of grace and must have at least the general intention of gaining the indulgence. The person must perform the acts at the time stipulated and in the manner required.
4. In addition to #3, the gaining of a plenary indulgence requires fulfillment of three conditions: sacramental confession, Holy Communion, prayer for pope’s intentions.