

## ***Indulgences: Special Gifts of God's Mercy for All Seasons***

### ***I Introduction:***

***Although the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, which Pope Francis promulgated two years ago, closed with the Feast of Christ the King, the season of God's infinite mercy with the opportunity of sharing in the treasury of the Church's indulgences is still wide open. In this context I would like to reflect with you on the nature, meaning and availability of indulgences, such great gifts of God's mercy available both to ourselves and the souls in Purgatory. It is fair to say that a great many Catholics today have little understanding or appreciation of indulgences and their importance. This is particularly true of younger Catholics, many of whom have never even heard of indulgences or, if they have, consider them of little relevance to the Christian life. Sadly both groups are missing out on a great blessing for their own spiritual growth and the wonderful opportunity to help deceased relatives and friends complete their time of purification in purgatory and enter more quickly into the surpassing joys of heaven.***

### ***II Proper Definition and Understanding:***

***Definition: an indulgence is the remission of the debt of temporal punishment due to sin which still remains after a person's guilt has been forgiven through sacramental absolution or other suitable means. In explaining this definition it is necessary to note, first of all, that every personal sin, mortal or venial, has two distinct effects or consequences. The first and more important of these effects of sin is guilt, whereby we personally become responsible doers of moral evil in God's eyes. Our very being is stamped, so to speak, with offenses against the infinite goodness and majesty of God. This condition of being guilty before the All-holy Lord is not the feeling of shame or failure we may experience for our sins but an objective reality of our very personhood. It can only be remedied and remitted by God's gracious gift of forgiveness. While with God's grace we can express contrition and repentance for our sins, essential conditions of being forgiven, we can in no way earn God's forgiveness and the remission of the guilt due to our sin.***

***The second significant consequence of sin, mortal or venial, is the sinner's liability to God's punishment for undercutting the order of divine justice but, more importantly, for denigrating the infinite dignity and holiness of God. Over and above the remission of guilt for our sins through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we remain, nonetheless, responsible for the temporal punishment which our sins have merited before God.***

(2)

*This personal share in the debt of punishment for our sins is but a tiny fraction of the punishment which we really deserve for having offended the immeasurable holiness and glory of God. Accordingly, we must make some restitution to God either in the present life or in the next, if we are to participate fully in the life of the Trinity and gaze on the very face of God. It is in regard to this second consequence of sin, the sinner's liability for punishment before God, where indulgences come into play.*

*It is, I think, somewhat difficult to understand the reason why penitents whose sins have been fully forgiven by God still need, nonetheless, to undergo punishment for them. We tend to think, if God in his great mercy has fully forgiven our sins, he must also have forgiven or remitted the penalty or punishment due our sins. Why is it that our sincere contrition and repentance alone do not suffice or satisfy for our offenses against God? An analogy on the human level may help, although it is important to recognize that our offenses against God immeasurably surpass any offense we may commit against the neighbor. Consider the following example. Suppose that you have participated in slanderous gossip about a good friend thereby denigrating his dignity and good name. What must you do to restore fully your relation with that friend? It is not sufficient that you express sincere sorrow and regret to the person you have offended by asking his forgiveness. In justice you also need to do all that you reasonably can to restore his good name and reputation. In a similar manner, though no adequate comparison exists, it is not sufficient for you merely to express serious sorrow and regret in asking God for forgiveness. You also need in justice to make serious reparation for the denigration of God's surpassing honor and dignity which you have caused by your sins.*

### ***III Further Significant Aspects of the Doctrine of Indulgences:***

*First of all, indulgences, properly understood, never remit the guilt of sin but apply only to the remission of the punishment due sin. Consequently, if one's guilt for a specific sin, whether mortal or venial, remains unforgiven, the effort to gain an indulgence for the punishment of that sin will have no effect.*

*Secondly, it is important to note that indulgences do not, strictly speaking, "cancel", either totally or in part, the debt of punishment owed God by reason of one's offenses against God's dignity. Rather the infinite merits of Christ's passion and death are granted the sinner as a way of satisfying one's debt. Strictly speaking, we are not excused from the punishment due our sins by gaining an indulgence; rather we are given the means of paying for them through the surpassing merits of Jesus and the saints, which the Church applies to us through the authority given to it by the Lord.*

(3)

**Finally we might note that indulgences with the capacity to remove all or part of the punishment due one's sin can only be applied to oneself or the souls in purgatory. We cannot apply the merciful fruits of indulgences we may have gained to other living persons.**

#### **IV Two Kinds of Indulgences: Plenary and Partial**

**The first kind of indulgence and the more important of the two types is called "plenary" (derived from the Latin adjective meaning "full" or "complete") and, accordingly, is one that remits fully and completely the debt of punishment a sinner owes to God for his forgiven sins up to that moment. In a similar manner, if a soul in purgatory is granted a plenary indulgence through the good efforts of a relative or friend, the suffering soul's debt of punishment will also be fully and completely remitted, unless the sinner has not received God's forgiveness for them. (Recall that indulgences can't forgive the guilt of sin; they can only remit the debt of punishment due once the guilt of the sin has been duly forgiven.)**

**The second kind of indulgence is called a partial indulgence and it is one that remits only a part of the temporal punishment due to forgiven sin whether the person gaining the indulgence applies it to himself or to a soul in purgatory. It will remit 1% of the due punishment, 99% of the penalty or any amount in between, depending on 3 important factors: (1) the nature of the action undertaken, (2) the degree of perfection with which the action is performed, and (3) the holiness of the individual performing the action.**

#### **V Conditions for Gaining a Partial Indulgence:**

**To gain a partial indulgence one must:**

- 1. Be baptized.**
- 2. Be in the state of grace.**
- 3. Have the intention of gaining the indulgence**
- 4. Be inwardly contrite for one's sins**
- 5. Say the prayer or perform the work correctly**

#### **Notes on the 5 Conditions for Gaining a Partial Indulgence:**

**In respect to the third condition stated above one need not have an explicit intention for gaining each and every partial indulgence. A habitual or general intention is sufficient. The simplest and easiest way to do this is to say out loud or in one's mind: "Lord, I wish to gain every indulgence which I can." For example, a partial indulgence is available each time one makes the sign of the cross (saying the prayer and forming the gesture).**

(4)

*On a given day one may make the sign of the cross on a number of appropriate occasions but there is no need to remember that an indulgence is available each time one makes the sign of the cross. While a habitual intention for gaining indulgences remains operative unless revoked it is helpful to renew it from time to time, perhaps on solemn feast days or even every day as part of one's morning offering.*

*Over and above the general intention of gaining partial indulgences one needs to have a particular intention regarding the recipient of the indulgences which one seeks to gain. One may gain indulgences for the remission of temporal punishment due to their own sins or on behalf of relatives, friends and others whom they believe are in purgatory still making reparation for their sins.*

*The fourth condition in the list above is fairly recent and perhaps needs some further explanation. What is the meaning of the phrase "inwardly contrite"? Fr. Edward Peters in his recent and excellent work on indulgences says the following:*

*One can establish one's sense of inward sorrow in different ways. The first and perhaps most salutary way is that of consciously renewing one's contrition when one is striving to obtain an indulgence. A few words, even mentally expressed such as "Jesus, I am sorry for my sins" is sufficient.*

#### **VI Conditions for Gaining a Plenary Indulgence:**

*To gain a plenary indulgence—limited to one per day—one must:*

- 1. Be baptized and be in the state of grace*
- 2. Go to Confession within the prescribed period of time.*
- 3. Receive Communion within the prescribed period of time.*
- 4. Have no attachment to sin, even venial sin.*
- 5. Pray for the intentions of the Holy Father.  
(One Our Father and one Hail Mary are sufficient)*
- 6. Have the intention of gaining the indulgence.*
- 7. Perform correctly the assigned work or prayer.*

#### **Notes on the seven conditions necessary for gaining a plenary Indulgence:**

*The second and third conditions in the above list regard a prescribed period of time for fulfilling the requirement of going to Confession and receiving the Eucharist as conditions for gaining a plenary indulgence. The allowed time period is the same for both: 20 days preceding the performance of the assigned work or prayer and 20 days after it. Ideally one should go to confession during the week prior to doing the assigned work or prayer and receive Communion on the day on which the assigned work or prayer is carried out.*

(5)

*The other condition needing explanation is the fourth in the above list: "Have no attachment to sin, even venial sin". It is this condition, more than all of the others combined, which makes gaining a plenary indulgence difficult. What is its meaning? Let me quote Fr. Peters again:*

*Freedom from attachment to sin means more than just the commitment to avoid committing sins. That is a start, of course, but not the end of one's effort to exclude sin from one's life. Freedom from attachment to sin means more; it means freedom for any affection for sin, elimination of fondness for sin (even in memory), exclusion of openness to sin.*

**VII Some Suitable Works and Prayers for Gaining a Plenary Indulgence:**

- a. Half an hour of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.*
- b. Recitation of the rosary with family or a group.*
- c. Individual recitation of the rosary before the Blessed Sacrament.*
- d. Prayerful reading of the Scripture for 30 minutes.*
- e. Making the Stations of the Cross in a church.*

**VIII Some Suitable Works and Prayers for Gaining a Partial Indulgence:**

- a. Making the sign of the Cross reverently while pronouncing the words.*
- b. Praying a number of pious invocations: "My God"; "God help me"; "Jesus"; "Praised be Jesus Christ"; "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph"; "Blessed be God"; "Your will be done"; "My Lord and my God"; "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner"; "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit".*
- c. Reciting Marian prayers: the Angelus, Memorare, Hail Holy Queen.*
- d. Reciting the Apostle's or Nicene Creed.*
- e. Praying the Acts of Faith, Hope, and Charity singly or as a group.*
- f. Praying to one's angel: Angel of God.*
- g. Making an examination of conscience.*
- h. Making a spiritual Communion.*
- i. Reading the Scripture for 15 minutes*

**IX Some Concluding Remarks:**

*As was indicated earlier, in seeking to gain a plenary indulgence the most difficult condition to fulfill is the need to overcome all attachment to sin, even venial sin—a level of spiritual growth not easily achieved. Given this difficulty one might decide not to try gaining a plenary indulgence.*

(6)

*This would be a mistake, however, because, even if one fails to fulfill all the conditions required for a plenary indulgence, he or she would still gain a partial indulgence, a very fruitful one, by reason of the more important work or prayer undertaken and the graces of Confession and Communion one would receive.*

*In the contemporary life of the Church it's sad how many serious and committed Catholics are unaware of the great blessing indulgences can be for their own spiritual growth and for deceased family members, relatives, and friends. Also there are many committed and devout Catholics, I think, who are not aware of how easy it is to gain partial indulgences and a good number of them on a given day, for example making the sign of the cross, using the pious invocation "Jesus", "God help me", reciting the "Memorare", praying the prayer to one's guardian angel, etc. Many of us are very aware of the great need for the corporal works of mercy today but we easily overlook the need and opportunity of bestowing great blessings on family, friends, and neighbors who have died through the great spiritual work of mercy—gaining indulgences on their behalf.*

*Robert Egan, S.J.*