

The Teaching of the Catholic Church on Indulgences

Etymological background:

- From Latin, originally meaning "kindness or favor"; later meant "the remission of a tax or debt."
- In Roman Law and Old Testament (Isiah 61:1) it expressed a "releasing from captivity or punishment."
- The special sense that "indulgence" is used in the Church is to mean a "remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, the guilt of which has been forgiven."

So what exactly does that mean? It may be better to start off with a look at what it doesn't mean.

What it does NOT mean:

- is NOT a permission to commit sin or the pardon of future sin (the Church has neither power to do so)
- is NOT the forgiveness of the guilt of sin (i.e. it doesn't take the place of Sacramental Confession); rather, it is only valid with the 'preexisting condition' that the sin already having been forgiven in Confession.
- is NOT an exemption from any law or duty (e.g. exemption from our Sunday and Holy Day Obligation)
- is NOT an exemption from the obligation required for forgiveness of certain sins (e.g. restitution); rather, it is a more "complete" payment of the debt which the sinner owes to God.
- does NOT give you immunity from temptation or create a "force field" to keep you from sinning again.
- does NOT allow one to secure their salvation or release a person's soul from Purgatory.

What an Indulgence IS:

- Extra-sacramental remission of temporal punishment for sins that have been forgiven by God, but which still require temporal punishment for God's Divine Justice
- This remission is granted by the Church through the power of the keys Christ gave His Church (Matt 16:19)

Sacramental Forgiveness of Sin:

- Baptism-removes all guilt of sin as well as all of the penalties attached to the sin.
- Penance-guilt of sin (and the eternal punishment connected to mortal sin) are removed, but the temporal punishment connected with mortal and venial sin required by God's Divine Justice still remains.
- Temporal punishment is either fulfilled in this life and/or in the next (i.e. Purgatory)

- Indulgence is offered to the penitent sinner by Christ's Bride, the Church, to provide a means of discharging this debt while still on earth.

Granting of Indulgences

- The Church grants an Indulgence as an application of the superabundant merits of Christ and of the saints for a just and reasonable motive.
- When the Pope/Bishop grants an indulgence, they do not offer personal merits, but only use their jurisdictional powers of the Church (which herself is only an 'administrator', not the 'owner' of the superabundant merits).
- "He who gains indulgences is not thereby released outright from what he owes as penalty, but is provided with the means of paying it" (St. Thomas Aquinas); the Church does not leave the penitent helplessly in debt, nor does she acquit him of all further accounting, but rather enables the penitent to meet their obligations.
- When granting, the Church keeps in mind both God's Mercy and the demands of God's Justice, and uses these to determine the level of punishment removed, and the conditions the penitent must fulfill to gain the indulgence.
- The Church exercises her jurisdiction over the living in granting Indulgences that removes temporal punishment.
- Because the Church has no jurisdiction over the dead, she can only petition God to accept the works and in consideration to shorten the sufferings of the souls in Purgatory.

Two Types of Indulgences

Plenary Indulgence

- The remission of the entire temporal punishment due to sin (up to that point in your life)
- In addition to the Indulgenced Act, other requirements must be fulfilled within several days (preferably the day the Act is performed, especially Eucharistic Communion):
 - Going to Confession
 - Receive the Eucharist
 - Pray for the Pope (at least one Our Father and One Marian Prayer (e.g. Hail Mary; Hail, Holy Queen)
- It is further required that all attachment to sin, even to venial sin, be absent. (i.e. you don't have the desire to commit a sin)
- If not all of these conditions are met, then the Plenary Indulgence becomes a Partial Indulgence
- You may use the "same" Confession for more than one Plenary Indulgence, but you must receive the Eucharist and pray for the Pope each time you intend to gain a Plenary Indulgence

Partial Indulgence

- The remission of only a portion of the temporal punishment.

- Amount of remission is decided by the church based on the conditions and the act it prescribes.
- "Time" were attached with Partial Indulgences (i.e. 500 days Indulgence) to measure the relative value of one Indulgence versus another; however, it was misunderstood as an absolute measure, so adding "time" was ended.
- Only God knows the exact penalty that remains for us to endure for our sins, so the Church has no power to attach an absolute 'time' or 'level' to Partial Indulgences.

Other notes about Plenary and Partial Indulgences:

- You must perform the works with the intention of gaining an Indulgence.
- Only one Plenary Indulgence can be obtained each day (except for those at the Moment of Death); multiple Partial Indulgences can be obtained in a single day

The power to grant Indulgences

- Sacramental forgiveness of sin in Confession extends to both the guilt of the sin and the eternal punishment - given this, why would the Church not be able to also free the penitent from a lesser, temporal penalty?
- "I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in Heaven." (Matt 16:19)