

What is An Indulgence?

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven.¹ There are specific conditions for receiving an indulgence.

As a result of the communion that exists between Christ and all the members of the Church, the Church has a treasury of spiritual goods that is inexhaustible. The source of these spiritual goods is Christ. Through her union with Christ, the Church has the authority to dispense this treasury. When the Church does this, in order to spur people to acts of piety and charity, the Church requires those who seek an indulgence to perform some good work or act of devotion.

An indulgence does not confer grace. An indulgence is not a remission of the guilt due to sin. The guilt due to sin is ordinarily taken away by the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance (confession), in which we receive forgiveness for sins through Jesus Christ. Although guilt is taken away, and with it the eternal penalty that is due to sin, namely, damnation, the eternal loss of the presence of God, there remain consequences for sins that those who have committed them must bear. There is what is traditionally called the temporal punishment for sin.

Every sinful act creates a disorder within the soul of the human person; it distorts our desires and affections, leaving us with "an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory." Furthermore, sin disrupts one's relationships with God, with the Church, with other people, and with the world as a whole. The communion intended by God is damaged or lost. Those who have received forgiveness for their sins through the sacraments still have an obligation to undergo a difficult and painful process (the temporal penalty for sin) to be purified of the consequences of their sins and to restore the disrupted relationships. The necessary and painful process that brings restoration and purification can take place either in this life or in Purgatory, as whatever part of the process remains unfinished at death must be completed in Purgatory.

Through an indulgence, God grants the prayer of the Church that the temporal penalty for sin due to someone be reduced [partial indulgence], or possibly eliminated [plenary indulgence]. By God's grace, participation in a prayer or action that has an indulgence attached to it brings about the necessary restoration and reparation 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."²

What is the difference between a partial and plenary indulgence?

An indulgence is partial or plenary according to whether it removes either part [partial] or all [plenary] of the temporal punishment due to sin.³

What are the conditions for obtaining an indulgence?

In order to be capable of gaining indulgences one must be baptized, not excommunicated, and in the state of grace at least at the completion of the prescribed works. To gain an indulgence, one must have at least the general intention of doing so.⁴

Plenary Indulgence: Furthermore, for reception of a Plenary Indulgence, which grants the remission of all temporal punishment due to sin, in addition to this good work or act of devotion, the Church specifies four conditions: (1) sacramental confession, (2) reception of Holy Communion, (3) prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father, and (4) complete detachment from all sin, even venial sin.⁵

Partial Indulgences: If the full disposition is lacking, or if the work and the four prescribed conditions are not fulfilled, [save certain specified exceptions], the indulgence will only be partial.⁶

Note on Partial Indulgences: In the past, partial indulgences were "counted" in days (e.g. 300 days) or years (e.g. 5 years). Catholics often mistakenly thought that this meant "time off of purgatory." Since there is no time in purgatory, as we understand it, it meant instead the remission of temporal punishment analogous to a certain amount of penitence as practiced in the early Church. This was a very generous standard, since the penitence required for sacramental absolution in the early centuries was arduous, indeed. However, with Pope Paul VI's 1968 revision of the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum* (Collection or Handbook of Indulgences), this confusing way of counting partial indulgences was suppressed, and the evaluation of a partial indulgence left to God.⁷

Can a baptized person obtain an indulgence for someone else?

The faithful can obtain Partial or Plenary indulgences for themselves, or they can apply them to the dead.⁸

1 Manual of Indulgences N1

2 From USCCB website: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/populardevotional-practices-basic-questions-and-answers.cfm>

3 Manual of Indulgences N2

4 Manual of Indulgences N17

5 From USCCB website: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/populardevotional-practices-basic-questions-and-answers.cfm>

6 Manual of Indulgences N20

7 From EWTN website: <https://www.ewtn.com/Devotionals/mercy/what.htm>

8 Manual of Indulgences N3