

Indulgences

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.... If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ~ 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 26

IN THE 16th century, a German monk named Martin Luther was scandalized — and rightly so — about the corruption and laxity in the Church of his day. The flash-point issue was the Church’s granting of indulgences. At the time of Luther, this practice of the Church was being so seriously mishandled by some of the Church’s representatives that indulgences were being bought and sold, a sinful practice and a scandal to many others besides Luther. (Tragically, Luther eventually broke away altogether because of this and other disagreements he had with the Church.) The Church, of course, did correct its ministers’ mishandling of the granting of indulgences, but it never had to correct its teaching, for the teaching was never in error. The problem of incorrect transmission of the Church’s teachings, unfortunately, always exists, although the errors taught in the name of the Church vary in different times and different cultures. In the case of Luther, as in the case of so many others, concern about a legitimate problem was transformed into denial of the authority of the Church and the truth of its teachings.

The Consequences of Sin

Mortal (serious) sin cuts a person off from God, while venial (less serious) sin wounds this relation-



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ship (see handout entitled What is Sin?). A person who dies in a state of mortal sin condemns himself or herself to eternal separation from God, an eternal self-inflicted punishment. God forgives anyone of even the most terrible sin who approaches him in a true state of repentance. However, repentance and forgiveness do not restore a soul to its original state of purity. Sin has left its mark, for each sin, however small, weakens our virtue and attachment to God, strengthens our own disordered desires, and makes committing the next sin easier. Furthermore, each sin has consequences that repentance and God’s forgiveness do not erase. This is similar to a child who breaks a neighbor’s window with a baseball. The child can sincerely apologize to the neighbor, but the neighbor will still, quite reasonably, expect the child to pay to replace the window. A wife deeply hurt by her husband reasonably expects him to do something more than apologize to restore their relationship. A thief is reasonably expected to repay stolen goods, and a liar to restore the reputation of someone he or she has injured. In many cases, when true reparation (that is, “repair”) is not possible, a criminal must undergo imprisonment — a reparation by way of loss of liberty and the pursuit of the everyday business of living.

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Our Need for Reparation

All of our sins, since they wound the Body of Christ as well as offend God, require some form of reparation. This is true regardless of whether these sins are also crimes involving civil judgment and punishment. This reparation goes by the name of **temporal punishment** (that is, punishment that is not eternal), and it can occur either in this life or in Purgatory (see handout on Purgatory). Temporal punishment in this life reduces the amount necessary in Purgatory.

Since nothing we can do, of ourselves, can truly satisfy God’s infinite justice, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ came to take our sins on himself: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor 5:21). Through his saving action, we can be purified, having *“washed [our] robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Rv 7:14). However, Jesus’ actions do not make our own efforts at reparation unnecessary, however limited and unable to make full restoration they are. While the infinite merit of Jesus is what makes our good acts meritorious, the distortions to our own soul, and the damage we have done to the Body of Christ, requires us to ourselves act to repair the injury.

There are a number of ways to make reparation. St. Peter teaches us that *“love covers a multitude of sins”* (1 Pt 4:8), and St. James that *“whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins”* (Jas 5:20). By loving others, and helping others back to Christ, we not only help repair the damage we have done to the human community, but also undo the damage of sin by strengthening our attachment to God. In general,



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prayer, mortifications, and good acts can accomplish much. By doing so, we can seek to heal the wounds we have inflicted on the Body of Christ as well as ourselves.

What Indulgences Are, and How They Work

Acts of love can take a variety of forms, and the Church has used her authority of binding and loosing (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18) to define some of these specifically as ways to undo the punishment due to sin, to make atonement and reparation, so that our temporal punishment is lessened. An **indulgence** “is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints”¹(CCC 1471). It is essential to understand that an indulgence is not forgiveness of sin, but a way of removing some of the need for punishment in this life or in the next, in Purgatory. By reason of its authority, the Church may give to sinners a share in the merits of Christ and the saints to lessen, or remove, the temporal punishment due to sin. God’s children can gain spiritual merit from the abundance of Christ’s mercy by their performance of good works in cooperation with his grace.

¹ Paul VI, apostolic constitution, *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, Norm 1



Statue of St. Martin on the exterior of the Cathedral of Chartres, France, dating from the 13th century

The faithful Christian who is in the state of grace (without unforgiven sin) and who “is duly disposed” (that is, has the right intention) can, by saying a given prayer or performing specified good works, merit this remission of punishment, the amount of remission determined by the authority of the Church. The person seeking the indulgence cannot be merely trying to pile up chits with God, an attitude that is no more acceptable to our Heavenly Father than it would be to the members of our own families or our neighbors.

Indulgences can be **partial** or **plenary**. A partial indulgence is a remission of part of the temporal punishment, while a plenary indulgence remits all of it (to that point in the person’s life; future punishment cannot be remitted any more than sin can be forgiven in advance). A plenary indulgence usually requires that the person have recently received the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, and to have a disposition of detachment from sin, in addition to a specified prayer or good work. The intention of the heart is the critical matter; it is not a “mechanical” or “automatic” thing to receive an indulgence.

Indulgences May Not be Bought and Sold

By their nature, spiritual goods cannot be bought and sold. The granting of indulgences cannot be merely a matter of monetary donations to a cause, however good the cause might be. Ensuring that almsgiving does not deteriorate into an effort to “sell Heaven” or to “buy Paradise” is a matter of good in-

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struction and good Church discipline. But we must remember that the misuse of a good thing, such as the misuse of indulgences in the 16th century, does not make the good thing bad. It is the misuse that must be corrected, so that the good thing can be preserved.

Why Indulgences Can be Given to Others

The Church’s practice of allowing indulgences to be applied to others is intimately related to the Church’s teachings on the Mystical Body of Christ and the communion of saints (see handouts on these subjects). We are all members of Christ’s Body and he, the Head of this Body, is the infinite source of merit. St. Paul tells us that his own sufferings “*complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church*” (Col 1:24).

It is the merits of saints like St. Paul that add to the common treasury of the Church. St. Paul teaches us that not only are we allowed to participate in Christ’s salvific action by our own efforts in response to God’s grace, but that these efforts can also do good for the entire Church. This common treasury of spiritual goods, which is the Church’s to dispense as it sees fit, make it possible for us to obtain indulgences not only for ourselves but also for those who have died and may be in Purgatory. We can all help each other through prayer and good works to overcome our tribulations and reach eternal happiness in the company of God. This is the glory that derives from the communion of saints. Many Catholics choose especially to ask God to apply the indulgences they obtain to the souls in Purgatory. This is a blessed act of charity. Some specifically ask God to send them sufferings and trials beyond what they need to make reparation for their own sins, so that they might add to the treasury of the Church. This, too, is an act of great charity.

(CCC 1471-1479)