

Indulgences. The very word stirs up more misconceptions than perhaps any other teaching in Catholic theology. Those who attack the Church for its use of indulgences rely upon—and take advantage of—the ignorance of both Catholics and non-Catholics.

What is an indulgence? The Church explains, “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 defined conditions through the Church’s help when, as a minister of redemption, she dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions won by Christ and the saints” (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 1). To see the biblical foundations for indulgences, see the Catholic Answers tract *A Primer on Indulgences*.

Step number one in explaining indulgences is to know what they are. Step number two is to clarify what they are not. Here are the seven most common myths about indulgences:

Myth 1: A person can buy his way out of hell with indulgences.

This charge is without foundation. Since indulgences remit only temporal penalties, they cannot remit the eternal penalty of hell. Once a person is in hell, no amount of indulgences will ever change that fact. The only way to avoid hell is by appealing to God’s eternal mercy while still alive. After death, one’s eternal fate is set (Heb. 9:27).

Myth 2: A person can buy indulgences for sins not yet committed.

The Church has always taught that indulgences do not apply to sins not yet committed. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* notes, “[An indulgence] is not a permission to commit sin, nor a pardon of future sin; neither could be granted by any power.”

Myth 3: A person can “buy forgiveness” with indulgences.

The definition of indulgences presupposes that forgiveness has already taken place: “An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has *already been forgiven*” (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 1, emphasis added).

Indulgences in no way forgive sins. They deal only with punishments left after sins have been forgiven.

Myth 4: Indulgences were invented as a means for the Church to raise money.

Indulgences developed from reflection on the sacrament of reconciliation. They are a way of shortening the penance of sacramental discipline and were in use centuries before money-related problems appeared.

Myth 5: An indulgence will shorten your time in purgatory by a fixed number of days.

The number of days which used to be attached to indulgences were references to the period of penance one might undergo during life on earth. The Catholic Church does not claim to know anything about how long or short purgatory is in general, much less in a specific person’s case.

Myth 6: A person can buy indulgences.

The Council of Trent instituted severe reforms in the practice of granting indulgences, and, because of prior abuses, “in 1567 Pope Pius V canceled all grants of indulgences involving any fees or other financial transactions” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). This act proved the Church’s seriousness about removing abuses from indulgences.

Myth 7: A person used to be able to buy indulgences.

One never could “buy” indulgences. The financial scandal surrounding indulgences, the scandal that gave Martin Luther an excuse for his heterodoxy, involved alms—indulgences in which the giving of alms to some charitable fund or foundation was used as the occasion to grant the indulgence. There was no outright selling of indulgences. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “[I]t is easy to see how abuses crept in. Among the good works which might be encouraged by being made the condition of an indulgence, almsgiving would naturally hold a conspicuous place. . . . It is well to observe that in these purposes there is nothing essentially evil. To give money to God or to the poor is a praiseworthy act, and, when it is done from right motives, it will surely not go unrewarded.”

Being able to explain these seven myths will be a

large step in helping others to understand indulgences. But, there are still questions to be asked:

“How many of one’s temporal penalties can be remitted?”

Potentially, all of them. The Church recognizes that Christ and the saints are interested in helping penitents deal with the aftermath of their sins, as indicated by the fact they always pray for us (Heb. 7:25, Rev. 5:8). Fulfilling its role in the administration of temporal penalties, the Church draws upon the rich supply of rewards God chose to bestow on the saints, who pleased him, and on his Son, who pleased him most of all.

The rewards on which the Church draws are infinite because Christ is God, so the rewards he accrued are infinite and never can be exhausted. His rewards alone, apart from the saints’, could remove all temporal penalties from everyone, everywhere. The rewards of the saints are added to Christ’s—not because anything is lacking in his, but because it is fitting that they be united with his rewards as the saints are united with him. Although immense, their rewards are finite, but his are infinite.

“If the Church has the resources to wipe out everyone’s temporal penalties, why doesn’t it do so?”

Because God does not wish this to be done. God himself instituted the pattern of temporal penalties being left behind. They fulfill valid functions, one of them disciplinary. If a child were never disciplined, he would never learn obedience. God disciplines us as his children — “the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6) — so some temporal penalties must remain.

The Church cannot wipe out, with a stroke of the pen, so to speak, everyone’s temporal punishments because their remission depends on the dispositions of the persons who suffer those temporal punishments. Just as repentance and faith are needed for the remission of eternal penalties, so they are needed for the remission of temporal penalties. Pope Paul VI stated, “Indulgences cannot be gained without a sincere conversion of outlook and unity

with God” (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 11). We might say that the degree of remission depends on how well the penitent has learned his lesson.

“How does one determine by what amount penalties have been lessened?”

Before Vatican II each indulgence was said to remove a certain number of “days” from one’s discipline—for instance, an act might gain “300 days’ indulgence”—but the use of the term “days” confused people, giving them the mistaken impression that in purgatory time as we know it still exists and that we can calculate our “good time” in a mechanical way. The number of days associated with indulgences actually never meant that that much “time” would be taken off one’s stay in purgatory. Instead, it meant that an indefinite but partial (not complete) amount of remission would be granted, proportionate to what ancient Christians would have received for performing that many days’ pious deeds. So, someone gaining 300 days’ indulgence gained roughly what an early Christian would have gained by, say, reciting a particular prayer on arising for 300 days.

To overcome the confusion Paul VI issued a revision of the handbook (*Enchiridion* is the formal name) of indulgences. Today, numbers of days are not associated with indulgences. They are either plenary or partial.

“What’s the difference between a partial and a plenary indulgence?”

“An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin” (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 2, 3). Only God knows exactly how efficacious any particular partial indulgence is or whether a plenary indulgence was received at all. The new system of reckoning leaves exact amounts to God and involves the Church in only general principles.

“Don’t indulgences duplicate or even negate the work of Christ?”

Despite the biblical underpinnings of indulgences, some are sharply critical of them and insist the doctrine supplants the work of Christ and turns us into our own saviors. This objection results from

confusion about the nature of indulgences and about how Christ's work is applied to us.

Indulgences apply only to temporal penalties, not to eternal ones. The Bible indicates that these penalties may remain after a sin has been forgiven and that God lessens these penalties as rewards to those who have pleased him. Since the Bible indicates this, Christ's work cannot be said to have been supplanted by indulgences.

The merits of Christ, since they are infinite, comprise most of those in the treasury of merits. By applying these to believers, the Church acts as Christ's servant in the application of what he has done for us, and we know from Scripture that Christ's work is applied to us over time and not in one big lump (Phil. 2:12, 1 Pet. 1:9).

"Isn't it better to put all of the emphasis on Christ alone?"

If we ignore the fact of indulgences, we neglect what Christ does through us, and we fail to recognize the value of what he has done in us. Paul used this very sort of language: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24).

Even though Christ's sufferings were superabundant (far more than needed to pay for anything), Paul spoke of completing what was "lacking" in Christ's sufferings. If this mode of speech was permissible for Paul, it is permissible for us, even though the Catholic language about indulgences is far less shocking than was Paul's language about his own role in salvation.

Catholics should not be defensive about indulgences. They are based on principles straight from the Bible, and we can be confident not only that indulgences exist, but that they are useful and worth obtaining.

Pope Paul VI declared, "[T]he Church invites all its children to think over and weigh up in their minds as well as they can how the use of indulgences benefits their lives and all Christian society. . . . Supported by these truths, holy Mother Church again recommends the practice of indulgences to the faith-

ful. It has been very dear to Christian people for many centuries as well as in our own day. Experience proves this" (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 9, 11).

HOW TO GAIN AN INDULGENCE

To gain any indulgence you must be a Catholic in a state of grace. You must be a Catholic in order to be under the Church's jurisdiction, and you must be in a state of grace because apart from God's grace none of your actions are fundamentally pleasing to God (meritorious). You also must have at least the habitual intention of gaining an indulgence by the act performed.

To gain a partial indulgence, you must perform with a contrite heart the act to which the indulgence is attached.

To gain a plenary indulgence you must perform the act with a contrite heart, plus you must go to confession (one confession may suffice for several plenary indulgences), receive Holy Communion, and pray for the pope's intentions. (An Our Father and a Hail Mary said for the pope's intentions are sufficient, although you are free to substitute other prayers of your own choice.) The final condition is that you must be free from all attachment to sin, including venial sin.

Because of the extreme difficulty in meeting the final condition, plenary indulgences are rarely obtained. If you attempt to receive a plenary indulgence, but are unable to meet the last condition, a partial indulgence is received instead.

Below are indulgences listed in the *Handbook of Indulgences* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1991). Note that there is an indulgence for Bible reading. So, rather than discouraging Bible reading, the Catholic Church promotes it by giving indulgences for it! (This was the case long before Vatican II.)

- An act of spiritual communion, expressed in any devout formula whatsoever, is endowed with a partial indulgence.
- A partial indulgence is granted the Christian

faithful who devoutly spend time in mental prayer.

- A plenary indulgence is granted when the rosary is recited in a church or oratory or when it is recited in a family, a religious community, or a pious association. A partial indulgence is granted for its recitation in all other circumstances.
- A partial indulgence is granted the Christian faithful who read sacred Scripture with the veneration due God's word and as a form of spiritual reading. The indulgence will be a plenary one when such reading is done for at least one-half hour [provided the other conditions are met].
- A partial indulgence is granted to the Christian faithful who devoutly sign themselves with the cross while saying the customary formula: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

In summary, the practice of indulgences neither takes away nor adds to the work of Christ. It is his work, through his body the Church, raising up children in his own likeness. "The Christian who seeks to purify himself of his sin and to become holy with the help of God's grace is not alone. "The life of each of God's children is joined in Christ and through Christ in a wonderful way to the life of all the other Christian brethren in the supernatural unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, as in a single mystical person!" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1474 [*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 5]).

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MYTHS ABOUT INDULGENCES

