



What is an Indulgence?

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Eternal and Temporal Punishment or Guilt

There are two kinds of punishment attached to sin, eternal and temporal. If the sin is mortal (serious, grave) sin, the person loses the friendship of God and with it the life of divine grace within. This punishment is eternal. If the person is not restored to grace before death he will be punished forever in hell, since serious sin is an infinite insult to an All-Holy God and thus deserves a like punishment.

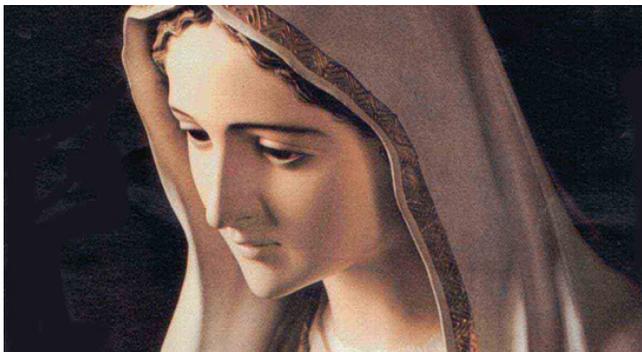
It was to repair for such sin that Jesus became man and was crucified. As God His sacrifice was infinitely meritorious, as Man He was able to represent us. He thus could expiate for our mortal sins, which are not just beyond our power of expiation but infinitely beyond it.

Mortal sin, and also venial sin (which has no eternal punishment attached to it), both disturb the right order within us and in the order of justice in general. We all experience these temporal (or in-time, in this world) consequences of sin, both both personally and socially. Sin changes us (or rather we sin because we are not what we are supposed to be), and like a pebble in a pond these changes have effects beyond us. Not only must we be sorry for our sins, but we must be more thoroughly converted to the Lord, and demonstrate that conversion (Acts 26:20) by our actions. So, while sacramental absolution forgives the eternal guilt of sin, which requires the infinite merits of Christ, it does not necessarily remove all the temporal punishment, since they are somewhat within our power to repair (and somewhat unknown to us). Depending on our degree of sorrow, absolution may result in the expiation of all the temporal guilt of sin. However, for that which it does not repair, we must offer further expiation through prayer, penance, carrying the Cross etc., or after death be purified in purgatory (Rev 21:27).

What an Indulgence does is to take an occasion of such expiation (a certain prayer, penance, charity or other designated work) and add to its intrinsic merit before God an additional value based on the treasury of merits of Jesus Christ, and those perfectly united to Him in heaven (the saints). This can either partially, or under certain conditions, totally remit the temporal punishment due to sin. This depends, naturally, on our openness to God's grace. A mechanical performance of an indulgenced work would not have effect. Performing an indulgenced work should have the consequence of fixing our will away from our sins and entirely on God. This is why among the most important of the conditions for receiving a plenary indulgence, and the hardest to satisfy, is the complete detachment or detestation of our sins. By detesting our sins we orient our will away from creatures (to the degree we love them inordinately), towards God. In this way we open our will to the action of His mercy flowing into our souls, which alone is able to effect the complete remission of the temporal punishment to our sins.

The Plenary Indulgence

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The following "General remarks on Indulgences" from Gift of the Indulgence summarizes the usual conditions given in the Church's law (cf. Apostolic Penitentiary, Prot. N. 39/05/I):

1. This is how an indulgence is defined in the Code of Canon Law (can. 992) and in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 1471): "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".
2. In general, the gaining of indulgences requires certain prescribed conditions (below, nn. 3, 4), and the performance of certain prescribed works [in this case, those granted for the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima]
3. To gain indulgences, whether plenary or partial, it is necessary that the faithful be in the state of grace at least at the time the indulgenced work is completed. [i.e. one must be a Catholic, not excommunicated or in schism.]
4. A plenary indulgence can be gained only once a day. In order to obtain it, the faithful must, in addition to being in the state of grace:
 - have the interior disposition of complete detachment from sin, even venial sin;
 - have sacramentally confessed their sins;
 - receive the Holy Eucharist (it is certainly better to receive it while participating in Holy Mass, but for the indulgence only Holy Communion is required);
 - pray for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff.
5. It is appropriate, but not necessary, that the sacramental Confession and especially Holy Communion and the prayer for the Pope's intentions take place on the same day that the indulgenced work is performed; but it is sufficient that these sacred rites and prayers be carried out within several days (about 20) before or after the indulgenced act. Prayer for the Pope's intentions is left to the choice of the faithful, but an "Our Father" and a "Hail Mary" are suggested. One sacramental Confession suffices for several plenary indulgences, but a separate Holy Communion and a separate prayer for the Holy Father's intentions are required for each plenary indulgence.
6. For the sake of those legitimately impeded, confessors can commute both the work prescribed and the conditions required (except, obviously, detachment from even venial sin).
7. Indulgences can always be applied either to oneself or to the souls of the deceased, but they cannot be applied to other persons living on earth.