



Introduction to Indulgences

You don't hear about indulgences anymore, at least not in Catholic circles. If it could be said that at one time they were over emphasized, it's surely true that today they're under-emphasized. Many Catholics simply don't know what indulgences are, and they're at a loss to explain the Church's position on indulgences when challenged by fundamentalists.

And fundamentalists do bring up indulgences, perhaps because they know even less about them than the average, poorly-informed Catholic.

There is surely no better place to turn than to the Enchiridion of Indulgences. "Enchiridion" means "handbook," and the Enchiridion of Indulgences is the Church's official handbook on what acts and prayers carry indulgences and what indulgences actually are.

An indulgence is defined as "the remission before God of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven as far as their guilt is concerned." The first thing to note is that forgiveness of a sin is separate from punishment for the sin. Through sacramental confession we obtain forgiveness, but we aren't let off the hook as far as punishment goes.

Indulgences are two kinds: partial and plenary. A partial indulgence removes part of the temporal punishment due for sins. A plenary indulgence removes all of it. This punishment may come either in this life, in the form of various sufferings, or in the next life, in purgatory. What we don't get rid of here we suffer there.

TIME OFF FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR?

If you uncover a holy card or prayer book, you'll notice pious acts or recitation of prayers might carry an indication of time, such as "300 days" or "two years." Most fundamentalists, and even many Catholics, think such phrases refer to how much "time off for good behavior" you'd get in purgatory. If you perform a pious act labeled as "300 days' partial indulgence," then you'd spend 300 fewer days in

purgatory.

It's easy to see how misinformed Catholics might scurry around for years, toting up indulgences, keeping a little register in which they add up the days. "Let's see, last year's tally comes to one thousand three hundred twelve years, give or take a week or so, and my lifetime tally is now past the twenty thousand mark. I can cancel out a lot of sinning with this!"

Or so some people might think. Well, there are no days or years in purgatory-- or in heaven or hell, for that matter -- and the indication of days or years attached to partial indulgences never meant you'd get that much time off in purgatory.

AS GOD SEES FIT

What it means was that you'd bet a partial indulgence commensurate with what the early Christians got for doing penances for a certain length of time. But there has never been any way for us to measure how much "good time" that represents. All the Church could say, and all it ever did say, was that your temporal punishment would be reduced -- as God saw fit.

Since some Catholics were confused by the designation of days and years attached to partial indulgences, and since nearly all Protestants got a wrong idea of what those numbers meant, the rules for indulgences were modified in 1967, and now "the grant of a partial indulgence is designated only with the words "partial indulgence," without any determination of days or years," according to the Enchiridion.

To receive a partial indulgence, you have to recite the prayer or do the act of charity assigned. You have to be in the state of grace at least by the completion of the prescribed work. The rule says "at the completion" because often part of the prescribed work is going to confession, and you might not be in the state of grace before you do that. The other thing required is having a general intention to gain the indulgence. If you perform the required act but don't want to gain the indulgence, obviously you won't gain it.

The requirements for a plenary indulgence are tougher than for a partial. After all, a plenary indulgence remove all the temporal punishment due for the sins committed up to that time.

(If you sin later, of course, the temporal punishment connected with the new sins isn't covered by the earlier plenary indulgence, but, at least the punishment for the old sins isn't revived.)

"To acquire a plenary indulgence," says the Enchiridion, "it is necessary to perform the work to which the indulgence is attached and to fulfill the following three conditions: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the

intention of the Sovereign Pontiff. It is further required that all attachment to sin, even venial sin, be absent."

THE TOUGHEST REQUIREMENT

The greatest hurdle is the last. Making a good confession is not particularly difficult, and going to Communion and praying for the Pope's intentions are easier still. It's being free from all attachment to sin that's hard and it's quite possible that even evidently good people, who seek plenary indulgences regularly, never, in their whole lives, obtain one, because they are unwilling to relinquish their favorite little sins.

There is an account of St. Philip Neri, who died in 1595, preaching a jubilee indulgence in a crowded church. A revelation was given to him that only two people in the church were actually getting it, an old char-woman and the saint himself. Not exactly encouraging, huh? But don't worry. If you aren't perfectly disposed and can't get the plenary indulgence, you'll at least come away with a partial.

It should be pointed out that the first three conditions may be fulfilled several days before or after doing the prescribed work, though receiving Communion and praying for the Pope are usually done the same day the work is performed.

By the way, the standard prayers for the Pope are one Our Father and one Creed, though you're at liberty to substitute other prayers.

VARIOUS GRANTS

The bulk of the Enchiridion is a listing of indulgenced prayers and acts. First come three "general grants."

The first says "a partial indulgence is granted to the faithful who, in the performance of their duties and in bearing the trials of life, raise their mind with humble confidence to God, adding -- even if only mentally-- some pious invocation." It is noted that this grant "is intended to serve as an incentive to the faithful to practice the commandment of Christ that `they must always pray and not lose heart'" (Luke 18:1)

The second general grant is this: "A partial indulgence is granted to the faithful who, in a spirit of faith and mercy, give of themselves or of their goods to serve their brothers in need." This grant "is intended to serve as an incentive to the faithful to perform more frequent acts of charity and mercy," as Christ commanded (John 13:15, Acts 10:38).

The third general grant provides that "a partial indulgence is granted to the faithful who, in a spirit of penance, voluntarily deprive them-selves of what is licit and pleasing to them." This provision is meant "to move the faithful to bridle their

passions and thus to bring to their bodies into subjection and to conform themselves to Christ in his poverty and suffering" (Matt 8:20, Matt 16:24).

PROVISIONS

After the discussion of the general grants comes a listing of miscellaneous prayers and acts to which indulgences are attached. This list is much shorter than in former years, the Church having decided to limit indulgences to the most important works.

There is no room or need to mention all the pious acts which are indulgenced, but it's worth noting that a plenary indulgence is given for the recitation of the rosary in a church or family group (and not just the recitation, of course, but the fulfilling of the usual conditions for a plenary indulgence).

Likewise, first communicants and those who "assist at the sacred ceremonies of a First Communion -- for example, the parents -- can receive a plenary indulgence. And the same reward is given to those who, "with the veneration due the divine word, make a spiritual reading from Sacred Scripture" for at least half an hour. Even making the Sign of the Cross has a partial indulgence attached to it.