

Year of St. Joseph

8 December 2020 to 8 December 2021

ABOUT INDULGENCES

by:

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In his document, *The Face of Mercy*, outlining his vision and intention for the extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy in 2016, Pope Francis writes: “A Jubilee also entails the granting of *indulgences*. This practice will acquire an even more important meaning in the Holy Year of Mercy” (no. 22).

For a great number of Catholics the doctrine of “indulgences” may be unknown or poorly understood; it might be wrongly thought of by some as a sort of bonus points system in the bank of eternal life.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines an indulgence as “a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven” (no. 1471). This definition immediately begs further questions such as “What is the temporal punishment due to sins?” and “Are not personal sins completely, fully forgiven in the sacrament of penance?” Certainly all sins confessed are totally and unconditionally forgiven by God, as Pope Francis writes: “God’s forgiveness knows no bounds. [...] Thus God is always ready to forgive, and he never tires of forgiving in ways that are continually new and surprising” (no. 22). The “temporal punishment due to sins” is not some unpaid debt for sin that needs to be rendered to God. Rather is better understood in terms of the consequences sin causes in our lives. While fully forgiven we are weakened by sin, much like a person whose wound has been healed but who still experiences the lasting consequences of that wound. Pope Francis explains it thus:

Though we feel the transforming power of grace, we also feel the effects of sin typical of our fallen state. Despite being forgiven, the conflicting consequences of our sins remain. In the sacrament of reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out; *and yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act*. But the mercy of God is stronger than even this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than fall back into sin (no. 22; italics added).

The source of this treasury of graces possessed by the Church comes through the communion of saints — the teaching that all Christians through all the ages, living and dead, share a deep spiritual bond with each other. The surplus of heroic virtues lived by some members of the Church in their lifetimes is shared with those who, while still on the journey, need it in their lives of faith.



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Again, as Pope Francis writes:

The Church lives within the communion of the saints. In the Eucharist, this communion, which is a gift from God, becomes a spiritual union binding us to the saints and blessed ones whose number is beyond counting (cf. Revelation 7:4). Their holiness comes to the aid of our weakness in a way that enables the Church, with her maternal prayers and her way of life, to fortify the weakness of some with the strength of others (no. 22).

How is an indulgence gained? Indulgences can be earned through the particular prayers or pious acts to which the Holy Father has attached an indulgence. In addition to fulfilling the *specified action*, a person seeking to gain an indulgence must *also* fulfill certain conditions. Traditionally, the three conditions to receive an indulgence are:

- making a sacramental confession and receiving Holy Communion;
- being wholly and sincerely repentant for one's sins, to the point of being free from all attachments to sin; and
- praying for the intentions of the Holy Father.

A special indulgence has been designated for the Year of Saint Joseph. Until December 2021, the end of this special year dedicated to this well-known and revered saint, there are many new ways that Catholics can receive this indulgence, including entrusting their daily work to the protection of Saint Joseph or reciting the rosary with their families. These simple acts of prayer and devotion must be accompanied by the usual requirements to obtain any plenary indulgence as noted above. Additionally, the elderly, the sick and the dying who are unable to leave their homes due to the coronavirus pandemic also have the opportunity to receive an indulgence by "offering with trust in God the pains and discomforts of their lives with a prayer to St. Joseph, hope of the sick and patron of a happy death." In these instances, there must be the intention to fulfill the three conditions to receive an indulgence when circumstances make it possible.

"To gain an indulgence is to experience the holiness of the Church, who bestows upon all the fruits of Christ's redemption, so that God's love and forgiveness may extend everywhere." (Pope Francis, *The Face of Mercy*, no. 22).

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