In the apostolic constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, Blessed Pope Paul VI defines indulgences as, “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.”

The definition first distinguishes between two effects of sin, **guilt** and **punishment**. When we sin, we bring upon ourselves guilt, because we have knowingly and freely committed an act against God’s will, and punishment, because our sins offend God and destroy or weaken our relationship with him. Our sins also have destructive effects upon ourselves, our neighbors, and our world. In his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, once and for all forgives our guilt and pays our punishment. In God’s plan, we receive these once-and-for-all gifts of Christ through his Body, the Church. The Church does not act without Christ, and Christ has chosen not to act without the Church.

Our guilt for less serious or venial sins is forgiven through personal sorrow or the sacrament of confession. Venial sins may be forgiven after death. Our guilt for serious or mortal sins is forgiven ordinarily in the sacrament of confession. Mortal sins cannot be forgiven after death. By sinning venially, we earn severe but limited punishment. By sinning mortally, we earn a terrible and eternal one. While the punishment due our sins has been paid once and for all by Christ, he desires us to cooperate with him in paying that punishment. This cooperation occurs through indulgences. An indulgence may be received only for those sins which have been forgiven. Indulgences may be received either to satisfy the punishment due one’s own sins or the sins of the holy souls in purgatory.

There are two different ways to categorize indulgences, first by the kind of action which is performed. To start, there are the four **general grant indulgences**, e.g., lifting the mind to God in the midst of daily life, giving compassionately in a spirit of faith, abstaining from certain acts or goods, and giving witness to the faith. Second, there are **specific grant indulgences**. These are individual short prayers which may be prayed in almost any circumstance, longer prayers which must be offered under specific circumstances, and special activities, occasions, or events. In this Centennial Year of the Diocese of Lafayette, one may receive a plenary indulgence by visiting the cathedral church and praying the Centennial Prayer while inside. Indulgences may also be categorized according to the punishment which they satisfy: partial or plenary. A **partial indulgence** remits a portion of the punishment due for sin and may be received more than once a day. A **plenary indulgence** remits all punishment due to sin up to the moment of the performance of the indulgence’s action and may be received only once a day.

The definition also notes that a member of the Christian faithful who is duly disposed may receive an indulgence. The most basic requirement is that one be a member of the Christian faithful, i.e., that one be baptized. One must also be properly disposed. To receive a partial indulgence, one must be in the state of grace, have the intention to receive the indulgence, and to perform the works or the prayers of the indulgence correctly. To receive a plenary indulgence, one must fulfill all the requirements for a partial indulgence. Additionally, one must not be excommunicated from the Church, and have no affection for sin, not even venial sin. This requirement is the most difficult. To have no affection means that one has no fondness for sin. While one may still be tempted, one rejects temptations immediately without hesitation or regret. One may even still commit venial sins but immediately repents of them and quickly addresses the weakness which led to the sin. Finally, to receive a plenary indulgence, one must receive the sacrament of reconciliation and Holy Communion and offer prayers for the pope’s intentions.
within a prescribed period of time. One may receive the sacrament of reconciliation and holy communion and offer prayers for the pope’s intentions either twenty days before or after the work, though one is encouraged to perform these actions on the same day as the work. One reception of reconciliation is enough for several plenary indulgences. Eucharistic communion and prayers for the pope’s intentions, on the other hand, may be applied only to a single plenary indulgence. Praying for the pope’s intentions requires that one offer prayers for the intentions which are close to the Holy Father’s heart. One need not know these intentions and the prayers are left to the choice of the faithful.

Additional Resources