



# Plenary Indulgences

BY FR. LARRY RICE

There are probably very few items of Catholic doctrine more misunderstood than the concept of indulgences. Yes, yes, I know. You're thinking, "wasn't that the thing about selling tickets out of purgatory that brought on the Protestant reformation?" Well, yes, and no. But mostly no. Clearly, there were times in our history when even the leaders of the Church misunderstood indulgences. But after the second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI significantly revised the application of this often misunderstood doctrine. So, let's give it another look.

An indulgence, either partial or plenary, remits all or some of the temporal punishment that is due for sin. So, what exactly is this "temporal punishment?" Let's use an analogy. Say you throw a rock through my window and shatter it. I may forgive you for throwing the rock, but still expect you to pay to replace my window. That's the temporal punishment that's a consequence of sin. God forgives us when we repent. But something more may be necessary to indicate a change of heart and turning away from the things that lead to sin.

Pope Paul VI did away with talking of indulgences in terms of time, because it was

confusing and missed the point. So we speak of indulgences today as partial or plenary. To gain one, there are specific conditions that must be met. One must make a sacramental confession, receive the Eucharist, and pray for the intentions of the Pope, as well as whatever additional conditions are established for the particular indulgence you're seeking. They can't be bought, and they're not a free ticket out of purgatory, since they're not free. But what they cost is a demonstration of inner conversion. Their point is the conversion of heart. These external actions and prayers are just the manifestation of that change.

The most common ways to seek a plenary indulgence is to spend a half hour in Eucharistic Adoration, or pray the Stations of the Cross, or pray the rosary in a church, with your family, or with a religious community, or to read or listen to the Sacred Scriptures for half an hour. And of course, add to that the sacramental confession, receiving the Eucharist, and praying for the intention of the Holy Father. If you can manage that, then a plenary indulgence is within your reach. Just don't blow it in the church parking lot on the way home.