

DECREE FROM ROME GRANTING SPECIAL INDULGENCES IN THE CURRENT PANDEMIC

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320c.html>

Dear Sisters and Brothers

The Church has today announced the granting of Indulgences in relation to the coronavirus. Indulgences were something commonly used and talked about among Catholics up to the 1960's but then seemed to fall into desuetude especially in the West.

Historically, Indulgences were abused by corrupt churchmen to make money. They sold indulgences, as if money could buy freedom from the effects of sin! Luther rightly railed against this abuse, though what happened was that the disdain for the abuse became disdain for the indulgences themselves. But because someone abuses something does not mean it no longer has any use.

So, what is an indulgence? The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a good place to look. Since some of its language is quite technical, I will try and paraphrase it in familiar terms.

Indulgences are closely tied to the grace we receive in the sacrament of confession or penance or reconciliation.

Let's take first the case of mortal sin, that is, very serious sin which "kills" our relationship with God. When a mortal sin is committed, it has two effects. The first is that it deprives us of union with God. Such deprivation makes us totally incapable of receiving eternal life. So, this deprivation is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. Notice very carefully that it is not God who imposes such punishment as if out of some angry vengeance! No, it is the sin committed which itself does so. The loss of eternal life is not a decree of God. It comes from the very nature of the mortal sin we have committed.

But there is a second effect which comes from mortal sin, and also from venial sins. Sin brings about in a person an unhealthy attachment to "creatures." By this word, we don't just mean animals or insects, but any created thing, including a human being or even an angel! The key word is "unhealthy." All God's creatures are good, and people are "very good" in God's eyes. But if we forget that a creature is a creature and relate to it as if it were more important than God himself, or in such a way that it weakens our relationship with God, then our attachment is unhealthy. It is dangerous to our spiritual salvation. Thus, mortal sin's second effect is to set in motion this unhealthy attachment.

So, we need to be freed from that attachment. Because the attachment is to something created, we say that it is the "temporal punishment" which sin brings about in us. This is to distinguish it from the "eternal punishment" which the mortal sin inflicts by depriving us of the eternal life of God. Note, too, that we will never be freed from the temporal punishment if we are not freed first from the eternal punishment which mortal sin inflicts on us.

How are we freed from the eternal punishment? This can be done by being baptised (which frees us from original sin and all other sins we may have committed) or, if we commit mortal sin after baptism, by means of the sacrament of penance. But the forgiveness of sin which frees us

from eternal punishment does not free us from temporal punishment, of that unhealthy attachment to some creature. And we all experience that in our lives.

How are we, then, freed or purified from the temporal punishment caused by the sin? It is purified either on earth, before we die, or in Purgatory, after we die, and the means are many: patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds, works of mercy and charity (the spiritual and corporal works of mercy), prayer and penance, almsgiving, etc.. All of these things gradually, day by day, loosen that unhealthy attachment until we are one day free of it, in this life or in the next.

However, another way in which we are freed from the temporal punishment of sin is, by the will of God, with the help of the saints in heaven. The saints are not dim and distant figures. They are very much alive and aware of what is going on in our lives and in our world. The Church calls them the “communion of saints” or the “Church triumphant.” They are our elder brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, urging us on to run the race to the finish.

So, we are not alone in our efforts to purify ourselves of sin and become holy. On the contrary, the life of each of God’s children is joined in Christ and through Christ in a wonderful way to the life of all other Christians. This is what we call the “supernatural unity” of the Mystical Body of Christ. The Church even uses the collective term of “single mystical person” to describe our common bond in Jesus.

Because of this truth of the communion of saints, there is a permanent bond of charity between those who have already gone to heaven, those who are being purified in Purgatory and those of us who are still pilgrims on earth. The Church embraces all three categories! But there is more. We are not only linked in the bond of charity. There is between us an abundant sharing of all good things, much the way family members would share their gifts and riches with each other.

In this sharing or exchange between us, the holiness of one profits the others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others. Holiness far surpasses sin in its powerful effects! For this reason, someone who has sinned and is sorry or contrite can, in certain circumstances, go to the communion of saints to be more promptly and efficaciously purified of the temporal punishment for sin.

All these spiritual goods of the communion of saints are called the “Church’s treasury.” This treasury is not the sum total of material riches the Church has accumulated through time! No, the true treasury of the Church is infinite in value. It can never be exhausted because it resides in and proceeds from the eternal and inexhaustible merits of Jesus Christ. They were offered so that all people could be set free from sin and reach communion with the Father. This Treasury includes as well the prayers and good works of Our Lady. These are particularly immense and unfathomable in their value in the sight of God. But there are also the prayers and good works of all the saints. By living holy lives they have cooperated in saving their brothers and sisters in Christ.

These treasures are shared with us in our time through the ministry of the Church (just as the sacraments are given through Her ministry). You will recall how Jesus gave the Apostles the power to bind and loose. That does not just refer to sin, but to the Church’s authority to teach the truth over falsehood. It also applies to the granting of indulgences, in other words, to sharing in the abundant spiritual treasury described above. The Church opens for us, at certain times and in certain circumstances (such as now, the coronavirus pandemic), the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal

punishment of sins, both mortal and venial. The Church does not want simply to come to the aid of Christians but also to spur them to works of devotion, penance and charity.

Coming now to the indulgences announced by the Church today, the decree in question first speaks of the meaning of suffering and then announces a series of indulgences. Please note that reference is made to the “plenary indulgence” as opposed to a partial indulgence. The former remits all of the temporal punishment, whilst the latter remits it only in part, but there are no partial indulgences mentioned in the decree in question. Note also that reference is made to the “Apostolic Penitentiary.” This is the Church’s supreme tribunal of the internal forum, thus for matters of conscience.

1. The *Plenary Indulgence* is granted to the faithful suffering from Coronavirus, who are subject to quarantine by order of the health authority in hospitals or in their own homes if:
 - a. with a spirit detached from any sin,
 - b. they unite spiritually through the media to the celebration of Holy Mass, the recitation of the Holy Rosary, to the pious practice of the Way of the Cross or other forms of devotion, or if at least they will recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and a pious invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, offering this trial in a spirit of faith in God and charity towards their brothers and sisters,
 - c. with the will to fulfil the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion and prayer according to the Holy Father's intentions), as soon as possible.

Please note these three conditions: 1) Detachment from sin past, present and future insofar as possible. 2) Spiritual union via the media (TV, ipad, radio, etc.) to the various things listed. 3) If the person outlives the virus, they must fulfil the conditions under “c.” in order to obtain the indulgence.

2. Health care workers, family members and all those who, following the example of the Good Samaritan, exposing themselves to the risk of contagion, care for the sick of Coronavirus according to the words of the divine Redeemer: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (*Jn 15: 13*), will obtain the same gift of the *Plenary Indulgence* under the same conditions.

Regarding condition “c” above, it’s not so much a case here of waiting until you have survived the virus, but of acting on them as soon as possible.

3. This Apostolic Penitentiary also willingly grants a *Plenary Indulgence* under the same conditions on the occasion of the current world epidemic, also to those faithful who offer a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or Eucharistic adoration, or reading the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour, or the recitation of the Holy Rosary, or the pious exercise of the Way of the Cross, or the recitation of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, to implore from Almighty God the end of the epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those whom the Lord has called to Himself.
4. The Church prays for those who find themselves unable to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and of the *Viaticum*, entrusting each and every one to divine Mercy by virtue of the communion of saints and granting the faithful a *Plenary Indulgence* on the point of death, provided that they are duly disposed and have recited a few prayers during their

lifetime (in this case the Church makes up for the three usual conditions required). For the attainment of this indulgence the use of the crucifix or the cross is recommended.

The reference to the Cross at the end simply means either holding a crucifix or looking at one with faith and devotion.

As you can see, the granting of the plenary indulgence is very broad and practically covers everyone, with some detailed attention to different situations. It is a recognition of the gravity of the pandemic and of the widespread anxiety of the faithful. The decree issued today is an expression of the motherhood and compassion of the Church.

I invite everyone, with humility and faith, to avail themselves of this huge opportunity of grace.

Monsignor Peter Magee
20 March 2020