

Artist: Ary Scheffer, 1846, Painting of Augustine of Hippo and his mother Monica of Hippo

## What is a PLENARY INDULGENCE?

**D**ear Father Kerper: When Pope Francis announced the Jubilee Year of Mercy, I suddenly started to hear a lot about indulgences. I thought such things had been abolished years ago. Isn't this superstition a mechanical type of spirituality? And is it true that indulgences can be passed on to dead people? Please explain.

Let's begin with the word "indulgence," the English form of the Latin word "*indulgentia*." The Latin word can mean an act of kindness, tenderness, forbearance and even the expression of fondness for another person. In "church Latin," it primarily means putting aside a just punishment caused by sinful acts.

Indulgences, when properly understood, simply reflect the Mercy of God, who constantly bestows "indulgences" on human beings. During the Year of the Mercy, Pope Francis has linked special indulgences to specific things and acts, such as visiting a Holy Door, practicing works of mercy, and so forth.

Now, to get to a proper understanding of indulgences, we must grasp the relationship between forgiveness and punishment.

God, of course, graciously forgives all sins, even the worst. We experience this divine mercy preeminently in the sacrament of penance, which firmly assures us that our sins are truly gone.

However, forgiveness does not necessarily free us from punishment. Some, of course, will quickly object: Where's the mercy? Why does God want to punish sin? Isn't this a contradiction?

From the merely human standpoint, we think of punishment as "settling scores." We punish wrongdoers by restricting their freedom, requiring some unpleasant work, or even causing pain or death. Such punishments are motivated primarily by the desire to restore justice – or to avenge misdeeds and deter other crimes.

By contrast, God's punishments always emerge from his merciful love. As such, God's penalties act as "medicine" to heal the self-inflicted wounds caused by personal sins, specifically the destruction of our friendship with God.

While these mysterious healing acts originate in God, they also involve Mary and all the saints. God draws them into his "healing project" through their union with the Body of Christ, which includes all baptized people, living and dead. This "organic unity" allows the goodness of each saint to benefit others. To put it another way, the "holy excess" of some saints gets transferred to people whose sins have made them "deficient," specifically by pulling them away from God and toward inferior goods or evil. God's punishments somehow "corrects" the sinner's disastrous turning away from God.

Here's an example. Imagine, say, a high school freshman who wants to become an engineer. He definitely needs to learn calculus. While in ninth grade he takes advanced algebra, plays video games during class, never pays attention, and fails the course. If he wants to learn calculus and have any hope of becoming an engineer, he must retake algebra during summer. In one sense, summer school is a painful punishment for playing video games in class. But it also eventually "heals" the student's mind, which had become wounded by self-imposed ignorance of algebra. At first glance, summer school appears to be a cruel punishment; but it's really an act of mercy because it restores to the student the possibility of reaching the goal of an engineering degree. Divine punishment does the same thing: it heals and returns the sinner to heaven's road.

God's healing, as mentioned earlier, involves the "transfer" of spiritual goods within the Body of Christ, the Communion of Saints. How so? Theologians have offered various explanations, but perhaps the well-known story of St. Augustine (354-430) and St. Monica works best.

In his youth, St. Augustine lived wildly, fathered an illegitimate son, and fell in with some brilliant people who vehemently rejected Christian faith. By any measure, St. Augustine suffered from a massive deficiency of holiness. St. Monica, his mother, clearly had "excess holiness" manifested by her infinite patience with her son, constant prayer, and resilient faith. Whereas St. Augustine prayed little and behaved badly, St. Monica's fervent prayer and goodness tipped the scales toward her son and fostered his spiritual healing and eventual conversion. St. Monica, then, truly – and willingly – transferred her "spiritual goods" to her son. What happened to St. Monica and St. Augustine can happen to anyone. The same principle applies.

Now let's move into the "technical" area of indulgences. As early as the third century, the Church allowed sinners to

seek the intercessory prayers of people on the verge of being martyred. Sinners believed that their prayerful association with heroic martyrs could remove or at least reduce the just punishments for their sins. Christians highly valued these prayers because they came from men and women who had given their lives and had surely gone to Heaven! The “holy excess” of martyrs was indisputable and freely transferable.

By the 12th century, indulgences had become more common and increasingly regulated. Sad to say, these practices became widely misunderstood, distorted and subject to abuse, especially by linking them with monetary exchange.

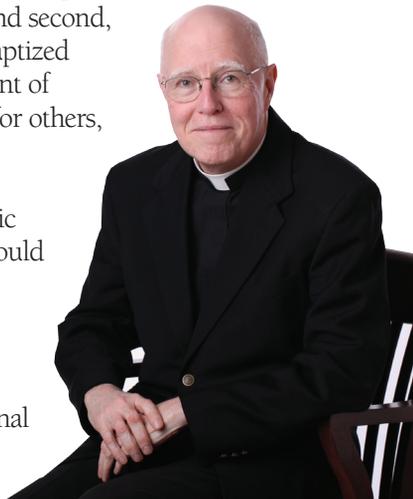
In 1967, Pope Blessed Paul VI strongly reaffirmed the Church’s ancient teaching about indulgences, which flows from the doctrine of the communion of saints. Moreover, the Holy Father greatly simplified the system, dividing indulgences into just two types: plenary and partial.

Plenary comes from the Latin word *plena*, which means “full.” A plenary indulgence, then, frees a person from all punishment due to sin. In medical terms, it would be akin to a total healing of cancer, with the reversal of all the disease’s consequences. In spiritual terms, a person granted a plenary indulgence would immediately enter into God’s presence after dying, with all the wounds of sin healed. As an example, think of the Good Thief. Jesus said to him, “I assure you, this day you will be with me in paradise.”

A partial indulgence frees a person from some punishment due to sin. In the old system, which Paul VI modified, prayers and deeds were carefully calibrated according to difficulty, length, antiquity and so forth. This excessive complexity, which emerged in the Middle Ages, sometimes promoted “spiritual accounting” which was not really traditional. The reformed system has restored pure, sincere, and simple prayer to its proper place.

As to the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis has formally attached a plenary indulgence to the act of visiting a Holy Door. This is *not* superstition. Rather, the Holy Father affirmed this old tradition for two reasons: first, it provides a tangible focal point – a holy location – for prayer and the experience of personal conversion; and second, it highlights how every baptized Catholic can act as an agent of divine mercy by praying for others, including the dead.

Indulgences, when understood in an authentic and balanced manner, should inflame our hearts with an even greater love for the divine mercy, whose mysterious ways eagerly draw people into His eternal embrace. ■



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