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Pope Francis speaks to pilgrims and visitors gathered for his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 10, 2024. (CNS photo/Pablo Esparza)

## Explainer: What are indulgences?



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Have you heard of the word [“indulgence” but aren’t exactly sure what it means](#)? You’re not alone. Indulgences come with a lot of baggage. Many people — even some Catholics — consider indulgences a medieval error connected to the upheaval in the church during the Reformation. Unfortunately, they were used wrongly at that time. Nevertheless, they remain a normal and helpful tool at the Church’s disposal to aid an individual’s response to God’s grace.

Any tool can be misused. However, it does not follow that it is intrinsically corrupt. To understand the true meaning and purpose of indulgences, one must consider them within the broader context of God's abundant love and the nature of the Church. With this foundation, one can appreciate better how indulgences can be misused and how they really work in the life of a believer.

What would you think of a farmer who threw seeds everywhere around his property: on paths, on rocky ground, among thorns and some on fertile soil? You might think he was a poor excuse for a farmer or, maybe, that he was reckless.

Yet this depiction of a farmer corresponds with one of Jesus' parables in which God is the sower and God's word is the seed (cf. Mk 4:1-20). The seed, moreover, can be understood as the person of Christ who is the Word made flesh.

God, in a sense, has "cast" Jesus into the world, making him and his love available to all — the divine person who came among us as a fellow human being, who saved us and established a church through which he promised to be with us always until we join him in heaven. As St. Paul wrote: "For God did not destine us for wrath, but to gain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live together with him" (1 Thes 5:9-10).

God's will is that we "should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 51).

Further, to paraphrase Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman: if we truly appreciated God's gift, then we would ask for it and honor it according to its value (Jn 4:10). In other words, we would offer God fertile soil — an eager mind and a willing spirit — ready to receive and act on his word or, if you will, to live by God's love in the knowledge that we are being saved and that one day we will enjoy the fullness of salvation.

St. Paul is an example of the human response: "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Gal 2:20).

Faced with this love, how can we keep from singing? "My God, I offer you praise. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his mercy endures forever" (Ps 118:28-29). Even though we may find it difficult to fathom such love — a love that some might call "reckless" — Scripture assures us: "He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?" (Rom 8:32). Nothing — except a free and willful rejection of God's offer (cf. CCC, No. 1037) — can separate us from "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

Yet even with the assurances of God's love, we can feel overwhelmed by the weight of sin and the challenges of doing what God says. Like the people in the parable of the sower, we may receive the good news with joy at first, but trials and persecutions dampen our spirit, and worldly anxieties and the craving for possessions vie for our attention.

In these circumstances, we need to remind ourselves that God — knowing our weakness — provided tangible aids to assist us on our journey home to him. The church, as already noted, is the privileged way that Jesus remains present to the world and shares his grace with us, principally through the Eucharist and the other sacraments. So, we can say in an analogous sense that the church itself is "the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men" (CCC, No. 780), for it "both contains and communicates the invisible grace [it] signifies" (Catechism, No. 774).

By God's grace, the church stands astride heaven and earth. It is "both visible and spiritual, a hierarchical society and the Mystical Body of Christ" (CCC, No. 779). Jesus forever sustains the church with his power, love and grace in a never-ending communion that brings about a "supernatural solidarity" or communion of saints ("Indulgentiarum doctrina," Nos. 4-5). What affects one affects all: the saints in heaven, those in purgatory and those on earth.

Part of this solidarity is the authority given to the church on earth to be the "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1). Jesus established the church through Peter and the apostles. To Peter he entrusted "the keys to the kingdom of heaven," and to all the apostles he guaranteed that "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:18).

The church's ministers exercise their authority — always subject to divine revelation — by governance, through the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments, and even through extra-sacramental means such as devotions and methods of prayer, not to mention their own good efforts at witnessing to the power of Jesus' love in their own lives.

It should be obvious that all members of the church, according to their particular vocation, are responsible for fostering communion by participating in these same means of grace.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, in her typically incisive and provocative manner, sums up the deeper meaning of being a member of Christ's body: "Since you loved me so much as to give me your only Son as my savior and my spouse, the infinite treasures of his merits are mine" ("Act of Oblation to Merciful Love"). Her intent is not to keep Christ's merits for herself but to offer them back to God for the salvation of souls. The boldness of her prayer articulates well how God saves us and permits us to cooperate in his work of salvation, as individuals and as a church.

The abundant love of God poured out to save us and the nature of the church as the sign and instrument of God's love forms the appropriate context to appreciate the meaning and purpose of indulgences. To help people understand indulgences, to clear up misconceptions and to avoid misuse, the church offers a definition that comes from Pope St. Paul VI's apostolic constitution, "Indulgentiarum doctrina" (Norm 1) and is repeated in the Catechism (No. 1471):

"An indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due sins already forgiven as far as their guilt is concerned, which the follower of Christ with the proper dispositions and under certain determined conditions acquires through the intervention of the Church which, as minister of the Redemption, authoritatively dispenses and applies the treasury of the satisfaction won by Christ and the saints."

The definition is a densely packed statement that summarizes a long and sometimes troubled history when it comes to indulgences. The careful language answers a number of issues that arose throughout the years.

The first part of the definition responds to two of the most frequent misconceptions of indulgences: that they forgive sins and that they dole out free tickets to heaven. They do neither, for an indulgence can be gained only after one's sins have been forgiven (a grace proper to the Sacrament of Penance) and when one has satisfied the conditions of the indulgence. Unfortunately, the falsehoods were perpetuated by the illegitimate practice of clerics who spread the lies and exacted payment from penitents.

Pope Boniface IX condemned the lies and payments in 1392, but the situation continued for centuries. Indeed, the practice was so commonplace that Chaucer features in his *Canterbury Tales* a "pardoner" who traffics in indulgences. In the 16th century, the Council of Trent (in part responding to Martin Luther's objections about indulgences) charged bishops with the task of rooting out all misuse. St. Pius V rehabilitated the spiritual efficacy of indulgences when, in 1567, he forbade any to be granted on the basis of money.

What the traffickers in indulgences were really selling — and it seems they had no lack of buyers — was cheap grace: not the forgiveness of a loving father that requires a response but a quick way to erase a guilty conscience. However, as the church's definition of indulgences makes clear, sin results not only in guilt but also punishments that follow upon the evil act. Note the definition mentions only the remission of temporal punishments. Eternal punishment — the separation forever from God — can only be forgiven and cleansed through sacramental confession. After confession, God allows the temporal punishments to remain, for they convict us of the evil of sin and prompt us to conversion.

In a September 1999 general audience, Pope St. John Paul II defined temporal punishments as part of the process of being healed of "the negative effects which sin has caused" in the person. The negative effects result in "an unhealthy attachment" to created things (Catechism, No. 1472), which must be purified and subordinated to the love of God — which, by the way, encourages a healthy attachment to created things. The punishments or healing process prepare us to stand before God as he created us, without the shame or guilt sin causes. Purification, of course, is not limited to indulgences. A person also may do acts of piety, penitence and above all the works of charity, all of which bring about purification as well ("Indulgentiarum doctrina," No. 11).

Indulgences, however, are a way that the church "as minister of the Redemption" intervenes on behalf of a penitent by using its God-given authority to dispense all the temporal punishments of sin (a plenary indulgence), or a portion of them (a partial indulgence), by the application of the satisfaction won by Christ and the saints. It is, in other words, an application of the communion of saints, who quite rightly come to the aid of a brother or sister in need. Even St. Paul exhorted the Galatians to "bear one another's burdens" (6:2).

To receive the indulgence, however, the penitent must have the proper dispositions and fulfill the determined conditions, for someone cannot be saved or healed without his or her free consent and without personal effort. Just as a person in years past may have sought an easy way to clear her conscience by merely buying an indulgence,

another penitent may go through the motions or think that the performance of a few good works takes care of any punishment. Such an attitude opposes contrition and any effort at conversion.

As a general rule, a plenary indulgence is granted under the following conditions: the penitent must perform the work to which the indulgence is attached, celebrate sacramental confession, participate in eucharistic communion and offer prayers according to the pope's intentions. The penitent must also have the disposition of being detached from any sin to receive the plenary indulgence. If this disposition is less than complete or if the conditions are not fulfilled, then the indulgence will be partial, as long as the penitent has a contrite heart and performs at least a part of the actions.

There will be few people who would disagree that the most challenging aspect of these requirements is not the conditions, especially for someone who already prays and celebrates the sacraments. Neither are the works to be performed very burdensome — most often they consist of prayer, reading Scripture, or corporal or spiritual works of mercy, etc. The truly challenging aspect is the detachment from any sin. A person may be contrite for his or her sins, but detachment from any and all sin is another matter. One might wonder if it's even possible and why one should even bother with indulgences in the first place.

To quote Jesus: "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26). Jesus said these words after telling a rich young man and the apostles that they had to be perfect. The young man went away sad and the apostles said it was impossible. Jesus, however, did not say they had to do it on their own power. He said to them, follow me. It's also worth noting that the English word "perfect" translates the Greek word "teleios," which means not without flaw but whole-hearted and ordered to one's proper end. In other words, Jesus was telling the man and the apostles to subordinate everything to a relationship with God, and through that relationship one would be united to God, the proper end of every man and woman.

In a similar way, the church is using the gift of indulgences to help men and women follow Jesus to heaven. The church knows that by himself or herself, an individual cannot advance in holiness or perfection ("teleios"). The devastating effects of sin and the evil that exists in the world are impossible to overcome without the grace of God and the practice of virtue. Indeed, on this side of heaven there is always the danger of choosing to sin again, even if one has received an indulgence. But if the person remains close to Jesus and follows him, then he or she will enjoy the fullness of salvation.

So, why not offer a way to help a person become whole-hearted in his pursuit of God? Indulgences are not a requirement of faith or a precept of the church, but to the person who uses them well, indulgences gradually train one in virtue and discipleship. They help people turn away from sin and toward God and neighbor by recommending prayer and works of mercy. In fact, a penitent on earth as a suffering member of the communion of saints may ask God to apply an indulgence gained not to oneself but to someone in purgatory so that person may be more swiftly purified and enter heaven.

Only God knows the exact form the remission of the temporal punishments takes in a person's life. One person may be freed immediately from an attachment to, say, alcohol or pornography. Another person may see relief only after years of effort or while in purgatory. God's grace can be seen in both situations.

An indulgence, used well, is an effective tool that helps one heal from the effects of sin and open oneself more fully to God's grace. In fact, we do not have to imagine what happens to us when we respond to God's love with a contrite heart and a willingness to grow in holiness. As we develop habits of prayer and charity, we become a little less selfish, a little less greedy; we have a bit more patience, a more generous heart. We focus more on love of God and neighbor, and we allow Jesus to draw us to himself.