

**Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Lent, Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Last week I spoke about the theological concept of indulgences, which can be summarized as “a remission before God of the temporal punishment for sins, whose guilt is forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful obtains under certain and clearly defined conditions through the intervention of the Church.”¹

I also discussed why the remission of temporal punishment through an indulgence is needed if sins are forgiven in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In short, through the ministry of the Church, “repentance after baptism leads to divine forgiveness of guilt as well as pardon with regard to the eternal punishment deserved for serious or ‘mortal’ sins, but with the possibility or even likelihood that penance must yet be done (earthly or ‘purgatorial’) before the forgiven sinner can be united with the Trinity in heaven.”² Indulgences are a way in which the Church helps her members who need to do that kind of penance (known as *temporal*

punishment). Thus, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, when the priest imposes a sacramental penance that also happens to be enriched with an indulgence, the penitent who performs that work “can at the same time both satisfy the penance and gain an indulgence.”³

Why am I spending so much time talking about indulgences? Because one of my chief responsibilities as your bishop is to help you get to heaven, and indulgences are a means to help you achieve your heavenly goal. So today I will discuss the “certain and clearly defined conditions” for obtaining an indulgence.

The English translation of the *Manual of Indulgences* published in 2006 states that in order to gain indulgences, “one must be baptized, not excommunicated, and in the state of grace at least at the completion of the prescribed works” and have at least the general intention of receiving them and fulfill the prescribed works “at the stated time and in due fashion, according to the sense of the grant.”⁴

In the following description of the conditions for obtaining an indulgence, you will hear reference to “partial” and “plenary” indulgences. “An indulgence is partial or plenary according to whether it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin.”⁵ The faithful can gain

partial or plenary indulgences for themselves or apply them for the dead by way of intercessory prayer.⁶

A plenary indulgence can be acquired only once in the course of a day; a partial indulgence can be acquired multiple times. However, the faithful “can obtain the plenary indulgence *at the hour of death*, even if they have already gained one on the same day.”⁷

In order to obtain a partial indulgence, one must at least have the interior disposition of a contrite heart.⁸ Traditionally, a contrite heart is expressed by a prayer called an Act of Contrition.

Three conditions must be fulfilled in order to gain a plenary indulgence: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the intention of the Pope.⁹ “A single sacramental confession suffices for gaining several plenary indulgences” (that is, spread over several days); “but Holy Communion must be received and prayer for the intention of the Holy Father must be recited for the gaining of each plenary indulgence.”¹⁰

“The three conditions [sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the intention of the Pope] may be fulfilled several days before or after the performance of the prescribed work; it is, however, fitting that Communion be received and the prayer for the

intention of the Holy Father be said on the same day the work is performed.”¹¹

“The condition of praying for the Holy Father is satisfied by reciting one Our Father and one Hail Mary; nevertheless, one has the option of reciting any other prayer according to individual piety and devotion,” as long as such prayer is recited for the intention of the Holy Father.¹²

In addition, one must exclude all attachment to sin, even venial sin, in order to obtain a plenary indulgence.¹³ This means that the disposition of the penitent must exclude “even the slightest affection for what is even venially sinful” in order to receive remission of “*all* temporal punishment” due to sin.¹⁴ This requirement for the penitent to be detached even from minor sins is a safeguard against indulgences being viewed in a superstitious way with the expectation the punishment due to sin will be remitted automatically by the performance of some ritual act regardless of the interior attitude of the penitent. “If the full disposition is lacking, or if the work and the three prescribed conditions are not fulfilled . . . the indulgence will be only partial.”¹⁵

Throughout this discussion of the conditions for obtaining an indulgence are references to the works to be performed, so let's take a look at those.

The faithful can acquire an indulgence if they devoutly use properly blessed pious objects, such as a crucifix or cross, rosary, scapular, or medal.¹⁶ The work prescribed for acquiring a plenary indulgence connected with a church or oratory consists of a devout visit during which an Our Father and the Creed are recited, unless other directives have been laid down in a particular case.¹⁷

There are "four general concessions by which the Christian faithful are encouraged to infuse with a Christian spirit all the actions that go to make up their daily lives and to strive in the ordering of their lives towards the perfection of charity."¹⁸ They are as follows:

1. A partial indulgence is granted to the Christian faithful who, while carrying out their duties and enduring the hardships of life, raise their minds in humble trust to God and make, at least mentally, some pious invocation.¹⁹

2. A partial indulgence is granted to the faithful who, led by the spirit of faith, give compassionately of themselves or of their goods to serve their brothers [and sisters] in need.²⁰
3. A partial indulgence is granted to the Christian faithful who, in a spirit of penance, voluntarily abstain from something that is licit for and pleasing to them.²¹
4. A partial indulgence is granted to the Christian faithful who, in the particular circumstances of daily life, voluntarily give explicit witness to their faith before others.²²

Notice how all four of these General Concessions address circumstance of everyday life, meaning that we do not need to go to a church or shrine to perform these works, but we can obtain indulgences by sanctifying our everyday activities, whether at work, at school or at home. These four grants “are fully in harmony with the Gospel and the doctrine of the Church, as clearly set forth by the Second Vatican Council” and are solidly based on texts from the Holy Scriptures.²³

Next Sunday I will discuss other concessions by which partial and plenary indulgences are granted for works of devotion, charity and penance.

As we continue this Lenten time of spiritual purification, may we cleanse our hearts as Christ cleansed the temple built by Herod in the Holy City. Jesus wanted to make the point that the people had lost sight of the real meaning of the Temple. Treating it as a commercial thoroughfare, they no longer placed God's commandments at the center of their lives. As Jesus cleansed them of this abuse, however, He also pushed them to see Himself as the new center of their relationship with God. It is through their allegiance to Him that they will be renewed and really cleansed.

In this time of Lent we are asked to reflect on our own preoccupations and allegiances. Where is Christ in our lives? Do we have time for him or do we let our daily concerns and practices leave him little time or space? If our relationship with Christ is central, then the way we deal with the business of life will flow from that, and we will have a sense of peace and direction. If we try to work the other way around, bringing Christ into our lives as secondary, we will find ourselves lost and confused. As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel of St. John, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." A core element to our Lenten journey is getting rid of what stops Christ being at the center of our life. Doing so uplifts us with the gift of his Spirit.

As Jesus replaced the temple of Jerusalem with His own body, we are challenged in faith to believe that we are the new temple because of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, whose Body and Blood we receive in this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Apostolic Penitentiary, *Manual of Indulgences: Norms and Grants*, English translation of the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum*, fourth edition, 1999, (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), N1, p. 13.

² *The New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “indulgences.”

³ *Manual of Indulgences*, N21, §2, p. 19.

⁴ *Manual of Indulgences*, N17, p. 17; see also *Code of Canon Law* (1983), c. 996.

⁵ *Manual of Indulgences*, N2, p. 13; see also *Code of Canon Law* (1983), c. 993.

⁶ *Manual of Indulgences*, N3, p. 13; see also *Code of Canon Law* (1983), c. 994.

⁷ *Manual of Indulgences*, N18, p. 17.

⁸ *Manual of Indulgences*, N4, p. 13.

⁹ *Manual of Indulgences*, N20, §1, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Manual of Indulgences*, N20, §2, p. 18.

¹¹ *Manual of Indulgences*, N20, §3, p. 18.

¹² *Manual of Indulgences*, N20, §5, p. 18.

¹³ *Manual of Indulgences*, N20, §1, p. 18.

¹⁴ *The New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “indulgences.”

¹⁵ *Manual of Indulgences*, N20, §4, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Manual of Indulgences*, N15, p. 16.

¹⁷ *Manual of Indulgences*, N19, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Manual of Indulgences*, The Four General Concessions, Introduction, no. 1, p. 23.

¹⁹ *Manual of Indulgences*, The Four General Concessions, Grant I, p. 25.

²⁰ *Manual of Indulgences*, The Four General Concessions, Grant II, p. 28.

²¹ *Manual of Indulgences*, The Four General Concessions, Grant III, p. 31.

²² *Manual of Indulgences*, The Four General Concessions, Grant IV, p. 34.

²³ *Manual of Indulgences*, The Four General Concessions, Introduction, no. 3, p. 24.