

**Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Lent, Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

March 1, 2015

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In his book, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John of the Cross compares our desire for union with God to the rays of sunlight shining upon a dirty window. The smudges of dirt and grime prevent the sun from illuminating the window completely. It would be different if the window were cleaned and polished. Then the sunlight would give the window clarity and transparency.

We can apply this image to our desire for union with God. For, just as our Lord was transfigured, He also invites us to deal with those attitudes, events, and situations that prevent the Lord's light from shining in and through us. What is needed is a purification of our souls. One of the means of purification of the soul offered by the Church's spiritual treasures endowed by Christ is known as indulgences.

Last week I spoke about the important role that indulgences played during the Crusades, when the faithful went to war seeking to defend

Christians and push back Muslim aggression.¹ Today we will look at the notion of indulgences in more detail, particularly with reference to their role in our spiritual lives today, especially during this penitential season of Lent.

The theological concept of indulgences is a longstanding Catholic doctrine which itself is largely unknown and widely misunderstood even by many Catholics. Some people think that indulgences were abolished by the Second Vatican Council. That is not true. The Church's teaching on indulgences was simplified and clarified by Blessed Pope Paul VI shortly after Vatican II. Far from eliminating this doctrine, the Holy Father sought to reinvigorate it with renewed understanding "to make it clear that the Church's object was not merely to help the faithful to make due satisfaction for their sins, but chiefly to induce them to greater fervor of charity."²

Blessed Pope Paul VI wrote in a 1966 letter that "an indulgence, given by the intervention of the Church, lessens or entirely remits the punishment, by which a person is in a certain sense prevented from attaining a closer union with God."³

In 1967, Blessed Pope Paul VI issued an Apostolic Constitution on the Doctrine of Indulgences, in which he wrote, "The doctrine and practice of

indulgences which have been in force for many centuries in the Catholic Church have a solid foundation in divine revelation which comes from the Apostles and 'develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.'"⁴

"In an indulgence in fact, the Church, making use of its power as minister of the Redemption of Christ, not only prays but by an authoritative intervention dispenses to the faithful suitably disposed the treasury of satisfaction which Christ and the saints won for the remission of temporal punishment."⁵

In the words of St. John Paul II, indulgences are, "the expression of the Church's full confidence of being heard by the Father when – in view of the Church's merits and, by His gift, those of Our Lady and the saints – she asks Him to mitigate or cancel the painful aspect of punishment by fostering its medicinal aspect through other channels of grace."⁶

The current *Code of Canon Law* codifies these recent papal teachings on indulgences, describing an indulgence as "a remission before God of the temporal punishment for sin, the guilt of which is already forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful obtains under certain and definite conditions with the help of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies authoritatively the treasury of the

satisfactions of Christ and the saints.”⁷ “An indulgence is partial or plenary in as far as it frees from the temporal punishment due to sin either partly or totally.”⁸ The faithful can gain partial or plenary indulgences for themselves or apply them for the dead by way of intercessory prayer.⁹

In order to gain indulgences “one must be baptized and 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 in due fashion, according to the character of the grant.¹⁰

In 2006, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops received Vatican approval to publish an English translation of the fourth edition of the *Manual of Indulgences* promulgated in 1999. In these norms, the notion of an indulgence is 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.”¹¹

Jesus Christ gave the power to forgive sins to St. Peter and the other Apostles as well as to their successors, the Popes and Bishops, with the assistance of their collaborators ordained to the ministerial priesthood.

Venial sins are primarily forgiven and mortal sins are necessarily forgiven in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. "However, even after mortal sin has been forgiven and, as a consequence, the eternal punishment it deserves has been remitted, and even if slight and venial sin has been remitted, the forgiven sinner can need further purification, that is, be deserving of temporal punishment to be expiated in this life or in the life to come, namely, in Purgatory." The purpose of an indulgence is to remit this punishment. The praiseworthy practice of gaining indulgences is especially efficacious for attaining holiness.¹²

While one does not gain an indulgence by participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or the Sacraments themselves, since they are the principal fonts of sanctification and purification, an indulgence can be granted for reason of a particular occasion connected with such participation, such as First Holy Communion or the celebration of a Mass by a newly ordained priest. In these cases, the "purpose of the indulgence is to promote and, as it were, reward the effort of commitment that is part of any festivity, the good done to honor people, the good example shown, and the honor accorded the Most Holy Eucharist and the Priesthood."¹³

Normally “an indulgence can be attached, according to tradition, to various works of piety, both private and public,” as well as works of charity and penance, which in our own times are accorded increased importance.”¹⁴ A renewed understanding of indulgences, “rather than stress the repetition of formulas and acts,” puts “greater emphasis on the Christian way of life” and focuses “attention on cultivating a spirit of prayer and penance” and on the exercise of the theological virtues.”¹⁵

All of this may still be somewhat confusing and subject to misunderstanding, for example, people may wonder why remission of temporal punishment through an indulgence is needed if sins are forgiven in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The following explanation may be helpful in that regard:

To understand the origins of indulgences it helps to recall that the very early church distinguished between the forgiveness of sins *before* and *after* baptism. The ritual cleansing with water in baptism was believed to signify and effect (by the power of Christ’s death and resurrection) a rebirth involving the forgiveness of *all* past *guilt* as well as *all* *punishment* due to it. For neither was there need to do penance *after* baptism. Not to be repeated,

baptism was supposed to be followed by a life in which future sin was avoided. But even the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1-6) attests to the fact that this ideal was not realized. . . .

A triple conviction grew with regard to those who sin after baptism: a) they are brought to forgiveness by God's grace but not without personal engagement in a process of prayer and self-denial; b) other Christians can help them because of the solidarity existing between the disciples of Jesus; and c) through the ministry of the church such 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. Indulgences arose as a way in which the church helped its members who needed to do that kind of penance (known as *temporal punishment*).¹⁶

Next Sunday I will discuss the four general concessions of indulgences and the specific conditions necessary to gain an indulgence.

As we celebrate this Lenten time of repentance, may we become more aware of our desire to grow in the love of the Lord. Mindful of this, may we offer our gifts of bread and wine as fruits of the earth that will become the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Holy Communion, Jesus comes to transfigure us into likenesses of Himself.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Thomas F. Madden, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/06/inventing-the-crusades>, June 2009.

² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*), 2nd ed., s.v. “indulgences.”

³ Blessed Pope Paul VI, Letter *Sacrosancta Portiunculae*, AAS 58 (1966) 633-634.

⁴ Blessed Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina* (On Indulgences), January 1, 1967, no. 1, AAS 59 (1967) 5.

⁵ Blessed Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, no. 8.

⁶ Pope St. John Paul II, General Audience, September 29, 1999.

⁷ *Code of Canon Law* (1983), c. 992.

⁸ *Code of Canon Law* (1983), c. 993.

⁹ *Code of Canon Law* (1983), c. 994.

¹⁰ *Code of Canon Law* (1983), c. 996.

¹¹ 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), p. 13.

¹² Cardinal William Wakefield Baum, Major Penitentiary, "Decree Promulgating the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum*," fourth edition (1999).

¹³ Introduction, *Manual of Indulgences: Norms and Grants*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Introduction, *Manual of Indulgences: Norms and Grants*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Introduction, *Manual of Indulgences: Norms and Grants*, p. 9.

¹⁶ *The New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "indulgences."