



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Message from Archbishop Smith - Indulgences

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I'm sending this message today for two reasons. The first is simply to check in with you. We are not able to get together these days as we normally do. Priests and people – and Archbishop – are separated from one another due to the necessary cancellation of public celebration of mass. But I'm thinking about you and praying for you daily, as I know you all are for one another. Especially if you live alone, are homebound or are self-isolating, it's very easy to begin to feel lonely, perhaps even forgotten. Well, you're not forgotten! Not at all. In fact, I think in many ways God is drawing us together more closely than perhaps we've ever been at the level of our hearts. We are looking for many sources of consolation right now, and I hope the assurance of our prayer for each other is one such source for you.

Now, our collective need for consolation takes me to the second reason I'm sending this message. We are all very much in the mind and prayers of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, especially anyone who is suffering from the COVID-19 virus, their family members and those who care for them. These brothers and sisters of ours perhaps feel most keenly the need for God's grace, which normally reaches us through the celebration of the sacraments. So, during this time of pandemic, the Pope is granting a special indulgence. Today I want to explain this beautiful gift and how those to whom it is granted may avail themselves of it.

Let me say first of all that I'll not be saying all that could be said about indulgences. I'll focus just on the essential points. The heart of the matter is this: an indulgence is the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, and that remains after the guilt of sin has been forgiven in confession (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1471). When we go to confession, what is forgiven is the guilt of our sin. The priest will also ask us to make satisfaction for our sins by assigning a penance. We are very familiar with this. But what about this "temporal punishment" that still remains?

Among the many explanations of indulgences on offer, I find very helpful the analogy often made with the way parents will deal with a child who has done something wrong. Let's say a child steals something. If the parents forgive the child and restitution is made, the parents might also decide that the child will be grounded for, say, a week, in order to impress upon the child the seriousness of what was done and the need to change behaviour.

We can think of that grounding as the temporal punishment. If, during that time of punishment, the child begins to act not selfishly but charitably towards others, the parents could see this as an indication that the child is serious about trying to change behaviour and be moved to lessen the period of grounding. That would be a remission of the temporal punishment. They might remit it partially – two days instead of a week – or totally.

In this example of parents and child, the temporal punishment – the grounding – is something that the parents impose. Temporal punishment due to sin has to be thought of differently. The *Catechism* puts it this way: “[Every] sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory.” When I sin, it reveals that I have an attachment to something, an attachment that is holding me back from giving myself fully to Christ. That makes the attachment a “temporal punishment.” So, let’s say, for example, that I confess greed, evident in my trying to amass wealth. This sin shows that I have an attachment to money. The guilt of the sin is lifted when the priest gives me absolution, but the attachment to money remains. Any attachment like this weighs heavily on a person who wants to grow in holiness, and so is experienced as a true punishment in time – a temporal punishment. We want to have that attachment remitted, or lessened – even removed entirely. We know, of course, that only God can do so.

So, this understanding of temporal punishment due to sin means that God’s action in remitting it needs to be understood differently from the action of a parent. The parent remits an externally imposed punishment (the grounding), while God acts in the heart of the sinner to lessen the unhealthy attachment. Which is to say, the grace of God moves the sinner inwardly to deeper conversion. (*CCC 1472*)

Now, why is the Church involved in this? Well, basically, it springs from the fact that Jesus united the Church with himself in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. He has willed to work through the ministry of the Church to bestow his saving grace. Recall that Jesus said to Peter and the other apostles: “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (*Matthew 18:18*) So, as we know, in the sacrament of Penance, when the priest pronounces the words of absolution, Jesus forgives us. There is nothing magic about this, of course; it presupposes real sorrow in the heart and a firm purpose to amend one’s life. Based on these same words of the Lord, we understand that the Church is also associated with Christ in his remission of our temporal punishments. The Lord remits, through the ministry of the Church as she gives an indulgence. Again, it is not something magic that requires nothing on our part.

A parent who sees indications of a real desire on the part of the child to change and do better will be moved to remit the punishment by lessening the period of grounding. God too, infinitely more so since He loves us so much and knows our weakness, is moved by the sincere desire of the sinner to change and comes to our help to remit the punishment. Indications that demonstrate this sincere desire for change are referred to by the Church as the conditions necessary to receive the indulgence.

What are those conditions? Well, typically they are the confession of sin, reception of the Eucharist and prayer for the intentions of the Pope. If one is not able physically to get to confession or receive Eucharist, then it suffices to intend to do so as soon as it is possible. For a full remission, or what is called a plenary indulgence, these acts must be undertaken in a spirit of detachment from all sin.

Now, with this as background, I hope we can understand and appreciate the beautiful and consoling gift granted now by the Holy Father in this time of pandemic. In these extraordinary days, the Church is granting a plenary indulgence to those who are sick from COVID-19, to those who care for them, and to any who pray for them. To receive this, the following practices can be undertaken as conditions for the reception of the indulgence.

If you are sick with COVID-19, or quarantined in hospital or at home by order of the health authority, you can join mass through the electronic media, or you could pray the Rosary, or do an act of piety like the Way of the Cross, or - especially if you are in a weakened state - simply recite the Creed, pray an Our Father or offer a prayer to the Blessed Mother. Do this in a spirit of complete detachment from sin and offer your trial to God as an act of charity toward others.

This plenary indulgence is also offered, under the same conditions, to the healthcare workers and family members, who at risk of contagion to themselves, draw near to the sick to care for them.

It is offered as well, and still under the same conditions, to any of the faithful who pray fervently for an end to this pandemic, for relief for those who suffer, and for the eternal repose of those who have died. This prayer can be a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, time spent in Eucharistic Adoration, reading the Bible for at least a half-hour, the recitation of the Rosary, making the Way of the Cross or praying the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.

Particularly moving is the assurance given to those who are at the point of death because of this virus and who are unable to receive the final sacraments. The Church is pledging fervent prayer for them, and provided they have the right disposition of heart and have prayed even just a few prayers in their lifetime, grants to them too, a plenary indulgence.

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God is rich in mercy, infinitely rich. In extraordinary moments like the one we are now living, God pours out that mercy through the Church's granting of indulgences. These are a powerful incentive to all of us to fervent prayer for an end to this virus. Let us embrace this call and know the joy of God's saving help.

✠Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton

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