

Indulgences

This week I want to talk about indulgences, and for two reasons: 1) you may have heard or read that the pope is offering a special plenary indulgence to God's people during this Year of Faith; 2) there is a special opportunity, fast approaching, that comes every Nov. 1-8, and especially Nov. 2, All Souls Day, to gain a plenary indulgence for the holy souls in Purgatory. I know I've written a long article here, but it's an important and complicated subject, so bear with me.

So, what is an indulgence? Didn't the Church get rid of them after the Protestant Reformation? What's the distinction between "plenary" and "partial" mean? All these questions and more can be answered by your friendly, neighborhood priest. Let's begin.

First, we need to understand that when Jesus Christ died on the cross, the merits, riches, and graces of that action before God are infinite, super-abundant, overflowing. Now, because Jesus has united us into His Mystical Body, we can share in these graces. But how? Well, Christ's Mystical Body, also known as His Church, does not only have a heavenly, supreme Head (Jesus Himself), it also has an earthly head, the Vicar of Christ on earth—the pope. Following in the legacy of St. Peter, the pope has the power to unlock the spiritual riches of Jesus Christ for the faithful, according to the words of Christ to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19).

That sounds nice, but why do we need these extra graces? Well, grace is not a thing. Grace is the life of God dwelling within us, the presence of God in our lives. All of us need (and hopefully want) God to be in us more and more. Not only that, but when we sin we separate ourselves to some degree from God (or completely, if the sin is mortal)—we, as it were, turn away from God's presence at least partially. This sin is like a spiritual wound. When we repent and are forgiven, that wound is healed, but a scar remains. This spiritual scar is traditionally called "the temporal punishment due to sin." And it is this punishment, this scar, this stain, that Purgatory is in the business of getting rid of (like spiritual Neosporin).

But we don't have to wait until after death, in Purgatory, to get rid of these stains: Jesus gave us the best spiritual stain remover ever—grace from indulgences. (Just think of it as "Temporal Punishment Be-Gone Spray Plus [now with new Attitude Softener and the great scent of Spring Breeze Incense!]). You see, every time you do something good, you grow in grace and holiness, which includes working off temporal punishment. But God loves us so much, He has a hard time waiting for us to spiritually grow—after all, we tend to do it so slowly. And so, through the Church, He likes to give us more than we really deserve. In other words, He likes to indulge us. Hence, an indulgence.

Or think of it this way. A parent really loves his or her child and wants to give the child a gift (say a super-sized, double-fudge sundae). However, the parent also wants to teach the child good habits. So the parent has the child do some small work, such as weeding a small flower bed, in order to get the reward. In other words, when the child completes the task, the reward it gets is far beyond what the work itself could earn. The child certainly merits some reward, but

the ice cream sundae is really from the free, unearned grace and love of the parent.

So, what about this distinction between partial indulgences and plenary indulgences? Well, they mean just what they say. When we do some things—pray, do good works, do penance, tell people about our faith—we receive a certain ‘amount’ of grace. (I know I said grace isn’t a thing, but it’s convenient to talk about it like that sometimes.) But there are also certain special things that are so important that the Church promises that if we do them, we won’t just get ‘some’ grace, we will get all the grace we could possibly need to be made completely whole, clean, “without spot or wrinkle” (Eph. 5:27)—as pure as after our Baptism. This is a plenary indulgence, and it’s attached to very important things like: praying the rosary as a group, visiting the Blessed Sacrament for at least half an hour, reading the Bible (a Catholic version) for at least half an hour, etc., including a special one at the hour of death. There’s a catch, though. Of course, the promised graces are there, but to actually receive the full plenary indulgence, one of the conditions is to be detached from all sin, even venial. That is HARD! So, I sometimes wonder if anyone really gets a plenary indulgence. But even so, you get as much as you can handle, as much as your detachment from sin allows.

So what happened with Martin Luther and the Protestants? Well, in that time of history, the pope’s great basilica, St. Peter’s in Rome, needed to be rebuilt. As you can imagine, that was expensive. And so, to help raise money, the pope attached indulgences to giving money to help build the basilica. This turned out to be a very bad idea because people ended up thinking that you could buy indulgences (versus doing a charitable work). Since a plenary indulgence (in theory) makes you ready to enter directly into Heaven with no stay in Purgatory, people thought, “Nice, I can buy my way to Heaven!” Some priests and theologians of the day actually taught that kind of stuff, which is completely false. Martin Luther and others were entirely correct to contradict this error. Learning from her mistakes, the Church has tried to be careful ever since to avoid giving the impression that indulgences, or any spiritual goods, can be bought or sold.

But, even though there were abuses, this doesn’t disprove or invalidate the Church’s beliefs and teachings on indulgences. We still have them because ultimately they come to us from Jesus Christ, and He wants us to use them on our spiritual journey. The details of how to receive the plenary indulgence for the Year of Faith are laid out in detail in the Oct. 19 issue of the *Messenger*, so I will not repeat it here. I will quote this one line, which I find the most relevant. The faithful can receive the plenary indulgence “Every time (they) take part in [...] at least three lessons on the ‘Acts of Vatican Council II’ and on the Articles of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in any church or ideal place.”

Of course, the purpose of an indulgence is to help you, the person who does the good deed. But it is possible to offer an indulgence to the holy souls in Purgatory to help them be purified more quickly (you cannot offer your indulgence to another living person). And so, I provide for you here, from the official *Manual of Indulgences*, the instruction on how to receive the plenary indulgence for the souls in Purgatory during the Octave of All Saints, as well as details on the *requirements* that are needed for any plenary indulgence. And, by the way, I will be offering a special Mass on All Souls Day in the cemetery of the old St. Pius X Seminary,

a.k.a. the old Catholic Center, now Cristo Rey Parish—this will be at 2:45 PM; all are welcome (bring a seat).

“A *plenary indulgence*, applicable only to the souls in Purgatory, is granted to the faithful who: 1° on any and each day of November 1 to 8, devoutly visit a cemetery and pray, if only mentally, for the departed; 2° on All Souls’ Day, devoutly visit a church or an oratory and recite an Our Father and the Creed.”

“Norm 20. §1. To gain a plenary indulgence, in addition to **excluding all attachment to sin, even venial sin**, it is necessary to **perform the indulgenced work** and fulfill the following three conditions: **sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion, and the prayer for the intention of the Sovereign Pontiff**. §2. A single sacramental confession suffices for gaining several plenary indulgences; but Holy Communion must be received and the prayer for the intention of the Holy Father must be recited for the gaining of each plenary indulgence. §3. The three conditions 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. §4. If the full disposition is lacking, or if the work and the three prescribed conditions are not fulfilled, [...] the indulgence will only be partial. §5. The condition of praying for the intention of the Holy Father is fully 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, if recited for this intention.”

How to Use a Confessional

Some parishioners brought to my attention the other week that not everyone is familiar with how to use our confessional. The confessional is that room within a room within the church; it’s inside what is commonly referred to as “the chapel.” Our confessional is more of a “reconciliation room,” as they became popularly known in the ’70s and ’80s. Instead of the traditional style of a kneeler on either side of the priest, the more modern confessional allows both for kneeling behind a screen or sitting face to face with the priest during Confession.

Both of these options are available in our confessional, although not everyone may have noticed this. Of course, when you walk in the door, the first thing that you may notice is the chair that you, the penitent, sit in if you want to face the priest. But, as you can see in this picture taken from the doorway of the confessional, there is also a place to kneel as soon as you walk in. You are on one side of the wall and the priest is on the other. You may not have noticed it, but that square of darker wood in the half-wall is the ‘screen’ (it’s actually wooden slats, but it works effectively—I can hear you, but I can’t see you). And don’t worry about the priest not knowing that you’re there if you stay behind the screen: that metal door makes quite a noise when it shuts, so we know.

Of course, someone may be wondering, “So, which option am I supposed to choose: screen or face to face?” Well, it is, of course, completely your option. But here is my general

impression of people's thought process. First of all, older people find it much easier to sit than to kneel during Confession, so they go face to face. But that's not the only reason people like to go face to face. Some people find it reassuring to see the priest when they confess their sins. I'm not sure if that's because it reminds them that we priests are sinful humans too, which is certainly true. Or if they think that we're making faces at them behind the screen (I promise, I have never made any faces). Especially if people need to ask some questions or want some advice, they often feel more comfortable going face to face. We priests enjoy face to face Confession as well because it is often easier to pick up on the disposition of the penitent.

On the other hand, many people like to go behind the screen. The obvious reason for this is that it provides a level of anonymity. This can be good for you if you are embarrassed by your sins or find it difficult to concentrate under the (hopefully kind) gaze of the priest. It is also helpful for the priest since he doesn't have to worry about trying to forget about people's sins because he doesn't know to whom a sin belonged in the first place. Also—though I mention this with sorrow—in these days of scandal and Virtus training, the screen provides a level of safety for all involved. Another reason people like to go behind the screen (and this is the reason that I personally do so) is because you get to kneel. I don't know about you, but when I confess my sins and ask Jesus for mercy, I like to be on my knees. As Indiana Jones puts it in *The Last Crusade*, “The penitent man kneels before God” (and then he ducks and avoids having his head chopped off by a giant saw blade....). The final reason why I think people like to confess behind the screen is because it helps them remember that, really, they are not confessing their sins to the priest, but to Jesus Himself. As at Mass, so in the confessional, the priest stands (or here sits) *in persona Christi capitis*, in the Person of Christ the Head. So, it is Christ Himself through His priest Who absolves your sins.

Just a couple of details. I know priests have different attitudes about this, but I personally have no problem with people writing down their sins if it helps you remember. Just don't forget to destroy the paper! Also, there are several useful “apps,” for all you smart-phone users out there. I like *Laudate*, and not just for its Confession function, but this isn't a commercial, just an FYI. So, now that you know all about our confessional, I hope to see you soon in Confession — but even if I don't *see* you, I hope you'll be there on the other side of the screen. Allow me to end with a refresher on how to go to Confession:

- After the priest greets you, you will make the Sign of the Cross together. The priest may then offer a prayer that you will make a good confession, after which you may begin.
- Remember to first tell the priest how long it has been since your last confession. If relevant to your confession, also tell your state of life or anything else it may be helpful for the priest to know.
 - If you wish, you may use the traditional formula, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been [however long] since my last confession” etc. However, this is not necessary and is no longer part of the current official Rite of Confession.
- If you have any mortal sins to confess, remember to be specific in confessing what they are and (as far as you can remember) how many times you committed them.

- Feel free to ask the priest questions or for some advice, although be mindful of others waiting for the Sacrament.
 - To conclude, it is commendable to use an ending formula such as, “For these and all the sins of my former life, I am truly sorry;” or “For all of my sins, especially those against the virtue of (charity/purity/etc.), I am truly sorry.” One may simply say, “That is all, Father,” but it is helpful if you say something to indicate that you are finished.
- The priest may ask you some questions for clarification or give you some advice. He will then give you a “penance” and ask you to make an Act of Contrition, which may be either formulaic or spontaneous (we have a version pasted on the wall of the confessional if you forget it). After this he will give you absolution.
 - (Please note: when the priest prays the prayer of absolution, he extends his hand. Please do **not** give me a ‘high five’ at this point. I only say it because it happens.)
- After the priest gives you absolution, he will say, “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good.” Please respond, **“His mercy endures forever.”**
- The priest will then dismiss you. (And don’t forget your penance!)



Whatsoever You Bind

Ever since the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul—with its Gospel reading where Our Lord gives St. Peter the Keys to the Kingdom—I’ve had several different people ask me about the phrase, “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matt. 16:19b). Of course, we are all happy about the idea of God loosing us from things, but what is this binding thing? What role does the Church have in binding things here on earth? Well, there are three areas that I can think of where this applies.

The first and most obvious example of when the Church binds someone is excommunication. Since this is not usually a problem for most people, we won't dwell on it in detail. The *Catechism* says, "The words *bind* and *loose* mean: Whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God" (CCC 1445). The Church uses the penalty of excommunication not to take vengeance on people, but to help them recognize the dire consequences of a particularly heinous sin and spur them on to repentance and reconciliation with God and His Church.

Another example of the Church binding and loosing can be seen with indulgences. Because she is the Bride and the Body of Christ, the Church has access to the infinite ocean of merits that Jesus won for us on the cross. To encourage her children to do certain good deeds and prayers, the Church attaches indulgences to certain things, giving us extra graces from God for doing them. When the Pope (who is the one to define all indulgences) decides to indulge some work or prayer, then he uses the Keys of St. Peter to loose graces for us. When he decides that it is no longer expedient for some work or prayer to carry an indulgence, then he binds up this grace again. Not to worry, though, because there are plenty of indulgences out there for those of you interested in making use of them.

Finally, we come to the area you're probably most interested in: Confession. In Confession, the priest uses the power of the Keys to loose us from our sins. All well and good. But is there a time that the priest would "bind" us, that is, refuse to forgive our sins? The basic answer is "No;" any sin that we are truly sorry for the Church will forgive because Christ will forgive. However, there are two exceptions. First, some sins are considered so serious that they are what is called "restricted," meaning that only a bishop, or sometimes only the Pope, can forgive them. Examples of this would be desecrating the Holy Eucharist (reserved to the bishop) or trying to assassinate the Pope (reserved to the Pope). You can't just go to Confession to your parish priest for these sins because he literally does not have the power to forgive them. (Nb. Abortion used to be counted among the restricted sins, but in the USA it has become so common that almost all priests have the faculty to forgive it now. A sad thought, but an encouraging one for those of you who have been scared by an abortion experience.)

The second exception is the one that might come the closest to applying to most of us. And that is simply that we can only be forgiven from our sins if we are truly sorry for them—if we're not actually sorry, if we're not going to even try to avoid the sin again, then Confession won't forgive it. So, if the priest can tell that a person is not sorry for his sin, then it is the priest's duty to refuse absolution. Now of course, the priest would never do this unless it is very clear that the person is not sorry—sorrow is kind of presumed for anyone entering a confessional. But there are situations. For example, I once heard this crazy but true story. A lunatic criminal planted a bomb in a church and then went and told the priest about it in Confession, thinking that the priest would not be able to do anything about it because of the Seal of Confession. But the priest simply told him that it was obvious from his manner that he wasn't sorry for his sin and wasn't making a real Confession. He threw him out of the confessional and went and called the police.

Now, this is extreme, but it is a reminder to all of us that the Sacrament of Confession is not magic, but is about restoring a relationship with our Beloved Friend and Lord, Jesus Christ. He knows whether or not we are sorry, and it is the priest's job to protect the dignity of the Sacrament by binding those who are clearly not sorry for their sins until they are ready to repent. Some food for thought for all of us, I'll be bound!

Noteworthy Comments from the Parish Survey

Now, one of the best things about a survey is that people tend to be completely honest because it's anonymous. And honesty is always the best policy. So, I would like to thank the person who was honest enough to write this: "I would like to see a penance service where you write your sins on paper, burn the slips, and do a group service—not individual or face to face." And indeed, who wouldn't rather do it that way? No one, including myself, enjoys facing a priest (even if that 'facing' happens behind a screen) and accusing yourself of your sins. And of course, it is an evocative symbol to write your sins on paper and then watch them burn, not unlike the way the love of God will burn away our sins in Purgatory. Besides, I don't know about you, but I'm a firebug at heart, and I'm always happy when I have a chance to burn anything. So, why don't we do Confession this way?

Well, the simple answer is because Jesus didn't ask us to do it that way, and so—as far as the Sacrament is concerned and as far as mortal sins are concerned—it just doesn't work. Does God want us to be sorry for our sins primarily in our heart? Of course He does. This is why the Church teaches the importance of perfect contrition. Perfect contrition means we are sorry for our sins because we have disobeyed our God, Whom we love with all our hearts. This is different from imperfect contrition (or attrition) in which we are sorry for our sins out of fear for the loss of Heaven and eternal punishment in Hell. If we truly have perfect contrition for our sins, the love between God and ourselves wipes away our sins, since as St. Peter says, "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8b). Does that mean that if we have perfect contrition for a mortal sin, we can just skip the Sacrament of Confession? The answer is No, and here's why.

Jesus specifically gave His Apostles the power to forgive sins. "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you. [...] As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained'" (Jn. 20:19, 21b-23). Now, it is the ancient faith of the Church that this power was given not simply for the first generation of Christians, but for all Christians throughout time. Therefore, the power to forgive sins is one that was passed on from the Apostles to all the later bishops and priests of the Church. And, if someone has been given the power to either forgive or retain sins, then obviously those who want their sins forgiven must confess their sins aloud. Otherwise, how would the Apostle or bishop or priest know whether to forgive or retain the sin? It was Jesus Himself Who instituted the Sacrament of Confession, requiring us to confess our sins if we are to receive forgiveness. And, among many reasons, there are two big reasons He did this. First, in the Sacrament of Confession, Jesus wants not only to forgive our sins, but also

to pour out tons of sacramental grace upon us in order to help us be spiritually healed and to avoid sin in the future. Second, because Jesus—being the Creator of the human person—knows that we need to take ownership of our failings in order to move beyond them. This is just basic mental health; ask any psychologist. It's not easy, it's awkward, but it's very, very good for us. And so, even though Jesus knows our hearts and will forgive our sins if we are perfectly sorry, He still wants us to go to Confession and receive His grace. In fact, as Catholics, we know that part of being perfectly sorry means planning on going to Confession as soon as possible. So, even with perfect contrition, Confession is a must if we are in mortal sin. Confession is also a must if we have not reached the spiritual maturity to have perfect contrition—and indeed, how often can we really say that we are perfectly sorry for our sins based simply on our love of God? In the Sacrament, Jesus makes up for our immaturity and forgives our sins even if we only have imperfect contrition. And so, while there's nothing wrong with a prayer service where we symbolically burn up our sins on slips of paper, that certainly will not forgive our mortal sins. Since it is not a Sacrament, it cannot replace the Sacrament of Confession.