

Plenary Indulgence during the COVID 19/Coronavirus Pandemic

Introduction. In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, the Holy See issued a Decree regarding a Plenary Indulgence. Because the granting of Plenary Indulgences may be unfamiliar, this memo has been prepared to assist you.

- I. **Plenary Indulgence.** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 1472 teaches that “sin has a *double consequence*. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the ‘eternal punishment’ of sin. On the other hand, 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. This purification frees one from what is called the ‘temporal punishment’ of sin.”

Just as the Sacrament of Reconciliation removes the eternal punishment of sin by sacramental absolution, so too an Indulgence removes the temporal punishment of sin. The word “indulgence” comes from the Latin *indulgere*, meaning “to be kind or yield to another.” The Lord wants to be kind to his people, and the normal means he does so is through the Church. The Church’s authority to grant indulgences is based upon the mandate of Jesus Christ: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (*Matt. 16:19*). When the Church grants an indulgence, she “looses” someone from the temporal punishments resulting from sin, and this has heavenly consequences.

The Church desires to dispense this grace generously, yet not indiscriminately. She wants the faithful to be prepared for this grace, lest it overwhelm them. Consequently, the Church prescribes spiritual practices the faithful are asked to perform, not to earn the indulgence—no one can earn grace—but to demonstrate their readiness to receive grace. These practices often include praying certain prayers and receiving certain Sacraments. Some practices are less demanding and thus demonstrate a person is *partially* ready to be loosed, and thus can

receive a Partial Indulgence. In extraordinary circumstances, however, the Church can grant a Plenary Indulgence, meaning the recipient will be loosed from *all* (plenitude) temporal consequences due to sin. The Holy See has determined that the Coronavirus crisis is one such extraordinary circumstance.

II. Application of the Decree for the Plenary Indulgence.

1. Who can receive this Indulgence? The Decree specifies

- a. those who have contracted the Coronavirus and are thus quarantined and unable to receive the Church's sacraments normally;
- b. health care workers, family members, and those exposing themselves to contagion as they care for those with the Coronavirus; and,
- c. "those faithful who visit the Blessed Sacrament, or Eucharistic Adoration, or reading the Holy Scriptures for at least a half hour, or the recitation of the Holy Rosary, or the pious exercise of the Way of the Cross, or the recitation of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, to implore from Almighty God the end of the [Coronavirus] epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those whom the Lord has called to Himself."

2. How do candidates for this Indulgence receive it? Usually, to receive any Plenary Indulgence a person is required intentionally to:

- a. desire to be released from attachment to sin;
- b. pray for the Holy Father's intentions with the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and a Marian prayer such as the Hail Mary;
- c. confess one's sins and receive sacramental absolution; and
- d. attend Mass and receive Holy Communion.

Normally, these should happen in proximity of each other, usually within a week. However, the Decree acknowledges that because of the Coronavirus, persons might be able to neither attend Mass (except electronically/remotely) and receive Communion, nor personally confess sins and receive sacramental absolution. In such cases, they may still obtain the Plenary Indulgence, provided they

intend to go to confession, receive sacramental absolution, attend Mass, and receive Communion “as soon as possible.” The Decree does not put a time limit on this condition.

3. **What about those unable to fulfill the conditions?** As can be seen above, virtually any of the faithful with the right intentions, even those quarantined, can fulfill the requirements. God is merciful and understands persons’ hearts.
4. **Can indulgences be gained to benefit others?** Persons on earth are responsible for their own destiny and cannot be granted grace *against* their will; hence Indulgences cannot be applied to others still living (they may refuse them). But those who have died and been judged worthy of eternal life, but are not yet ready for heaven because of their attachment to earthly pleasures, are being purged of these attachments. Hence, those in Purgatory can benefit from our Indulgences. We can pray, “Lord, may X who is being prepared for heaven benefit from these graces which I am obtaining.” The Lord looks lovingly as we selflessly surrender our graces to another in need.
5. **How many indulgences can I obtain?** There is no limit to the number of Partial Indulgences a person may obtain, but the Church limits the granting of Plenary Indulgences to one per person per day.

III. Additional Information on Indulgences. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nn. 1471 – 1479 is a good starting place.