

Indulgences

What is an Indulgence?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church #1471 offers an explanation – “*An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven...*” Note that it mentions forgiveness.



Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise

Purgatory and Indulgences

To understand indulgences you have to understand Purgatory – as they go together hand-in-hand. When a person dies he/she experiences an immediate personal judgment. The result – based upon our life here on earth – means our eternal soul will experience Heaven or Hell. Most of us are not “good” enough to enter Heaven directly since it is a state of perfection. Assuming we are also not “bad” enough to be damned to Hell we just need some spiritual cleansing – which is the state of Purgatory. I like to call Purgatory a spiritual shower where we are cleansed and made worthy of Heaven.

This is where indulgences come in. The issue of indulgences was one of those that Martin Luther was so upset about because they became abused. When we sin and are able to get forgiveness for those sins – either through a Confession or from those we sinned against – there may still be some stain. Forgiveness needs two conditions: (1) truly being sorry and (2) making restitution. Let’s look at an example.

Suppose that you had a dire need and stole some money. After doing so you regretted what you did so you returned the money. This meets the requirements for forgiveness because you were sorry and made restitution. Now suppose that in a

fit of anger you killed someone. Again you truly regretted what you did and begged forgiveness from the family and friends of the person. They forgave you and perhaps you spent the rest of your life in service to that family – perhaps entered a convent or monastery to pray the rest of your life. The complete requirements were not met because you cannot make full restitution since you cannot bring that person back to life.

This where Purgatory comes in and what the Catechism #1471 was trying to explain about indulgences. We do not understand (yet) the actual process of Purgatory – only that it is a state where we are cleansed of the stain of sin. Our prayers for the deceased are part of this process which helps the souls we pray for. While time does not exist in the afterlife – the way we try to understand the process is to think of it in units of time. That is – after “X” number of days, weeks, months or years – we will be cleansed and made worthy to enter paradise.

How do Indulgences work?

Indulgences are good works here on earth and special acts of piety such as prayers or religious pilgrimages. Some indulgences are more powerful than others and this makes sense. Praying one Hail Mary certainly is less powerful than a rosary in front of the Eucharist. The church has tried to quantify some of this in time and other ways. A plenary is the full indulgence and sometimes we only get the “partial” impact. So this is the reason you may see the wide variety of “values”.

The theory is that our acts of good works and piety would add up to shortening our “time” in Purgatory. In some respects this makes sense because it reflects how we have lived our life here on earth. You do not have to be a theologian to understand that people such as Mother Teresa are more worthy of entering paradise after death than someone who lived a life a debauchery.

To sum this up - I quote a saying from Mother Teresa. ***“The only things we bring to heaven with us – are those that we gave away while on earth”.***