

# **INDULGENCES: What are they and how do they work**

## **Indulgencies – do they still exist?**

On 31 October 1522 Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to a church door in Wittenburg, protesting at the abusive sale of indulgencies to fund the building of the new basilica of St Peter's at the Vatican. Many Catholics assume that the practice of indulgencies ceased, if not then, at least by the time of the Second Vatican Council. Yet in 1967 Bl. Pope Paul VI issued an Apostolic Constitution 'to give greater dignity and esteem to the use of indulgencies.' Norms were issued the following year.

Pope Francis issued an indulgence to young people attending World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro in 2013. He sees the granting of indulgencies as integral to the Year of Mercy.

## **So what is an indulgence?**

Indulgencies remain a part of the life of the Church because they relate to the human condition, to the mercy of God and to the role of the church in dispensing that mercy.

Separation from God, which is the consequence of sin, is dealt with by the absolution granted in sacramental Confession. Yet other consequences can still remain. Traditionally, the Church has spoken of 'the temporal punishment due to sin,' which we may encounter either in this world or in Purgatory. It is not a question of God inflicting punishment, but rather the natural consequences flowing from sin.

Indulgencies are an action of the Church drawing on the infinite merits of Christ, and the merits of the saints, won in the eyes of the Father. 'An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins where guilt has already been forgiven.' Pope Francis puts it like this: 'Despite being forgiven, the conflicting consequences of sin remain....sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger even than this. It becomes indulgence on the part of the Father Who, through the Bride of Christ, the Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than fall back into sin.'

## **If this is 'indulgence on the part of the Father,' why does the Church attach conditions?**

Indulgences remind us that mercy is pure gift from God, unmerited on our part. Nevertheless, the Church is concerned to demonstrate that indulgences are not something mechanical or superstitious. For Pope Paul VI, they were the means of cultivating a 'spirit of prayer and penance' and the practice of the theological virtues. Indulgencies are connected to some act of piety or devotion which are a sign of our willingness to receive forgiveness. They are always connected to faith, which is why the Church asks those gaining indulgencies to be properly disposed, to pray and to receive the sacraments.

## **Who can gain and benefit from the indulgence?**

Any Catholic in a state of grace. They must intend to gain the indulgence. The indulgence can be for the person concerned or be applied by them for the benefit of the Holy Souls.

## **What are the conditions?**

The act specified by the Holy Father for the Year of Mercy is 'a brief pilgrimage to the Holy Door.' In addition to Westminster Cathedral, the Cardinal has designated other churches at which the indulgence may be gained by passing through their Holy Door.

The normal conditions attaching to an indulgence are:

- Receiving Holy Communion

- Celebrating the Sacrament of Confession
- Praying for the Pope. This is satisfied by praying one Our Father and one Hail Mary for the Pope's intentions

Pope Francis has added two further conditions:

- Reciting the Creed; and
- A reflection of mercy. While in no way precluding other reflection on mercy, this condition may be satisfied by praying the Collect for Divine Mercy Sunday:

**'God of everlasting mercy. Who, in the very recurrence of the paschal feast kindle the faith of the people You have made Your own, increase, we pray, the grace You have bestowed, that all may grasp and rightly understand in what font they have been washed, by Whose Spirit they have been reborn, by Whose Blood they have been redeemed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, Who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen'**

### **How long do I have to fulfil the conditions?**

The conditions must be satisfied 'several days before or after' visiting the Holy Door. This period is generally taken to mean around a week before or after the visit. If possible, it is appropriate to receive Holy Communion and to pray the prayers on the same day as visiting the Holy Door. Confession might be at another time, and need not be at the Cathedral or church at which we visit the Holy Door.

It is only possible to gain one indulgence per day, but otherwise we can obtain the indulgence throughout the Year of Mercy.

### **I am unable to visit a Holy Door. Am I precluded from obtaining the Indulgence?**

No. Pope Francis wishes the indulgence to be obtainable as widely as possible. The sick and the housebound may still receive the indulgence by receiving Holy Communion, or attending Mass or community prayer – even by the various means of communication.

Prisoners may receive the indulgence in their prison chapel. In their case, the door of their cell may serve as the Holy Door.

## **YEAR OF MERCY**

**The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy begins with Pope Francis opening the Holy Door in the Vatican on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2015 – The Feast of the Immaculate Conception.**

**The Cardinal will open the Holy Door in Westminster Cathedral in the context of Vespers and Benediction at 3.30pm on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December. You are very welcome to attend. Those making a brief pilgrimage during the Year of Mercy to the Cathedral Holy Door or others throughout the Diocese may gain the Jubilee Indulgence for themselves or the Holy Souls.**

**The Cardinal has prepared '*A Pilgrimage Companion for the Year of Mercy*' by way of explanation and to help us experience God's mercy to the full. Copies of the booklet are available free for every home in the parish and will be distributed next weekend.**

**More information about events during the year, Holy Doors and the Indulgence is available on the Diocesan Website <http://rcdow.org.uk/year-of-mercy/>**

**May this Holy Jubilee Year be for all, as Pope Francis wishes, 'a true moment of encounter with the mercy of God.'**