

One of the main purposes of a Holy Year is to gain the Holy Year Indulgence, but what is an indulgence? And how do indulgences work?

The Church's definition of an indulgence is: the remission of the temporal punishment due on account of our sins, the guilt of which has already been forgiven. But what does that mean? Let's unpack it slowly.

First, let us be clear that God does not sit in Heaven waiting for us to trip up and then zap us with some ghastly misfortune by way of punishment. That would mean that God was somehow against us, but we have just celebrated Christmas, the birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. He is *with us* in our weakness, our frailties, and He stands alongside us even in our sinfulness, though He Himself remains without sin of course. He does not place stumbling blocks on our road to Heaven; it is Satan who does that! No, Our Lord is the One who clears the stumbling blocks away. He *wants* us to get to Heaven. God is on our side.

Even so, it remains true that there are consequences to all of our actions: virtuous actions are rewarded, but bad actions carry a punishment. Whilst we are not zapped with cancer because of our sins (and I speak as somebody who has had cancer), yet if we can accept the adverse circumstances of our lives as penances in *lieu* of punishment for our sins then we will be imitating Our Blessed Lord who took undeserved evil upon His back, and carried it on our behalf. He chose to accept the Agony in the Garden, the Scourging at the Pillar, the Road to Calvary, and the miserably painful and humiliating Crucifixion for sins that He had not committed. How much more should we be willing to accept our pains, even when they are not a direct consequence of our sins and are not sent directly by God? If, with the help of God's grace, we can so accept our trials and tribulations then we will be growing to be more like Christ. If we are willing to carry, not the full weight of our sins, for only Christ can do that, but perhaps just a tiny portion, a bit like Simon of Cyrene carrying the tail

end of Our Lord's Cross, then not only will we share with Christ some of the consequences of our sins, we will be growing in the likeness of Christ: in truth, we will be growing in holiness, whether we *feel* we are or not.

And what if we really have lived a very virtuous life and *still* very great trials come our way? In her *Meditations on the Way of the Cross*, sadly no longer in print, Dorothy Wells writes, "And may we so live and die in Thee crucified that when our life is done we may have suffered more than we have sinned, and paid the full measure of our debt of love on earth."

And there you have the doctrine of Purgatory and of Indulgences.

If, by the time we die, we have not carried enough of our share of the burden of our own sins – a burden the greater bulk of which is carried by Christ anyway – then we must carry that burden after we have died, in Purgatory. We receive forgiveness for the *guilt* of our sins in the Sacrament of Confession, and once forgiven they need never be confessed again. But there remains what the Church calls the *temporal punishment* for those sins. This punishment is not eternal, for that would be Hell. Rather, *temporal punishment* means the sufferings Christ asks us to carry so that we may carry *our* share of the sufferings He was willing to carry on our behalf. The more we carry in this life, the less we shall have to carry in the next.

So an Indulgence is when the Church grants that some, or even all, of the punishment due to us for our sins will be remitted – cancelled, revoked – as a result of undertaking particular, designated actions or prayers, such as going on pilgrimage.

If we undertake the action set us by the Church then that action can replace the suffering in Purgatory that we would otherwise have had to undergo. And all of this precisely because God and the Church are on our side, continually offering to Mankind a limit to the

consequences of our sins, clearing away obstacles on our path to Heaven, defeating sin and death, and bringing life instead.

We cannot gain indulgences for other people who are still living, but we can gain them for ourselves or for the Holy Souls in Purgatory who can no longer gain them for themselves. An indulgence remits the temporal punishment due to those sins which we have confessed and which have been absolved. A partial indulgence remits some of that punishment; a plenary indulgence remits all of the punishment. But if we go on to commit more sins after we have gained an indulgence then we might need to try to gain another indulgence later on. They are readily available, especially during a Holy Year. Besides, we can never be absolutely sure that we have gained an indulgence so it is always best to keep trying to gain more.

Exactly how to gain the Holy Year Indulgence will be explained in our parish Holy Year handbook which will be available in the next week or so.

In the meantime we can rejoice that Purgatory and Indulgences are tremendous gifts from God, beautiful signs of His mercy, evidence that He is on our side and wants us to get to Heaven. And by co-operating with these gifts we can benefit from the full extravagance of His love.