

*What is an Indulgence?*

At the bottom of many prayer cards we read things like, “300 days indulgence”. What does that mean? Unfortunately, we don’t think or talk much about things like indulgences, purgatory, and after-life these days. We think it’s scary and just want to focus on the good life. That’s too bad because forgetting about final realities is much scarier.

Indulgences are part of God’s mercy to soothe our purifying sufferings in our final realities. An indulgence is the privilege, dispensed by the Mystical Body of Christ, (Church) of our sharing in the merits of the Communion of Saints. Like purgatory, indulgences are only useful to people who die in the state of God’s grace. We should take every opportunity to prepare for our quick entrance into heaven when we die, and to help our departed loved ones pass quickly through purgatory.

It works something like this:

- No one even slightly imperfect can come into the presence of perfect God.
- We all become imperfect by sin but God is generous in forgiving our guilt whenever we ask Him for a new chance.
- God’s forgiveness removes our guilt of sin but the damage done by sin leaves our soul “dirty” and the world around us damaged. Eternal punishment is removed but temporal penance still remains.
- We need to clean and fix this, along with any unhealthy attachment to worldly things. We can do this by penance, prayer, good works, fasting, or alms, to name a few ways.
- If we die with unfixed problems we must finish the penance in purgatory. This also includes unconfessed venial sins.
- The saints of the Church, in union with Jesus, and by His grace, did more penance and good works than they personally needed.
- We call this surplus, the treasury of the communion of saints.
- Since we also are members of the communion of Saints, God provides a way we can withdraw from this treasury. We call this privilege, indulgence.
- By the power to loose and bind, the Church prescribes, under certain conditions, small prayers or penances that are enlarged greatly from the treasury of Jesus and His saints.
- We can apply indulgences to ourselves or to a faithful departed loved one.
- An indulgence can be partial or plenary. A plenary indulgence cleanses us of all temporal punishment due to our sin. A partial indulgence accomplishes the equivalent of a given sum of merits from the treasury; thus 300 or 500 days etc.

We can find more information about this important gift in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; item numbers 1471-1479, 1498 and 1032.