



*A theological and spiritual guide to understanding, with truth and depth, what the Catholic Church really teaches*

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## Introduction: When History Gets Distorted

For many, the word *indulgence* evokes negative images: ecclesiastical corruption, medieval abuses, and the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg, denouncing, among other things, what he saw as the “sale of indulgences,” and with that, he planted in the collective imagination the idea that the Catholic Church charged money in exchange for God’s forgiveness. Over time, this episode became one of the most persistent and misunderstood myths in the history of Christianity.

But was it really like that? Did the Church actually sell God’s forgiveness? What is an indulgence, really? Does it make any sense to talk about them today? How does this relate to our concrete Christian life? This article aims to shed light on these questions with theological rigor, a pastoral and approachable tone, and a deep desire to help the reader rediscover the spiritual treasure hidden in this oft-misunderstood practice.

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## 1. What Is an Indulgence? Doctrine and Meaning

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, an indulgence is:

*“The remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church” (CCC 1471).*

In other words, an indulgence **does not** forgive sin (only God can do that through the sacrament of confession), but it remits the *temporal punishment* that remains as a consequence of sin. To understand this better, let’s use this analogy: if a child breaks his mother’s vase and sincerely repents, she lovingly forgives him—but the child still must face



the consequence (for example, cleaning up the shards or buying a new one). In the same way, sin, even when forgiven, leaves marks on the soul that require purification.

An indulgence is an **act of mercy** that flows from the power of the keys Christ gave His Church (cf. *Mt 16:19*), and it is deeply rooted in the communion of saints. The Church, as a mother, administers the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to help the faithful on their path of purification.

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## 2. Where Does This Practice Come From?

The notion of indulgences has its roots in the penitential practices of the early Church. In the first centuries, grave sins required very severe public penances: prolonged fasts, pilgrimages, even years of temporary exclusion from the sacraments. Over time, the Church introduced the possibility of substituting some of those penances with other charitable works, prayers, or acts of devotion—especially when done with sincere contrition.

Already in the third century, Pope Cornelius spoke of bishops granting indulgences to penitents in special cases. Throughout the Middle Ages, the practice was systematized, always connected to the power of the keys and the principle of spiritual communion among members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

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## 3. The Historical Misunderstanding: Abuses and Truth

It is true that in the 15th and 16th centuries, **serious abuses** occurred regarding the preaching of indulgences. Some preachers, like Johann Tetzel in Germany, used commercial and oversimplified formulas that obscured the true theological meaning of this practice. The famous phrase attributed to Tetzel—“As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs”—does not reflect the Church’s teaching, but rather a fraudulent and superficial use that scandalized even many faithful Catholics of the time.

However, it is crucial to distinguish between **human abuses**, which the Church itself denounced and corrected at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), and the **true doctrine**, which never taught that the forgiveness of sins could be “bought.” The Council made it clear:



*“The Church teaches that indulgences are very useful to the Christian people and should be retained in the Church; but it condemns with anathema those who assert that they are useless or that the Church lacks the power to grant them” (Council of Trent, Session XXV).*

In other words, what was rejected was not the concept of indulgences, but their improper use.

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#### 4. What Value Do Indulgences Have Today?

One might think that indulgences are an archaic practice, incomprehensible to modern Christians. But nothing could be further from the truth. In an age marked by superficiality and a loss of the sense of sin, **indulgences remind us of three essential truths:**

1. **Sin has consequences:** It is not merely individual or private. It affects the soul, the Church, and the world.
2. **We are united in the communion of saints:** We can help one another, even after death.
3. **The grace of Christ is not a theory:** It is transmitted through concrete means, including through the Church, His Body.

St. Paul expressed it beautifully:

*“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26).*

Today, the Church offers plenary and partial indulgences under certain conditions: sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion, prayer for the Pope’s intentions, and total detachment from sin. One may gain them for oneself or apply them to a soul in purgatory. The *Manual of Indulgences* lists many simple practices to do so: praying the Rosary with one’s family, Eucharistic adoration for half an hour, reading the Bible for 30 minutes,



performing works of mercy, among others.

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## 5. Practical Applications: Living with Indulgence

Rediscovering the value of indulgences can have a great impact on our spiritual life:

- **It renews our understanding of sin:** Making us more aware that every act has eternal weight.
- **It fosters spiritual solidarity:** We pray not just for ourselves but for souls in purgatory, the sick, and the conversion of the world.
- **It connects us with the living Tradition of the Church:** Participating in this practice helps us feel part of a millennia-old story of faith.
- **It motivates a holier life:** Indulgences are not “magical”; they require conversion and proper disposition. They push us to live the Gospel with greater intensity.

Have you ever wondered how many souls in purgatory could be freed by your prayers? Or how much good you could do your own soul if you embraced each day as an opportunity for purification and offering?

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## 6. Pastorally Speaking: An Invitation to Hope

In a world where many feel lost, directionless, or weighed down by the past, indulgences are a **path of hope and mercy**. They are not about legalisms or spiritual transactions but about entering into a logic of reparative love. God never tires of forgiving, and the Church, as mother, offers us concrete means to heal and restore.

Saint John Paul II, a great promoter of rediscovering indulgences, wrote:

*“The gift of the indulgence reveals the fullness of the Father’s mercy, who does not want the death of the sinner but that he should turn and live” (Bull Incarnationis Mysterium, 1998).*



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## Conclusion: A Protestant Myth? Yes, But One with Lessons for All

The famous “sale of indulgences” was, more than a Catholic doctrine, **an interested caricature** that has persisted for centuries. It is fair to acknowledge that human errors were committed, but it is equally necessary to honestly see that the Church knew how to correct herself and reaffirm the spiritual richness of her teaching.

Today, more than ever, we need to rediscover this practice with a renewed outlook, free of prejudice. Indulgences are not a thing of the past, but a powerful tool to live the present in a spirit of mercy, communion, and hope.

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## What Can You Do?

- Go to confession frequently, at least once a month.
- Attend Mass and receive Communion devoutly.
- Offer indulgences for the souls in purgatory.
- Engage in daily spiritual reading, especially of the Word of God.
- Pray the Rosary or the Stations of the Cross with a contrite heart.
- Seek indulgences on special days (like November 2nd or during a Year of Mercy, if celebrated).

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## Final Prayer of Reparation

*Lord Jesus, by Your precious Blood, deliver us from the weight of sin. Through Your infinite mercy, accept our acts of love as supplication for ourselves and for the souls in need of purification. May Your Church always be a bearer of Your grace and Your forgiveness. Amen.*