

MEMORANDUM

Date: March 23, 2020
To: All Clergy of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis
From: Reverend Tom Margevičius, Director, Office of Worship
Re: A new Plenary Indulgence During the Coronavirus Pandemic

- I. **Plenary Indulgences in General.** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 1472 teaches that “sin has a *double consequence*. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the ‘eternal punishment’ of sin. On the other hand, every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the ‘temporal punishment’ of sin.”

Just as the Sacrament of Reconciliation removes the eternal punishment of sin by sacramental absolution, so too an Indulgence removes the temporal punishment of sin. The word “indulgence” comes from the Latin *indulgere*, meaning “to be kind or yield to another.” The Lord wants to be kind to his people, and the normal channel he does so is through the Church. The Church’s authority to grant indulgences is based upon the mandate of Jesus Christ: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (*Matt.* 16:19). When the Church grants an indulgence, she “looses” someone from the temporal punishments resulting from sin, and this has heavenly consequences.

The Church desires to dispense this grace generously, yet not indiscriminately. She wants the faithful to be prepared for this grace, lest it overwhelm them. Consequently, the Church prescribes spiritual practices the faithful are asked to perform, not to earn the indulgence—no one can earn grace—but to demonstrate their readiness to receive grace. These practices can include praying certain prayers and receiving the Sacraments.

Some practices are less demanding. These demonstrate a person is *partially* ready to be loosed and thus can receive a Partial Indulgence. In extraordinary circumstances, however, the Church grants a Plenary Indulgence, meaning the recipient will be loosed from *all* (the plenitude of) temporal consequences due to sin. The Holy See has determined that the Coronavirus crisis is one such extraordinary circumstance.

II. **Plenary Indulgence During the Time of Coronavirus**

As Archbishop Hebda indicated in his March 20, 2020 letter, the Apostolic Penitentiary has announced the gift of a special Plenary Indulgence for the faithful suffering from COVID-19 disease, commonly known as Coronavirus, as well as to health care workers, family members and all those who care for them in any capacity, including through prayer.

1. **Who can receive this Indulgence?** The Decree specifies (1) those who have contracted the Coronavirus and are thus quarantined and unable to receive the Church’s sacraments normally; (2) health care workers, family members, and those exposing themselves to contagion as they care for those with the Coronavirus; and (3) those who visit the Blessed Sacrament, do Eucharistic Adoration, read the Holy Scriptures for at least a half hour, recite the Rosary, pray the Way of the Cross, or recite the Chaplet of Divine Mercy “to implore from Almighty God the end of the [Coronavirus] epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those whom the Lord has called to Himself.”

2. **How do candidates for this Indulgence receive it?** To receive a Plenary Indulgence a person is required to:
- Have been baptized, in a state of grace, and not excommunicated;
 - Desire to be free from attachment to sin;
 - Pray for the Holy Father's intentions with the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and a Marian prayer such as the Hail Mary;
 - Confess one's sins and receive sacramental absolution; and
 - Attend Mass and receive Holy Communion.

Normally, these should happen in proximity of each other, usually within a week. However, the Decree acknowledges that because of the Coronavirus persons might not be able to attend Mass (except electronically/remotely), receive Communion, nor individually confess sins and receive sacramental absolution. Nevertheless, they may still obtain the Plenary Indulgence, provided they *intend* to go to confession, attend Mass, and receive Communion "as soon as possible." The Decree does not put a time limit on this condition.

3. **What about those unable to fulfill the conditions?** As can be seen above, virtually any of the faithful with the right intentions, even those quarantined, can fulfill the requirements. God is merciful and understands persons' hearts.
4. **Can indulgences be gained to benefit others?** Persons on earth are responsible for their own destiny and cannot be granted grace *against* their will; hence Indulgences cannot be applied to others still living (they may refuse the grace). But those who have died and been judged worthy of eternal life, but are not yet ready for heaven because of attachments to earthly pleasures, are being purged of these attachments. Hence, those in Purgatory can benefit from our Indulgences. We can pray, "Lord, may X who is being prepared for heaven benefit from these graces which I am obtaining." The Lord looks lovingly on us as we selflessly surrender our graces to another in need.
5. **How many indulgences can I obtain?** There is no limit to the number of Partial Indulgences a person may obtain, but the Church limits the granting of Plenary Indulgences to one per person per day.
6. **The *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing.** Pope Francis will give a special *Urbi et Orbi* blessing ("to the city and to the world") on Friday, March 27, 2020 and has invited everyone to participate spiritually online. It will be livestreamed by the Vatican at **noon** Minnesota time. All the faithful who listen to the *Urbi et orbi* blessing at noon this Friday (even electronically) can gain the Coronavirus Plenary Indulgence indicated the recent Decree.

- III. **Where can I brush up on my Indulgence theology?** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nn. 1471 – 1479 is a good starting place. In addition, the fourth edition (1999) of the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum* was translated into English 2006 and is now available from the USCCB as *Manual of Indulgences: Norms and Grants*. It has a helpful General Introduction explaining the why and how of Indulgences. Finally, see also Ed Peters, *A Modern Guide to Indulgences: Rediscovering this Often Misunderstood Teaching* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2008). Thankfully, Amazon is still delivering during the pandemic.