

“Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.”

Although November has not yet begun, next Sunday – the first Sunday of the month – will be All Saints Day, so it seemed a good idea to say something about indulgences this week before November begins.

Many of us have, perhaps, fallen out of the habit of praying for the dead and trying to gain indulgences for the Holy Souls in Purgatory. Perhaps we are unsure just what an indulgence is or, even more likely, find it hard to explain to others what an indulgence is, especially non-Catholics.

Let's start by explaining what an indulgence is not: it is not a permission to commit sin; it is not even forgiveness for past sins. Indulgences are concerned with the punishment which we undergo for our sins *after* our sins have been forgiven in Confession. We don't like the idea of being punished for our sins but – and this is very rarely spoken of these days but has always been part of the teachings of the Catholic Church – every sin we commit carries with it a punishment. Our Lord Jesus Christ, of course, has borne the brunt of that punishment in His Passion and Death, but we have to carry some of that punishment too, and any punishment we do not undertake in this life, in the form of penances, will have to be suffered after death in Purgatory.

In the early Church, when Christians generally had a much greater horror of sin, penitents had to perform great penances before they could be readmitted to fellowship with the Christian community. A penitent might have to wear rough sackcloth with ashes sprinkled on his head, he might have to fast, scourge his body, retire to a monastery, kneel at the Church door to beg prayers from those entering, or

wander through the countryside as a beggar. Such penances might last forty days, or three years or seven years or even a lifetime.

But this was also the age of martyrdom when thousands of Christians were arrested and put to death for their faith. It became the practice that penitents would seek the prayers of these great Christian heroes, seek the intercession of the martyrs who were in prison awaiting death. An imprisoned martyr would give to a penitent a written request for mercy which was to be presented to the bishop. On receipt of one of these the bishop would absolve the penitent from the arduous penance that had been imposed on him, absolve him internally from his debt to God as well as from the punishment for which the penance was intended to make satisfaction.

This worked because the prayers and the sufferings of the martyr were deemed to make satisfaction to God for the punishment that the penitent should have undergone.

So began the system of indulgences and of *measuring* indulgences as it were. An indulgence of, for example, three hundred days does not, and never did, mean three hundred days fewer in Purgatory. It meant that three hundred days' worth of penance which the penitent would otherwise have undertaken – three hundred days of fasting, for example – would be remitted.

Moreover, as it is possible for some people to suffer more than they have sinned – the martyrs for example – and as no prayer is ever wasted, the Church collects the value of these acts of satisfaction and stores them in a reservoir, as it were, which she calls her spiritual treasury. Each time we carry out prayers or actions to which an indulgence is attached we are drawing upon this reservoir, this treasury, of merit.

Today there are basically two types of indulgence: a plenary indulgence remits all of the punishment which is due; and a partial indulgence, of course, remits part of the punishment which is due.

We can gain such indulgences by saying certain prayers, or carrying out certain pious practices and devotions, according to the Church's prescriptions, the Church, of course, having the power to bind and to loose. And the indulgences which we gain through these prayers and holy practices can be applied either to ourselves or to the Holy Souls in Purgatory.

As well as saying specific, prescribed prayers, we can also gain indulgences by performing our ordinary duties, and enduring the difficulties of daily life, if, as we do so, we raise our mind to God, place our trust in Him and make some pious invocation, such as "Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us", or "Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto thine," in other words if, as we used to say in the old days, we offer it up. This is very much the favoured approach of saints like St Philip Neri for example, who said that we didn't need to go in search of additional sufferings in order to make up for our sins. It was sufficient, for most of us, to offer up the trials of our ordinary daily life without going to look for more. If we could do *that* perfectly, we would have done no small thing.

The Church gives us November 2nd, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, and indeed the whole of the month of November, as a time of special devotion on behalf of the Holy Souls in Purgatory but really, of course, we should pray for the dead throughout the year, ideally every day! Perhaps several times a day! We neglect the Holy Souls at our peril. After all, if we do not pray for them, and if we do not teach our children to do the same, who will pray for us when we're languishing in the purifying fires of Purgatory?

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord.

And let perpetual light shine upon them.

May they rest in peace.

Amen.