

## THE PARDON OF ASSISI OR THE INDULGENCE OF THE PORZIUNCOLA

On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, we celebrate the Indulgence of the Porziuncola also known as the pardon of Assisi.

What does this mean? How did it begin? And how important is it for us today?

On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the anniversary of the consecration of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels, any person who devoutly visits any Franciscan Church or a Parish Church will obtain a plenary indulgence on the following four conditions:

- That one has sincerely repented from one's sins,
- That one participates at Mass and receives Holy Communion,
- That one confesses one's sins to a priest and receives absolution in the days preceding or following the day of commemoration,
- That one recites the Creed and prays for the intentions of the Pope.

Today, the plenary indulgence is obtainable every day of the year at the Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels in Assisi but only on August 2<sup>nd</sup> for all Franciscan Churches, oratories and all Parish Churches in the world.

**Origin of the indulgence of the Porziuncola:** There is a long tradition that dates back to Saint Francis himself, although the first official documentation available is a letter from Teobaldus, then bishop of Assisi, dated 1310. The little chapel of Our Lady of the Angels, known as the Porziuncola, which is presently enshrined in the Basilica of the same name in Assisi, is one of the three churches repaired by Saint Francis himself. The earliest biographers testify that Saint Francis had a special love for that little chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and recognised that, there, the Order had received many graces. For example, it was there that Francis understood from the Gospel passage of the day that his specific vocation was to be different from that of the hermits. He and his first companions settled there, and there they received the young Clare of Assisi when she ran from home to join the new penitential movement. There he cut her hair at the altar. While Francis and his first companions lived at the Porziuncola, the Order had a remarkable growth. Francis recommended that the Brothers should never leave that Church and he died there on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1226. Ten years before, in the year 1216, Francis was inspired to ask from Pope Honorius III to decree that anyone who would visit that little Church in devotion, be granted a plenary indulgence as if he/she had done a pilgrimage to any of the great sanctuaries which existed then. More to this, there was to be no cost attached to it.

**The extra-ordinary nature of the pardon of Assisi:** Indulgences were normally granted only in relation to pilgrimages to very important churches or places such as the Holy Land, the Tombs of the Apostles in Rome, Saint James of Compostella in Spain and the Sanctuary of Saint Michel on Mount Gargano in the south of Italy. The Porziuncola had no such fame. Also, any penitent was normally expected to pay some symbolic sum as support for the Church and its enterprises. We can imagine how such practice could easily disfavour the poor. In addition to this, all popular pilgrimage centres were far from Assisi, the closest being Rome, making it practically impossible for many persons from central Italy to fulfil the conditions for indulgences. The request of Francis was revolutionary in favour of the poor, the elderly and the sick, especially among the populations of central Italy. By granting Francis' request, Pope Honorius was bringing an important source of grace closer to the people, but he was also risking reducing pilgrims to other centres.

It was not an easy decision for the Pope. It was an unusual requests. When the Pope asked Francis for how many days he wanted it, Francis responded: "Holy Father, I am asking for souls and not for days." After some consultation with the Cardinals, the Pope granted that this indulgence be obtainable in the Church of the Porziuncola only once a year, on the feast of the dedication, on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. Later on, seeing the benefits that pilgrims drew it, successive Popes have enlarged the Pardon of Assisi to get to what we have today: everyday of the year at the Porziuncola in Assisi, but on August 2<sup>nd</sup> for all other Franciscan Churches and Oratories and all Parish Churches. The Church has brought this source of grace closer to all the faithful in the world.

**What is an indulgence?** Talk on indulgences is not common today. It seems an outdated concept. However, though the word may not be very familiar to us today, the reality remains. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines an indulgence as *"a 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 which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and all of the saints"* (CCC n° .1471).

COVID-19 has awaken humanity again to the fact that we are more connected than we often think. As long as one person in suffers, humanity is affected. The doctrine of the communion of saints can be explained in similar terms: not only do the sins of one person affect the whole community, but the merits of Christ and virtues of the Saints benefit the whole Church. Therefore, to obtain an indulgence is to draw from the merits of Christ and of the Saints for the benefit one's own spiritual benefit or for others. An indulgence is defined as the total or partial cancellation of the pain that, by the justice of God, we merit for sins committed after baptism, even when they were confessed and absolved. An indulgence may be obtained either for oneself or for those who have died. When only part of the pain is cancelled, it is called a partial indulgence. When all the pain is cancelled, it is called a plenary indulgence. What determines whether an indulgence is plenary or partial is first the place and the conditions laid down by the Church, and also the intentions of the one who desires to obtain the indulgence. Normally, a plenary indulgence can be obtained only once in a day, while partial indulgences can be obtained several times in a day.

**To celebrate the pardon of Assisi is to celebrate the greatness of God's mercy.** The commemoration of the Pardon of Assisi, celebrates God's merciful love offered to humanity through the Church and the merits of Saint Francis of Assisi. It is not something of the past. The opportunity is given now to Christians all over the world. You must not go to Assisi, you can receive the indulgence wherever you are. Saint Francis had an urge to preach the Gospel to all humanity. He said that this indulgence of the Porziuncola was desired by Jesus for the salvation of many, and he desired to send everyone to Paradise with it. It is this love for humanity and the conviction of Saint Francis that the Lord wanted it that gave him the verve to dare ask for such a favour from the Church. The pardon of Assisi, especially in its renewed and expanded form, is an expression of the concern of the Church for the salvation of souls and the commitment of Franciscans to promote it in the entire world. Therefore, the celebration provides an opportunity to Franciscans not only to benefit for themselves and their loved ones, but most of all to encourage people to repent from evil ways and to approach the Sacrament of confession in order to benefit from such opportunities given us by God through the mediation of the Church.

**A plenary indulgence in times of COVID-19:** The Church proclaimed an indulgence for the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The apostolic penitentiary issued a decree on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2020 and the following are excerpts:

*“The Plenary Indulgence is granted to the faithful suffering from Coronavirus, who are subject to quarantine by order of the health authority in hospitals or in their own homes if, with a spirit detached from any sin, they unite spiritually through the media to the celebration of Holy Mass, the recitation of the Holy Rosary, to the pious practice of the Way of the Cross or other forms of devotion, or if at least they will recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and a pious invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, offering this trial in a spirit of faith in God and charity towards their brothers and sisters, with the will to fulfil the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion and prayer according to the Holy Father's intentions), as soon as possible”.*

*“Health care workers, family members and all those who, following the example of the Good Samaritan, exposing themselves to the risk of contagion, care for the sick of Coronavirus according to the words of the divine Redeemer: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (Jn 15: 13), will obtain the same gift of the Plenary Indulgence under the same conditions”.*

The plenary indulgence is granted also to those faithful who *“offer a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or Eucharistic adoration, or reading the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour, or the recitation of the Holy Rosary, or the pious exercise of the Way of the Cross, or the recitation of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, to implore from Almighty God the end of the epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those whom the Lord has called to Himself”.*

Finally, *“The Church prays for those who find themselves unable to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and of the Viaticum, entrusting each and every one to divine Mercy by virtue of the communion of saints and granting the faithful a Plenary Indulgence on the point of death, provided that they are duly disposed and have recited a few prayers during their lifetime (in this case the Church makes up for the three usual conditions required). For the attainment of this indulgence the use of the crucifix or the cross is recommended”.*

As Franciscans animated by the same passion for souls as our Seraphic Father Saint Francis of Assisi, we are committed to celebrate God's mercy of which we ourselves have benefitted, and to lead other persons to such springs of Divine Mercy.

*By Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFMCAP.  
General Spiritual Assistant OFS-YouFra*