



Indulgences, Funerals and Scattering

Frequently Asked Questions

What is an indulgence?

If you were to fall and tear a ligament or tendon in your knee, your body would not be able to heal itself; you may need a surgeon to fix it, and even then you would need physiotherapy in the months that followed because the knee would be weak and prone to future injury. In a similar way, every time we fall spiritually (every time we sin) there is also a spiritual consequence – damage to the soul that leaves the soul weak in this area and prone to future sinning – damage that needs to be healed. This is because every sin, even little ones, and even ones that have been forgiven through confession, indicate an unhealthy attachment to something other than God, and this must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory.¹ The Church recognizes our need in this area, and so lovingly offers us pathways to speedily purify that spiritual consequence here on earth, called *indulgences*. We can obtain an indulgence for ourselves, or on behalf of the souls in Purgatory (which is made possible through the *communion of saints*).

During the season of Holy Souls, we can obtain a full indulgence (a.k.a., a *plenary* indulgence) on behalf of a soul in Purgatory, by devoutly visiting a cemetery during November 1st - 8th (it is a partial indulgence during other days of the year) to pray for the dead. In order to access this indulgence on behalf of a soul in Purgatory, your own soul must be adequately prepared by receiving the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion (within several days of visiting the cemetery), and by spending a little time praying for the intentions of the Pope (one Our Father and Hail Mary is a good minimum), which expresses our unity with the Church. We can give no greater gift to a loved one who has passed away!

Can I scatter my relative's ashes in the ocean?

Even though it may look classy or romantic in the movies, cremated remains should never be scattered. Cremains, though in ash form, are still what remain of the body, and we should no more scatter them than we would scatter

body parts about. Placed in a worthy container, they should be buried in a grave or inurned in a columbarium niche, preferably in a Catholic cemetery (which is sacred ground that has been consecrated by a bishop). This Catholic practice expresses reverence and respect for the dignity of the human body as a member of Christ.

Furthermore, the very act of visiting a site and seeing the deceased's name (not possible if someone's remains have been scattered), provides comfort and closure not only to family and friends, but for everyone whose lives were touched by the deceased. It is also for generations that follow who will want to connect with their heritage.

Is a funeral mass really necessary?

Yes! The Catholic Church is constantly reminding us of the dignity of the human person – we are created in the image and likeness of God, and we are called to participate in His very life and love for all eternity. The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral. This is because the community turns for spiritual nourishment to the table of the Eucharist: "In partaking of the body of Christ, all are given a foretaste of eternal life in Christ and are united with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead."²

Moreover, through baptism, a Christian's very *body* becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit; through reception of the Eucharist, a person's body becomes a tabernacle carrying our Lord; and even in death, we believe that someday the body will be reunited with the soul and become a glorified body for all eternity. The human body is therefore a vessel destined for unimaginable glory and eternal happiness, and as such is worthy of noble treatment here on earth, even after death. For these reasons, a Catholic funeral service has a beautiful form and set of guidelines to uphold and celebrate this dignity.

¹ (CCC, n. 1472).

² *Order of Christian Funerals*, 143.