

## COMMENTARY ON THE NATIVITY PLENARY INDULGENCE FOR THE DIOCESE OF BIRMINGHAM IN ALABAMA - 2024

*Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L., Chancellor*

This morning, January 3, which is the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, Bishop Raica received a wonderful gift from the Holy See: a plenary indulgence connected with the Nativity scenes that are found in practically all of our churches, chapels, shrines, oratories, Catholic schools, and other Catholic institutions around the Diocese of Birmingham at this time of year!

A plenary indulgence is the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin that has already been forgiven. To put it in simpler terms, sin has consequences both in time (temporal) and in eternity. When we repent of our sin by going to Confession, the eternal consequences are dealt with. But the effects that our sins cause here in this world of time – such as damaged relationships, a tipping of the scales of justice, wounds in our own hearts, etc. – remain and require time and other actions to be fully dealt with. Through our prayers, penances, and good works, we gradually address these temporal effects and grow towards wholeness in Christ. If we have not fully done so by the moment of our death, then, as long as we died in friendship with God (the state of grace), the time we spend in Purgatory will complete our purification and healing from the temporal effects of our sins.

An indulgence, whether partial (remitting some of the temporal punishment due to sin) or plenary (remitting all of the temporal punishment due to sin), is a gift from the Church. The Bible teaches us that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8) – and we grow in love of God and neighbor precisely by those prayers, penances, and works of charity that I mentioned above. However, we know also from experience that sometimes we grow cold in our love or lax in our pursuit of the growth that we know we need. And just as parents offer incentives to their children so that they will learn to do what is right, so the Church, our Mother, offers the faithful incentives so that we will say the prayers and do the good works that we should. This is what an indulgence is: *an incentive to do the sorts of things we already should be doing as faithful Catholics!*

This spiritual incentive from Holy Mother Church is drawn, through the power given to her by Christ, from what we call the “heavenly treasury” made up of the merits of Christ and the saints. The Church is able to distribute these graces as she sees fit – and one of the primary ways that she does so is through the granting of special indulgences.

The plenary indulgence that was granted today is in connection with the Nativity scene. Eight hundred years ago, St. Francis of Assisi set up the first Nativity scene in the town of Greccio, Italy. He was facing a difficult time in his ministry and, moved by devotion and divine inspiration, knew that being able to look upon a representation of Christ’s birth would help to warm his heart and give him courage and strength to continue on his mission. With the help of a friend named John, a truly living Nativity was set up, including not just a baby but also an ox and an ass. The scene immediately captured the hearts of those who saw it, and the tradition quickly spread throughout Italy and well beyond – to include our own homes and churches here.

### **How to Gain this Indulgence**

The decree from the Apostolic Penitentiary, which is the part of the Holy See that distributes these special graces, is provided in an English translation with this commentary. To distill it down to a simpler list, however, the following is what must be done in order to gain this indulgence:

1. Catholics who live within the territory of the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama or visit it between December 19, 2023 and February 2, 2024 are eligible to receive the plenary indulgence.
2. They should visit a Nativity scene in one of the following locations during that time:
  - a. The Cathedral of Saint Paul;
  - b. A parish church or mission chapel;
  - c. A Catholic hospital chapel;
  - d. A Catholic school chapel;
  - e. A convent or monastery chapel;
  - f. The large outdoor Nativity Chapel at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Hanceville;
  - g. Another Catholic institution that has a legitimate chapel (e.g., in the diocesan chancery, for those who work there);
  - h. The chapel at EWTN in Irondale;
  - i. For the residents of Cenacolo or those invited/approved to visit there, in their chapel.

(If anyone believes that a location should be added to this list, please contact the Bishop's office for approval.)

3. Although it is now customary to take down Christmas decorations after the feast of the Baptism of the Lord (which, this year, is Monday, January 8), this indulgence is granted through February 2, 2024. Therefore, pastors, administrators, religious superiors, and those others responsible for the above locations are encouraged to consider leaving up at least their Nativity scene, even in a slightly simplified form, until February 2.
4. The usual conditions for gaining a plenary indulgence apply: 1) have the intention to receive the indulgence; 2) have a total detachment from sin; 3) go to sacramental confession within about 20 days before or after the day that you do the indulgenced action; 3) receive Holy Communion worthily within about 20 days before or after; 4) pray for the intentions of the Holy Father. The additional requirements for this indulgence are that you must pray wholeheartedly for peace and you must also recite the Our Father, a Creed (e.g., Apostles' or Nicene), and "invocations" to the Holy Family and St. Francis of Assisi.

(Such "invocations" would be in the form of: "Jesus, have mercy on us. Blessed Mother, pray for us. St. Joseph, pray for us. St. Francis of Assisi, pray for us." – or similar.)
5. The decree mentions participating in devotions or celebrations for the Nativity or simply pausing before a Nativity scene and praying privately. Pastors and others charged with the care of souls are welcome to organize special celebrations that include the above elements. Please do not hesitate to contact the Office for Sacred Liturgy for any further guidance.
6. Those who are homebound or in prison can also gain the indulgence by spiritually uniting themselves with the pilgrimages of those who are able to visit a Nativity in a church or chapel and with the intention of completing the usual requirements as soon as they are able.

7. It is possible to gain up to one plenary indulgence per day under ordinary circumstances. One confession can cover multiple indulgences. There must be one communion per indulgence. Therefore, those who are in the habit of going to daily Mass and confession about once a month can theoretically gain this indulgence every day through February 2.
8. The decree also asks priests to be generous with offering the sacrament of penance.
9. The indulgence can be applied to one's own soul or to the souls in Purgatory.

Indulgences are a distinctive part of our Catholic Tradition that have not always been appreciated in recent years, perhaps; and sadly, at times in our history, were even abused. However, it should be noted that there is a growing re-appreciation for them today among the faithful, who desire to gain all the spiritual benefits they can on their journey to heaven. We should all give thanks to God for this gift from Pope Francis, by way of our Bishop's request to the Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See.

If there are any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Fr. Jerabek in the Chancellor's Office or Fr. Justin Ward in the Office for Sacred Liturgy.