 Reading time: 40 min.

November is traditionally associated with praying for the dead and the possibility of obtaining plenary indulgences for them. However, not everyone knows that this gift of divine mercy is available throughout the year, both for oneself and for the souls in Purgatory. The Church offers many opportunities to obtain it, many of which are connected with visiting basilicas, cathedrals, shrines and parish churches. Rome, with its extraordinary wealth of sacred places, offers pilgrims special opportunities. Rediscovering this practice means appreciating a spiritual treasure of the Christian tradition and turning a visit to a church into an opportunity for prayer, conversion, growth in faith and charity towards our departed brothers and sisters.

A gift of divine mercy throughout the year

Many Christians know November as a particularly appropriate time to pray for their departed loved ones and obtain indulgences for them. Indeed, on 2 November, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, the Catholic Church offers the opportunity to obtain a plenary indulgence applicable exclusively to the souls in Purgatory. The same opportunity is available from 1 to 8 November to those who devoutly visit a cemetery and pray for the dead.

But can indulgences only be obtained on these days? And can they be obtained only for the dead, or also for oneself?

Some special opportunities may still be quite well known: the Church's Jubilees, the papal blessing *Urbi et Orbi* at Christmas and Easter, or 2 August, when the so-called Pardon of Assisi is celebrated, linked to the Franciscan tradition of the Porziuncola.

In reality, as we have already had occasion to point out in a previous article, the opportunities offered by the Church are far more numerous than people generally think. In this article, we would like to focus in particular on those connected with visiting sacred places.

The meaning of indulgences

To understand the value of this practice, it is worth recalling that an indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due for sins whose guilt has already been forgiven (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1471).

The sacrament of Reconciliation obtains forgiveness for our sins. However, even after receiving forgiveness, the effects of sin remain within us, requiring a process of purification and spiritual renewal. Through indulgences, the Church meets this need of the faithful by drawing on the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints.

An indulgence is called plenary when it remits all the temporal punishment due for sins, and partial when it remits only some of it.

Every member of the faithful can obtain indulgences for themselves or offer them, as a suffrage, for the souls in Purgatory. In the latter case, they are a precious expression of Christian charity, founded on the communion of saints, which unites the members of the Church even beyond death.

Visits to sacred places

The *Manual of Indulgences* (*Enchiridion indulgentiarum*), in its fourth edition, published by the Apostolic Penitentiary in 1999, devotes an entire grant, no. 33, to visits to sacred places.

According to its provisions, a plenary indulgence is granted to the faithful who devoutly visit one of the following places on the occasions specified, reciting the Our Father and the Creed and fulfilling the usual conditions.

1. ***The four major papal basilicas of Rome***

– St Peter’s in the Vatican;

– St John Lateran;

– St Mary Major;

– St Paul Outside the Walls.

These basilicas may be visited on any day of the year, either as part of a group pilgrimage or with the intention, at least during the visit, of filial submission to the Roman Pontiff.

2. ***Minor basilicas***

– On 29 June, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles;

– on the solemnity of their titular feast;

– on 2 August, on the occasion of the indulgence of the Porziuncola;

– once a year, on a day freely chosen by the faithful.

3. ***Cathedral churches***

– On 29 June, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles;

– on the solemnity of their titular feast;

– on 22 February, the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter the Apostle;

– on 9 November, the anniversary of the dedication of the Lateran Basilica;

– on 2 August, on the occasion of the indulgence of the Porziuncola.

4. ***Shrines recognized by the competent ecclesiastical authority as international, national or diocesan***

– On the solemnity of their titular feast;

– once a year, on a day freely chosen by the faithful;

– whenever one takes part in a group pilgrimage organized at the shrine.

5. ***Parish churches***

– On the solemnity of their titular feast;

– on 2 August, on the occasion of the indulgence of the Porziuncola.

6. ***Churches and altars***

– On the day of their dedication.

7. ***Churches and oratories of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life***

– On the day dedicated to their Founder.

The same *Manual* also provides for the granting of a plenary indulgence to those who take part in the sacred services in a stational church on the appointed day. A partial indulgence is granted to those who devoutly visit a stational church on the designated day or a Christian catacomb.

(Cf. Apostolic Penitentiary, Manual of Indulgences, 4th edition, 1999, grant no. 33, §§ 1–3).

The conditions for obtaining a plenary indulgence

Naturally, simply visiting a sacred place is not enough to obtain a plenary indulgence. The prescribed work must be performed and the conditions laid down

by the Church must be fulfilled:

– be completely detached from all sin, even venial sin;

– receive the sacrament of Confession;

– receive Holy Communion;

– pray for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff.

Confession may be made a few days before or after performing the indulgenced work, while it is advisable to receive Communion and pray for the Pope’s intentions on the same day.

Ordinarily, only one plenary indulgence may be obtained per day.

The point, then, is not simply to comply formally with a set of requirements, but to undertake a genuine journey of conversion, welcoming God’s mercy and renewing one’s commitment to the Christian life.

Rome: an extraordinary opportunity for pilgrims

Rome holds a privileged place in the history and life of the Catholic Church. Since the earliest centuries of Christianity, the faithful have travelled to the Eternal City to pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, honor the memory of the martyrs and express their communion with the Successor of Peter.

According to figures presented by the Holy See on 11 April 2025, St Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican alone welcomes around twelve million visitors a year, an average of almost 33,000 people a day. Some go in to admire its architectural and artistic beauty; others come to pray and experience their faith.

With its four major papal basilicas and more than nine hundred churches, including minor basilicas, parish churches, shrines and churches belonging to religious institutes, Rome offers a heritage that is not only historical, artistic and cultural, but above all spiritual.

In the four major papal basilicas, it is possible to obtain a plenary indulgence every day of the year, subject to the conditions laid down by the Church. These opportunities are supplemented by the many occasions provided by the titular feasts of parish churches, minor basilicas and shrines, as well as the liturgical commemorations of the founders of religious orders and congregations.

From tourists to pilgrims

What has been said about Rome naturally applies to the rest of the world as well. There is no need to undertake a long journey to benefit from this gift of the Church. Many opportunities can be found close to home, in parish churches, cathedrals and shrines in our dioceses.

A patronal feast, a community pilgrimage or a visit to a basilica can become an opportunity to renew one’s friendship with God and perform an act of spiritual charity for the dead.

To those who have the opportunity to travel to Rome, we would like to extend a special invitation: do not leave the Eternal City without taking advantage of one of the many opportunities the Church offers to obtain a plenary indulgence, for yourselves or for your departed loved ones.

A trip to Rome can thus become more than just a sightseeing visit: a true pilgrimage, an encounter with the witness of the saints and an opportunity to enrich one’s spiritual life.

Churches in Rome to visit throughout the year

To help pilgrims learn about and make the most of these opportunities, below is a list of churches in Rome, together with their respective liturgical feasts and locations.

The list is intended as a practical tool for planning visits, rediscovering places of faith that are sometimes little known, and making the most of the many opportunities the Church offers throughout the year to receive the gift of plenary indulgences.

The church name links to its website, and the type to its Wikipedia page. Select a column heading to sort the table. Purple text indicates an uncertain patronal feast day. Movable feasts appear at the end of the latest month in which they may fall.

Churches and basilicas in Rome