



ARCHDIOCESE OF AGAÑA

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Protocol No. 2020-059

PASTORAL LETTER IN RESPONSE TO THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION & THE TEMPORARY CLOSURE OF CHURCH BUILDINGS DURING THIS COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Peace be with you!

Please be assured of my prayers for you and your families. We have lost one sister in Christ as a result of this pandemic and find that to date 49 of our brothers and sisters have tested positive for COVID-19. I also remember and keep in prayer all the families who bear, at this time, uncertainty of loss of work, the availability of resources, and how to recover when a solution to this pandemic is available. We are in a period of history in which none of us have experience; therefore, your commitment to keep the faith and continue to work patiently as a community of believers in cooperation with the protocols issued by the government gives me confidence that we will weather this storm like true disciples of Jesus Christ. I encourage you now to find confidence in the word of God... *“be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6).* Indeed God is with us and therefore I implore you to remain steadfast in prayer constant in charity, and strong in faith. We can ever rely upon a Provident Father whose mercy and power knows no end.

In this letter, therefore, I address two important issues: 1) the temporary closure of our church buildings; and 2) the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the light of our present circumstance

First, regarding the closure of our church buildings. In my pastoral letter to you on 16 March 2020, I encouraged your pastors to use their discretion in keeping the church buildings open for personal prayer, while observing the protocols of social distancing. Unfortunately realities have changed given the rise of confirmed cases of infection and the new government strictures of social isolation. As of today, in order to do our part in preventing the further spread of COVID-19 all church buildings will be temporarily closed, at least up until 13 April 2020. I understand that our churches throughout the island bring comfort, hope, and strength to you, but I must encourage you at this time to pray at home and to take advantage of, and foster the opportunity you have to strengthen your domestic church. Have those conversations with your family in which you may share each other’s worries, fears, concerns and hopes for the future. Consider the simple but profound words of St. Teresa of Calcutta, “love begins at home.”

Secondly, regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We understand that with the social distancing measures in place, the ordinary way of celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, that of individual confession, is not possible, in that doing so would most likely place both the penitent and the priest in danger of infection.

Therefore, as a consequence of the current pandemic, along with guidance from the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome; and most especially taking into account the supreme good of the salvation of souls, I grant to our designated hospital chaplains permission to provide general absolution to penitent patients who seek reconciliation.

For those of us who are observing this period of social isolation and are unable to leave our homes, we will not be offering private reconciliation or general absolution. I therefore encourage you to make acts of perfect contrition according to a note by the Apostolic Penitentiary:

“Where the individual faithful find themselves in the painful impossibility of receiving sacramental absolution, it should be remembered that perfect contrition, coming from the love of God, beloved above all things, expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness (that which the penitent is at present able to express) and accompanied by *votum confessionis*, that is, by the firm resolution to have recourse, as soon as possible, to sacramental confession, obtains forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones (cf. CCC, no. 1452).”

The important dispositions for perfect contrition are:

1. The Love of God;
2. Sincere desire for forgiveness; and
3. An ardent commitment to receive the sacrament of reconciliation as soon as it is available.

I once again reiterate that these are temporary measures and updates will be provided to you in a timely manner. Our present priority in this present moment motivates us as the Catholic Church on Guam to do our part in ensuring that COVID-19 does not continue to wreak havoc amongst our people. Therefore, I request that you to engage more fully this extraordinary season of Lent: fast, pray, and join the sacrifices you are making to the sufferings of our Savior Jesus Christ, knowing full well that in the end He is victorious. Be strong in faith, confident in hope, and constant in charity.

Finally, continue to pray for those individuals who are on the front lines of the response to this virus, the doctors, medics, researchers, and government leaders tasked with the noble work of keeping our island and communities safe. Let all our interactions continue to be one that observes the respect and dignity of the person and do not forget the love Christ has for each of us. May God continue to be with us and that Santa Marian Kamalen may bless us and give us strength.

I remain in Christ,



Archbishop Michael J. Byrnes, S.T.D.
Archbishop of Agaña

28 March 2020