



Secretariat of Doctrine and Canonical Affairs

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MEMORANDUM

To: All Bishops

From: Rev. Michael JK Fuller, S.T.D.,
Executive Director for the Secretariat of Doctrine and Canonical Affairs

Date: March 22, 2020

Re: The Care of Souls and the Forgiveness of Sins During This Pandemic

Recently the Apostolic Penitentiary released two statements addressing the current pandemic:

- *Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic, 20.03.2020*

and

- *Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the granting of special Indulgences to the faithful in the current pandemic, 20.03.2020.*

Attached to this memo is a resource produced by the Secretariat of Doctrine and Canonical Affairs, and reviewed by Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades, Chairman of the Committee on Doctrine and Bishop Robert P. Deeley, Chairman of the Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance.

The attached resource, *The Care of Souls and the Forgiveness of Sins During This Pandemic*, was developed as an aid to you in addressing the two documents from the Apostolic Penitentiary. Please feel free to share, adapt, or amend it as you see fit.

THE CARE OF SOULS AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS DURING THIS PANDEMIC

The necessary and prudent measures enacted by government officials to prevent and slow infection rates during this current pandemic come with a great many sacrifices. As in all areas of life, these measures also affect the Church in her mission for the care of souls. The faithful have been overwhelmingly understanding in adapting to the restrictions of public gatherings and the temporary cessation of public Masses by attending Eucharistic celebrations virtually and participating in spiritual communion.

Another crucial aspect of the spiritual life is the forgiveness of sins, which is ordinarily accomplished through individual and integral confession to a priest followed by individual absolution. The current pandemic and the measures taken to combat it make this very difficult. Therefore, the following instructions have been issued by the Holy See (Apostolic Penitentiary):

- the diocesan bishop is to indicate to priests and penitents the prudent attentions to be adopted in the individual celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. These should include assuring that proper precautions are made in terms of appropriate distancing, that it occurs in a well-ventilated area, such as outside the confessional, the use of protective masks, and while always assuring protection of the seal of confession. Governmental guidelines limiting the number of people who may gather in the same public place, including a church or chapel, need to be adhered to as well.
- the diocesan bishop can, in the current situation, determine that the circumstances in his territory warrant the use of the third form of the Rite of Penance, often called “general absolution.” However, this form necessitates a gathering of people. Given restrictions on public gatherings, the diocesan bishop could grant permission for those areas where such a gathering is already in place, such as in a hospital ward “where the infected faithful are in danger of death.” This would require some explanation on the part of the priest to the penitents as to how they can participate in the rite. It would also require that all prudent measures be made so that the penitents can hear the absolution (such as a public address system).

However, given public restrictions, the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation with either individual or general absolution may not be possible. This will make some of the faithful anxious, especially during this Lenten season of penance.

To help in this, the Holy See, through the Apostolic Penitentiary, has offered two recourses for the faithful:

a) “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).”

- perfect contrition requires
 - the love of God
 - the sincere desire for forgiveness
 - the ardent commitment to receive the sacrament of reconciliation when available

b) “The gift of special Indulgences is granted to the faithful suffering from COVID-19 disease, commonly known as Coronavirus, as well as to health care workers, family members and all those who in any capacity, including through prayer, care for them.”

- this is a time of suffering, especially for those who have contracted COVID-19. As such, it may be a time for us to “rediscover ‘the same redemptive suffering of Christ’ (*Salvifici doloris*, 30).” Trusting in Christ,
- a *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.”
 - An indulgence is “the expression of the Church's full confidence of being heard by the Father when - in view of Christ's merits and, by his gift, those

of Our Lady and the saints - she asks him to mitigate or cancel the painful aspect of punishment by fostering its medicinal aspect through other channels of grace” (John Paul II, *General Audience, September 29, 1999*).

- A plenary indulgence removes all the temporal punishment due to sin (CCC, 1471).

Promotion and catechesis on these remedies during the absence of the sacrament of reconciliation can be a source of great consolation for all the faithful. A short catechesis on how the faithful can participate in both the indulgence and the act of perfect contrition will be coming shortly to the USCCB website usccb.org.

For further reference, please see:

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320d.html>

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320c.html>