



MEMORANDUM

To: Priests, Deacons, Pastoral Leaders, Parishes, and Religious Houses

From: Most Reverend Daniel E. Thomas

Re: Care of Souls and the Forgiveness of Sins during the Pandemic

Date: 26 March 2020

*And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
“Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
and whose sins you retain are retained” (Jn 20: 23).*

Care of Souls and the Forgiveness of Sins

The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See released two statements recently addressing the current COVID-19 pandemic:

- *Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic* (March 20, 2020)

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

and

- *Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the granting of special Indulgences to the faithful in the current pandemic* (March 20, 2020)

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

The following provides guidance and information concerning these two documents.

Sacrament of Reconciliation

- The seriousness of the Coronavirus does not dispense from making available the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Individual auricular confession is the ordinary way of celebrating this Sacrament and should still be available at published times, in so far as possible. Given the size of particular confessionals/reconciliation rooms, priests may appropriately choose, as

previously indicated, to hear confessions outside of the confessional during this period. Appropriate social distancing is to be maintained.

- Priests, according to the most recent Vatican directives, may choose to hear confessions in a ventilated place outside the confessional, adopt suitable distance and use a protective mask if thought necessary. In every instance the inviolability of the sacramental seal is to be safeguarded.
- The faithful, who desire to celebrate the Sacrament but are inhibited for one reason or another should be catechized about the benefit of perfect contrition for sins and the gift of special indulgences at this time.

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 (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1452).

Thus, perfect contrition requires: the love of God, the sincere desire for forgiveness, and the ardent commitment to receive the sacrament of reconciliation as soon as possible.

Third Form in the Rite of Penance (“General Absolution”)

According to the *Note* from the Apostolic Penitentiary, “individual confession is the ordinary way of celebrating this sacrament (cf. can. 960 CIC), while collective absolution, without prior individual confession, cannot be imparted except where there is an imminent danger of death, since there is not enough time to hear the confessions of individual penitents (cf. can. 961, § 1 CIC), or a grave necessity (cf. can. 961, § 1 CIC). 961, § 1, 2 CIC), the consideration of which is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop, taking into account the criteria agreed upon with the other members of the Episcopal Conference (cf. can. 455, § 2 CIC) and without prejudice to the necessity, for valid absolution, of *votum sacramenti* on the part of the individual penitent, that is to say, the purpose of confessing serious sins in due time, which at the time could not be confessed (cf. can. 962, § 1 CIC). (*Note from Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic*, 20.03.2020).

Regarding whether the condition of “grave necessity” of canon 961 §1 exists in a diocese affected by the pandemic is left to the diocesan bishop to determine, as canon 961 §2 and the *Note* specifically indicate. Given the other requirements outlined above for the licit use of “General Absolution”, and especially for its valid celebration (the *votum sacramenti*), it is my determination that at this time the use of “General Absolution” is not to be employed in the Diocese of Toledo. Should the level of the pandemic contagion worsen, then this determination can be re-evaluated.

Gift of Special Indulgences

- 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” (Pope Saint John Paul II, *General Audience, September 29, 1999*).
- A plenary indulgence removes all the temporal punishment due to sin (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1471).

In order to assist the faithful in their understanding of the gift of Indulgences, the following excerpts, from the *Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the granting of special Indulgences to the faithful in the current pandemic*, may be particularly helpful.

- So that all those who suffer because of COVID-19, precisely in the mystery of this suffering, may rediscover “the same redemptive suffering of Christ” (*Salvifici doloris*, 30), this Apostolic Penitentiary, *ex auctoritate Summi Pontificis*, trusting in the word of Christ the Lord and considering with a spirit of faith the epidemic currently underway, to be lived in a spirit of personal conversion, grants the gift of Indulgences in accordance with the following disposition.

The *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.
- This Apostolic Penitentiary also willingly grants a *Plenary Indulgence* under the same conditions on the occasion of the current world epidemic, also to those faithful who offer a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or Eucharistic adoration, or reading the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour, or the recitation of the Holy Rosary, or the pious exercise of the Way of the Cross, or the recitation of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, to implore from Almighty God the end of the epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those whom the Lord has called to Himself.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and of the Church, Health of the Sick and Help of Christians, our Advocate, help suffering humanity, saving us from the evil of this pandemic and obtaining for us every good necessary for our salvation and sanctification.