



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

The recent 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. Yet, for some people they have found it very challenging to understand how they might receive God's forgiveness during this pandemic of the Coronavirus. The Church is clear in the avenues which a person can find that forgiveness that they are looking for.

- The forgiveness of sins is ordinarily accomplished through individual and integral confession to a priest followed by individual absolution. Yet, the current pandemic and the measures taken to combat it make this very difficult. Because of the Governor's order of 'stay at home,' people are not to gather in the same public place. Keeping numbers down and social distancing is to be respected, as a means of protecting the common good as an act of charity.
 - The celebration of the third form for the Sacrament of Reconciliation has been raised where 'general absolution' might be used. Yet, this form necessitates a gathering of people. Given the present restrictions on public gatherings, unless we may be speaking of a hospital ward "where the infected faithful are in danger of death", this does not seem to fit the criteria for the use of this form.
- A. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, has offered two distinct recourses for the faithful to seek forgiveness due to circumstances of this pandemic:
1. "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

2. “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.”
 - a) 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,
 - b) 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.
 - c) “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.”
 - d) 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).
 - e) 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 www.usccb.org.

Lastly, as a pastor, I know that the Church is very clear in what she teaches in regards to the ‘forgiveness of sins.’ I recall very well that when I ministered to the person who was elderly and unable to get to Mass, someone who may struggle with scrupulosity, or with the person who is fearful of the unknown, I always tried to reassure them of God’s abundant mercy and compassion.

Recently, our Holy Father, Pope Francis delivered a homily in a mass that was livestreamed from Santa Marta on March 20, 2020. His words spoke of the extreme emergency and fear that so many people are experiencing in Italy and all over the world due to the pandemic.

His words brought me such great comfort amidst what we are trying to grapple with here in the United States, and I thought you, too, might find it helpful, especially as you minister to God's people who are also struggling with these very real questions of God's forgiveness and our inability to celebrate the individual Sacrament of Reconciliation:

“People who cannot go to confession because of the coronavirus lockdown or another serious reason can go to God directly, be specific about their sins, request pardon and experience God’s loving forgiveness.....This is the right time, the opportune moment. An act of contrition (CCC 1452) well done, and our souls will become white like the snow.”

God welcomes every repentant sinner with open arms, he said. **“It's like going home.”** The Holy Father in effect offered the People of God a way to not delay seeking forgiveness even when they are not able to celebrate the Sacrament with a priest because of the circumstances of this pandemic. **Let us assure our people of this forgiveness my brothers at this time of extreme danger!** Let me close with some with further description of the Holy Father's homily:

“However,” he acknowledged, **“many will say to me today: ‘But, Father, where can I find a priest, a confessor, because one can’t leave home? And I want to make peace with the Lord, I want Him to embrace me, that my Papa embrace me . . . What can I do if I can’t find priests?’”**

“Do what the Catechism says,” the Jesuit Pope stressed, **“it’s very clear: if you don’t find a priest to hear your Confession, talk with God, He is your Father, and tell Him the truth: ‘Lord, I’ve done this, and that, and that . . . I’m sorry,”** and ask Him for forgiveness with all your heart, with the Act of Contrition, and promise Him: **“Afterwards I will go to Confession, but forgive me now.”**

If you do all this, Pope Francis said, you will return to God's grace immediately. As the Catechism teaches, he reminded, you yourself can approach God's forgiveness without having a priest at hand.

The Catechism teaches that “when it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called “perfect” (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sin; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.” (CCC 1452)

+Most Reverend Daniel E. Garcia
Bishop of Monterey in California
March 27, 2020