

VATICAN CITY, March 20, 2020 ([LifeSiteNews](#)) – Pope Francis has granted a plenary indulgence to Catholics directly affected by the coronavirus, upon meeting certain conditions, while the Vatican has clarified that priests can give general absolution to groups of Catholics caught up in the pandemic, as deemed necessary by the local bishop.

The Vatican's Apostolic Penitentiary released two documents today, [the first](#) announcing a special indulgence for Catholics affected by Covid-19, including the sick, their family members, health workers and anyone who takes care of them “even with prayer”, putting themselves at risk of falling ill. The plenary indulgence, which remits those who fulfill its stipulations from temporal punishment in Purgatory, has the following conditions:

- Detachment “from any sin”
- Spiritually uniting themselves to the Church through the celebration of Mass, or
- Reciting the Holy Rosary, or
- The pious practice of the Via Crucis, or
- Some other form of devotion, or
- Reciting the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and a pious invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Those who avail themselves of this indulgence must offer their demonstration in a spirit of “faith in God and charity towards brethren, with the intent of fulfilling the usual conditions (sacramental confession, reception of Holy Communion, and prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father) as soon as it is possible for them.”

The difficulties in participating in sacramental confession during a pandemic were addressed in [the second document](#) released by the Apostolic Penitentiary today.

Titled “Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic situation,” the letter discusses physical safeguards for the confessor and the penitent against infection and also the possibility of waiving individual confession in favor of general absolution.

Collective or general absolutions in the Catholic Church are normally strictly reserved for emergency situations, such as an impending disaster or the moments before a battle when a military chaplain has no time to hear individual confessions. When circumstances allow, penitents who receive general absolution should pray an act of contrition, and, when grave sins are involved, should confess them individually as soon as possible.

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The document released today reminds Catholics that “even in the Covid-19 period, the sacrament of Reconciliation is administered according to the norms of universal canon law and the instructions of the Ordo Paenitentiae [Order of Penance].” This means that general absolution, the granting of God's forgiveness to a group of the faithful without a

priest hearing their confessions first, will not be permitted without case-by-case decisions by bishops.

“Individual confession represents the ordinary method for the celebration of this sacrament (cf. can 960 CIC), while general absolution, without previous individual confession, cannot be given except where there is immediate danger of death, there not being enough time to hear the confession of the single penitent, or a grave need (cf. can. 961, § 1, 2° CIC), whose consideration belongs to the diocesan bishop, taking into account the criteria agreed upon by the other members of the Episcopal Conference (cf. can. 455, § 2 CIC), and [...] the penitent's intention to confess later and in person the serious sins that at the moment he was not able to confess (cf. can. 962, § 1 CIC),” the bulletin reads.

However, because of the coronavirus epidemic, the Apostolic Penitentiary believes that in places where the virus runs rampant and is likely to reoccur, there will be “grave need” for general absolution. However, this is at the discretion of a bishop, and if a priest believes that several faithful should be given general absolution together, his bishop should either be warned or informed “as soon as possible.” This is for the sake of spiritual safety.

Bishops are also responsible for the physical safety of priests and penitents, the document relates.

“In the present pandemic emergency, it is up to the diocesan bishop to indicate to priests and penitents the prudent safeguards for individual celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, such as the celebration in a ventilated place outside the confession box, the adoption of fitting distance, the recourse to protective masks ... while safeguarding the sacramental seal [of Confession] and the necessary discretion,” it states.

The document also stipulates that it is up to the diocesan bishop to determine, for his own diocese and relative to the level of the pandemic contagion, when and where there is a grave need for granting general absolution. It offers as an example the entrance to a hospital ward, saying that the priest's voice should be amplified, so that the faithful can hear him.

The bishops are also asked to consider assembling groups of voluntary “extraordinary hospital chaplains” so that they can help “guarantee the necessary spiritual assistance to the sick and the dying.” This should be done in consultation with the hospitals and with reference to rules preventing the contagion from spreading.

The document also offered advice to those in a position where it is impossible to receive any form of absolution, counselling them that perfect contrition, coming from a love of God above all else, a sincere wish to be forgiven, and the firm intention of receiving individual confession when it is possible will obtain the forgiveness of sin, “even mortal sins.”

Finally, the directive noted that we are in a situation unprecedented in the history of the Church.

“The Church has never before experienced so much the power of the communion of saints and lifted up to her Crucified and Risen Lord so many offerings and prayers, in particular the sacrifice of the Holy Mass, celebrated daily, even without the people, by priests,” it proclaimed.

“Like a good mother, the Church begs the Lord that humanity will be liberated from such a scourge, invoking the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy and Health of the Sick and of her Spouse Saint Joseph, under whose patronage the Church has always walked in the world.”

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