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Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic

«I am with you always»

(Mt 28: 20)

The gravity of the present circumstances calls for reflection on the urgency and centrality of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, together with some necessary clarifications, both for the lay faithful and for ministers called to celebrate the Sacrament.

Even in the time of COVID-19, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is administered in accordance with universal canon law and with the provisions of the *Ordo Paenitentiae*.

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, 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*).

This Apostolic Penitentiary believes that, especially in the places most affected by the pandemic contagion and until the phenomenon recedes, the cases of serious need mentioned in can. 961, § 2 *CIC* above mentioned, will occur.

Any further specification is delegated by law to diocesan bishops, always taking into account the supreme good of the salvation of souls (cf. can. 1752 *CIC*).

Should there arise a sudden need to impart sacramental absolution to several faithful together, the priest is obliged to warn the diocesan bishop as far as possible or, if he cannot, to inform him as soon as possible (cf. *Ordo Paenitentiae*, n. 32).

In the present pandemic emergency, it is therefore up to the diocesan bishop to indicate to priests and penitents the prudent attentions to be adopted in the individual celebration of sacramental reconciliation, such as the celebration in a ventilated place outside the confessional, the adoption of a suitable distance, the use of protective masks, without prejudice to absolute attention to the safeguarding of the sacramental seal and the necessary discretion.

Furthermore, it is always up to the diocesan bishop to determine, in the territory of his own ecclesiastical circumscription and with regard to the level of pandemic contagion, the cases of grave necessity in which it is lawful to impart collective absolution: for example, at the entrance to hospital wards, where the infected faithful in danger of death are hospitalised, using as far as possible and with the appropriate precautions the means of amplifying the voice so that absolution may be heard.

Consideration should be given to the need and advisability of setting up, where necessary, in agreement with the health authorities, groups of “extraordinary hospital chaplains”, also on a voluntary basis and in compliance with the norms of protection from contagion, to guarantee the necessary spiritual assistance to the sick and dying.

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).

Never before has the Church experienced thus the power of the communion of saints, raising to her Crucified and Risen Lord her vows and prayers, especially the Sacrifice of Holy Mass, celebrated daily, even without the presence of the people, by priests.

Like a good mother, the Church implores the Lord that humanity may be freed 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 the world.

May Mary Most Holy and Saint Joseph obtain for us abundant graces of reconciliation and salvation, in attentive listening to the Word of the Lord, which he repeats to humanity today: “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46: 10), “I am with you always” (Mt 28 :20).

Given in Rome, from the seat of the Apostolic Penitentiary, on March 19, 2020,

Solemnity of St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patron of the Universal Church.

Mauro Cardinal Piacenza

Major Penitentiary

Krzysztof Nykiel

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