



DIocese OF FORT WORTH THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Pastoral Letter

To All Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Men and Women, and Faithful Laity of the
Diocese of Fort Worth

March 24, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

As I have written to you several times during the recent days of this pandemic, it is incumbent upon us to be mindful that the Eucharist is, above all, a sacrament of charity, that binds us together in the unconditional love for God and our neighbor. I thank you for the manner in which each of you: our priests, deacons, seminarians, religious, and faithful laity have given of yourselves in being inconvenienced with joy through such practices as social distancing and hygienic sanitizing for your own health, that of your neighbor, and the common good of our communities throughout the Diocese of Fort Worth. Your cooperation and solidarity have demonstrated a great love and gratitude for the gift of the Eucharist, the source and summit of our lives, the Sacrament that makes us the Church.

Out of this same love for our neighbor and in cooperation with the latest order by our civic officials to “stay at home” I am hereby directing that **the most recent practice of the public distribution of the Eucharist after masses without a congregation be stopped for the time being.** I am making this decision in the interest of public health and for the prevention of the spread of the virus. Scheduled Masses should continue to be celebrated in parishes by priest’s *sine populo* (without a congregation present) and should be livestreamed wherever possible. In masses that are live-streamed, priests should pray the Act of Spiritual Communion aloud that those participating through the live-streaming might pray along with the priest and with each other. An Act of Spiritual Communion will be published on our diocesan website. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament may also be live-streamed. We will reassess this decision next week in consultation and ongoing discernment with priests, deacons, the faithful, and civic officials.

As we move forward during these days that are, in many ways, uncharted and requiring of fresh discernment on each of our parts, it is especially important that we place as a priority the sick, the elderly, the infirm and also the pastoral care of first responders and medical personnel. **This requires the health, availability, and willingness of our priests to anoint the sick and those in proximate danger of death as well as other clergy to distribute viaticum in accord with the rites of the Church.** This also requires of the faithful a spirit of generosity and gratitude to avail themselves of spiritual communion and other acts of devotion to sustain themselves for both spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The availability of other sacraments to all the faithful is based in this sense of gratitude and love and should never be taken for granted out of a misplaced sense of demand. Solidarity based in Communion in the love of God is the way forward for all of us.

THE CATHOLIC CENTER

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With this end in mind and to foster confidence and encouragement among all the faithful I wish to share with you the following. In his pastoral concern for all the Catholic faithful during the present pandemic, Pope Francis is keenly aware of the great difficulty in many places for the faithful to regularly receive the grace of the sacraments. Indeed, the Holy Father has great concern especially for those who find themselves unable to receive the sacrament of the anointing of the sick and of *Viaticum*, and entrusts them in a unique way to the mercy of the Lord and to the prayers of all members of the Church. As such, he has taken it upon himself to open the Church's treasury of grace in order to impart three special plenary indulgences during these trying times.

The Church has never abandoned the practice of granting indulgences. However, there are many who still misunderstand the doctrine of indulgence, so it is fitting to briefly explain their nature and purpose before expositing the new, special grants which the Apostolic See has recently issued. According to Church teaching,

an indulgence is the remission before God of temporal punishment for sins whose guilt is already forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful gains under certain and defined conditions by the assistance of the Church which as minister of redemption dispenses and applies authoritatively the treasury of the satisfaction of Christ and the saints (c. 992; CCC 1471).

In other words, an indulgence is a special gift whereby the Church applies and dispenses the merits of Christ to the faithful in order to cancel out the painful punishments due to sin (i.e. temporal punishment). A plenary indulgence fully removes all temporal punishment due to sin (CCC 1471), whereas a partial indulgence does so only partially.

It is necessary to understand that there are two principal consequences of grave sin: eternal punishment and temporal punishment. According to Catholic doctrine:

Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. On the other hand, every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin (CCC 1472).

Even though sacramental confession absolves us of the guilt of sin, and therefore of the eternal punishment due to grave sin, temporal punishment remains even after the forgiveness of sins because we remain attached to our vices. In other words, the spiritual scars we have inflicted upon ourselves by sin remain, though the wounds have been bound up by forgiveness.

Works of devotion, penance, and charity in this life, and the purification of purgatory in the next, release us from the temporal punishment due to sin—as do indulgences. Indulgences are “...obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments due for their sins” (CCC 1478). The release of punishment obtained by indulgences can be applied by the one performing the assigned devotion to himself or even to a member of the faithful departed.

Moreover, “to be capable of gaining indulgences, a person must be baptized, not excommunicated, and in the state of grace at least at the end of the prescribed works” (c 996 §1). Thus, one cannot gain an indulgence while in mortal sin, nor do indulgences forgive sin.

The sacrament of penance grants absolution and forgiveness of sins and is therefore essential to obtain the benefits of indulgences. Sacramental absolution is therefore one of the three usual conditions placed upon such grants from the Church, alongside the reception of Holy Communion and praying for the Holy Father’s intentions. Nevertheless, due to the extraordinary circumstances of the current pandemic and the difficulty in many places to approach individual confession, the three special indulgences detailed below allow for the faithful to complete the acts of devotion for the indulgence, so long as they make a firm resolution to fulfill the three above conditions **as soon as possible even after the crisis passes**. Thus, when prior individual confession is impossible, penitents should make an act of perfect contrition moved solely by the love of God, sincerely request the forgiveness of their sins, and resolve to make an individual and integral confession of each grave sin as soon as possible. Only one plenary indulgence can be obtained per day.

The special indulgences issued by the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome on March 20, 2020 are as follows.¹

1. First Plenary Indulgence

- a. The first plenary indulgence can be obtained by:
 - i. those suffering from Coronavirus.
 - ii. those ordered into quarantine by the health authorities, whether in hospitals or in their own homes.
 - iii. and by 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 than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13).
- b. This first plenary indulgence can be obtained by the above who, with a spirit detached from any sin, offer this trial in a spirit of faith in God and charity towards their brothers and sisters, and with **the will to fulfill** the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion, and prayer according to the Holy Father’s intentions) as soon as possible, either
 - i. unite themselves spiritually to the celebration of Holy Mass through the media (i.e., participate via radio, television, internet, etc. and make a spiritual act of communion).
 - ii. recite the Holy Rosary.
 - iii. pray the Stations of the Cross or other forms of devotion.
 - iv. or at least recite the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and a pious invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

¹ <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320c.html>

2. Second Plenary Indulgence

- a. A second plenary indulgence is available to all members of the faithful for the duration of the current pandemic under the same conditions, i.e., with the will to obtain sacramental absolution, receive Holy Communion, and pray for the Holy Father's intentions as soon as possible
- b. This second plenary indulgence can be obtained by those who, 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, either
 - i. offer a visit to the Blessed Sacrament.
 - ii. attend Eucharistic adoration.
 - iii. read the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour.
 - iv. recite the Holy Rosary.
 - v. pray the Stations of the Cross
 - vi. or recite the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.

3. Third Plenary Indulgence

- a. A third plenary indulgence is available to the faithful on the point of death.
- b. Dying members of the faithful can receive the indulgence if they are
 - i. properly disposed, i.e., have a spirit detached from all sin.
 - ii. and have at least recited a few prayers during their lifetime, in which case the Church provides for the three usual conditions required (confession, Holy Communion, and prayer for the Holy Father's intentions).
- c. The use of a crucifix or a cross is recommended in the attainment of this indulgence.

These indulgences are granted for the comfort of the faithful to foster their confidence in the unconditional love of God Who gave His Son that we might have eternal life. With prayers for your hope and consolation I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ Michael F. Olson

Most Reverend Michael F. Olson, STD, MA
Bishop of Fort Worth

E. James Hart

Chancellor

