



THE SACRAMENTS AND THE EPIDEMIC: THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Some tips from the Latin Mass Society,
in light of the Extraordinary Form
and the Traditional Practice and Discipline of the Church

1. Availability of the Sacrament of Penance

The degree to which it will be possible for the Faithful to confess their sins to a priest will depend not only on the severity of the restrictions imposed by the Government, but on priests' availability and continuing good health. Priests ministering to the sick may be exposed to a risk of infection comparable to that of medical staff, and kept busy by the urgent needs of the seriously ill, as the epidemic progresses.

Ways of hearing Confessions which minimise the danger of passing infection between Confessor and Penitent have been suggested and put into practice in various places around the world: for example, ways which maintain some distance between them while respecting the privacy of the Confessional. Imaginative solutions to the problem are to be welcomed. Nevertheless the epidemic raises issues not easily dealt with, and even if solutions can be found, the availability of Confession is sure to be severely curtailed for legitimate reasons.

It should be noted that while aids to communication can be allowed in confession, physical proximity is still absolutely necessary. Sacramental absolution cannot be given over the telephone or internet: such a practice would be neither licit nor valid.

2. Doing without Sacramental Confession during the Epidemic

The Sacrament of Penance is a privileged means for our sins to be forgiven, but we are not left entirely without assistance if we cannot get access to it. We should pray that we do not die an 'unprovided death'—a death without the Sacraments. We should also live in such a way that a sudden death will not find us unprepared, as we do not know when we will be called to face our Judge. If we cannot access Confession on demand, this should prompt us to examine our lives and habits so that the ultimate catastrophe, a death in a state of mortal sin, does not befall us.

As with Holy Communion, we should habituate ourselves to practices which will as far as possible give us the forgiveness of our sins which the Sacrament offers, and at the same time serve as a long-term preparation for the next opportunity we may have for making a Sacramental Confession, so it may be as complete and fruitful as possible.

These practices consist of two components: examinations of conscience, and acts of contrition.

The practice of a daily examination of conscience is most commendable; we may also wish to make a particularly thorough examination part of our devotional routine on Sundays. Many

aids to examinations of conscience can be found in hand-missals and other devotional works, and on-line.

An act of contrition naturally follows a daily or weekly examination of conscience. Of the utmost importance for those with limited access to the Sacrament of Penance is the distinction between perfect and imperfect contrition.

Perfect contrition is a sorrow for sin which flows from our love of God: for having offended Him, who is so good in Himself, and has shown such love for us, in creating and redeeming us.

Imperfect contrition is sorrow for sin which flows from any other motive: disgust at sin, or a fear of its consequences, in this life or the next.

Imperfect contrition is sufficient for the making of a worthy confession and being given a valid sacramental absolution by a priest. A sinner who makes a perfect act of contrition, on the other hand, has his sins forgiven *immediately*, even without sacramental confession, though if the sin is a mortal one he remains obliged to confess it to a priest and to receive absolution and penance for it.

Anyone who is conscious of having committed a mortal sin should endeavour to make an act of perfect contrition, and not wait for an opportunity to go to Confession, to minimise the time he is out of God's friendship and has lost sanctifying grace. Sacramental confession gives us the assurance, however, that even if our contrition was imperfect, our sins have been forgiven.

If we are unable to get to Confession for an extended period of time, for whatever reason, the practice of frequent examinations of conscience and the making of acts of contrition, with the intention of making an act of perfect contrition, is of special value. We should ensure we understand what perfect contrition is, and use the prayers and meditations found in devotional books designed to help us attain it. Contrition is ultimately a gift from God, and must be sought from Him in prayer.¹

3. Penance and Indulgences

As well as seeking the forgiveness of our sins outside the Sacrament of Penance, this period of time without access to the normal sacramental life of the Church should prompt us to make use of those means of grace which we still have. The most important of these is prayer. Particularly relevant to the subject of Confession, however, are the means we have to mitigate the temporal (as opposed to eternal) punishment due to our sins: acts of penance, and the gaining of indulgences.

Both depend on our being in a state of grace: we cannot perform meritorious works otherwise. This should remind us of the capital importance of staying in a state of grace, and

¹ See below, and [here](#).

the acts of perfect contrition which can restore us to that state if we depart from it. Any suffering which we endure during the performance of the duties of our state of life can be offered to God for our own sins, for the sins of others, including the souls in purgatory, and for the conversion of sinners. So too can voluntary penances such as fasting, and the inconvenience, forgone pleasures, and pain, of any good works we choose to do.

Indulgences add to the merit of certain good works, from the superabundant merits of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the Saints. This means that by doing a good work with the intention of gaining an indulgence, the remission of the punishment due to our sins can be increased, as the merits of the saints are added to those flowing from our own good work. These merits can also be applied to the souls in purgatory.

In the current official handbook of indulgences, the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum*, indulgences are granted for wide categories of good work, as well as for the saying of specific prayers and the performance of specific devotions. This means that a partial indulgence is available for practically any good work we perform. These should not be neglected. All that is needed to gain these partial indulgences is the *intention* to do so.

The gaining of plenary (full) indulgences, which if gained fully would forgive all the temporal punishment due to our sins (or those of a soul in purgatory), normally requires us to receive Holy Communion and make a Sacramental Confession within a week of a good work qualifying for an indulgence, and say prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father. We must also be free from ‘attachment to sin’. In the context of the epidemic, however, when these sacraments cannot easily be had, the Sacred Penitentiary has issued a decree modifying those conditions. It grants:

the Plenary Indulgence on the occasion of the present global epidemic, to those faithful that offer to visit the Most Blessed Sacrament or Eucharistic Adoration, or the praying of the Holy Rosary, or the pious exercise of the Via Crucis [Stations of the Cross], or the praying of the Divine Mercy chaplet, to implore Almighty God for an end to the epidemic, the relief of the afflicted, and the eternal salvation of those that the Lord has called to Himself.²

The modified conditions are that the good works be performed:

with the will to fulfil the usual conditions (Sacramental Confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father), as soon as it is possible for them.

The prayers enjoined for the intentions of the Holy Father, which of course we need not put off, are an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and the Apostle’s Creed.

Plenary indulgences are also offered in a similar way to those ill with the virus, and those caring for them.

² Decree, 20th March 2020. It can be seen [here](#).

4. Useful Prayers

Prayer Before an Examination of Conscience

I am perfectly sensible, O my God, that I have in many ways offended thy divine majesty, and provoked thy wrath by my sins; and that if I obtain not pardon I shall be cast out of thy sight forever. I desire, therefore, at present to call myself to an account, and look into all the sins whereby I have displeased thee; but O my God, how miserably shall I deceive myself if thou assist me not in this work by thy heavenly light. Grant me, therefore, at present, thy grace, whereby I may discover all my imperfections, see all my failings, and duly call to mind all my sins: for I know that nothing is hidden from thy sight. But I confess myself in the dark as to my own failings: my passions blind me, self-love flatters me, presumption deludes me, and though I have many sins which stare me in the face, and cannot be hidden, yet how many, too, are there quite concealed from me! But discover even those to me, O Lord! Enlighten my darkness, cure my blindness, and remove every veil that hides my sins from me, that I may be no longer a secret to myself, nor a stranger to my own failings, not ever flatter myself with the thoughts of having repented, and at the same time nourish folly and vice within my breast. Come, Holy Ghost, and by a beam of thy divine light illumine my understanding, that I may have a perfect view of all my sins and iniquities, and that, sincerely repenting of them, I may know thee, and be again received into thy favour. Amen.

A Prayer For Obtaining Contrition

I have now here before me, O Lord, a sad prospect of the manifold offences whereby I have displeased thy divine Majesty, and which I am assured will appear in judgement against me if, by repentance and a hearty sorrow, my soul be not prepared to receive thy pardon. But this sorrow and this repentance, O Lord, must be the free gift of thy mercy, without which all my endeavours will be in vain, and I shall be forever miserable. Have pity, therefore, on me, O merciful Father, and pour forth into my heart thy grace, whereby I may sincerely repent of all my sins; grant me true contrition, that I may bewail my base ingratitude, and grieve from my heart for having offended so good a God. Permit me not to be deluded by a false sorrow, as I fear I have been too often, through my own weakness and neglect; but let it now be thy gift, descending from thee, the Father of Lights, that so my repentance may be accompanied by an amendment and a change of life, that being thus acquitted from the guilt of my sins, I may once more be received into the number of thy servants. Amen.

An Act of Contrition

O my God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins, and detest them above all things, because they deserve Thy infinite punishments, because they have crucified my loving Saviour Jesus Christ, and most of all, because they offend Thy infinite goodness; and I firmly resolve, by the help of Thy grace, never to offend Thee again, and carefully to avoid the occasions of sin. Amen.