

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Luke 6:36

The Covid 19 pandemic has wrought havoc across the globe with millions testing positive for the virus and hundreds of thousands losing their life.

It will be sometime before we will know when and if a “second or third wave,” will affect our region. It will be some time before we can look back at this time to assess how we provided a witness to God’s love in faith and with love.

For now, it is certain that we will be living with the effects of Covid 19 for the foreseeable future.

Until such time as a vaccine or effective treatments are discovered, Covid 19 will impact the manner in which we celebrate the sacraments, the frequency of our liturgies and the number of the people with whom we might join in prayer.

Physical distancing has and will continue to invite us to express our faith in new and creative ways. This is especially true for the celebration of Sacramental Reconciliation, which has not been possible for several weeks.

At the time Pope Francis announced the Jubilee Year of Mercy, in *Misericordiae vultus*, the Church was reminded that the whole of the sacramental economy is pervaded by divine mercy, beginning with baptism “for the forgiveness of sins”, the reconciling work of God is particularly bestowed and continuously manifested in the Sacrament of Penance¹. Celebrating the Mercy of God within the context of Sacramental Reconciliation helps us to place ourselves with honesty before our own conscience, to recognise our need to be reconciled with the Father, who with patience knows how to wait for the sinner in order to give an embrace that restores our dignity.

The teaching of Pope Francis has been consistent throughout his papacy: God is mercy.

Our desire for reconciliation is itself a gift from the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, inviting us back, over and over again, to be embraced by the Father, who runs out to greet us, even while

¹ “The Sacraments, as we know, are the locus of the closeness and the tenderness of God for mankind; they are the concrete way that God thought and wanted to come and meet us, to embrace us, without being ashamed of us and of our limitations. Among the Sacraments, certainly Reconciliation renders present with particular efficacy the merciful face of God: it is constantly and ceaselessly made real and manifest. Let us never forget, both as penitents and confessors, there is no sin that God cannot forgive. None! Only that which is withheld from Divine Mercy cannot be forgiven, just as one who withdraws from the sun can be neither illuminated nor warmed.” Pope Francis, Audience to the participants at a Course on the Internal Forum organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary, 12 March 2015

we are still far off (cf. Luke 15:11-32). This longing for God's embrace has been unfilled in these last weeks and has been poignantly experienced by many.

The following notes are meant to assist pastors and parish teams in preparation for the celebration of Sacramental Reconciliation with General Absolution, following the restrictions necessitated by Covid-19.

Permission for General Absolution was granted by The Apostolic Penitentiary on March 20, 2020. At that time, The Apostolic Penitentiary made clear that it holds that, especially in places most impacted by the pandemic contagion and until the phenomenon subsides, there are cases of grave necessity meeting the criteria for general absolution.

Bishop Fabbro, following consultation with the Episcopal Council, has granted permission for this usage within the Diocese of London. This is an extraordinary response provided to meet the needs of the faithful in an extraordinary time.

As the need to physically distance will be part of our experience for the foreseeable future, pastors should offer this celebration as long as pastoral necessity requires it in parish settings, after which time, individual confessions ought to resume. That is, a number of celebrations using General Absolution will need to be had, prior to the practice of individual confessions being resumed.

Pastors should take this opportunity to provide the members of their communities with sufficient catechesis on Sacramental Reconciliation, so that the faithful might avail themselves more frequently to all that God, the Great Physician, offers in these encounters of mercy. There is a well-founded hope that an experience of General Absolution, will facilitate a rebirth in individual confessions.

Preaching and catechesis for celebrations of General Absolution ought to make reference to both the personal and corporate dimensions of sin, while at the same time speaking to both the need to seek forgiveness with God and our brothers and sisters within the Body of Christ.

Though General Absolution assures the penitent of being forgiven, pastors ought to encourage penitents to bring grave matter forward in the future for counsel and guidance. Pastors should respond to these requests with gentleness and humility, noting that many of these concerns may have gone unspoken and hidden for decades.

Most importantly, it is essential that we remind the faithful of the unfathomable depth of God's mercy and goodness and that the victory has already been won, through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. This is most clearly evidenced in the formula for absolution.²

² The *Rite of Penance* lists clearly the essential theological ingredients of the formula (cf. RP 19). First of all, its clear Trinitarian structure is noted. The reconciliation effected in this Sacrament comes from God, who is called «the *Father* of mercies». The formula declares what God has already done;

For further reflection, you are encouraged to read again:

Ordo paenitentiae (1974)

Reconciliatio et paenitentia (1984)

Evangelii Gaudium (2013)

Amoris laetitia (2016)

Gaudete et exsultate (2018)

Excerpts from these documents will be helpful in preparing catechesis, bulletin inserts and homilies.

namely: «God, the Father of mercies, has reconciled the world to himself». And God has done this «through the death and resurrection of his *Son*», which the formula sets in immediate relationship with the sending of «the *Holy Spirit* among us for the forgiveness of sins». Up to this point in the formula it is a question of liturgical *anamnesis*. That is, the death and resurrection of Jesus is remembered, declared, announced. This *anamnesis* is done in Trinitarian terms and with language that immediately indicates the relevance of this mighty act of God to what God is about to do now for the penitent. God has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.

Taken from “Rediscovering the Rite of Penance,” published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in NOTITIAE (2015.2) on the occasion of the Jubilee of Mercy.

Michael Bechard (Rev.)
Director of Liturgy

