



DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



+ Michael F. Olson
by the grace of God and the favor of the Apostolic See
Bishop of Fort Worth
decrees the following

INSTRUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The present state of emergency declared in the State of Texas on account of the COVID-19 outbreak calls all of the Christian faithful towards a deeper love of neighbor and reliance upon the grace and mercy of the Lord. Thus, in her pastoral solicitude during these trying times, the Church demands her sacred ministers embrace a greater zeal for the salvation of souls and the alleviation of suffering. Therefore, a deeper reflection upon the urgency of the sacrament of penance and of its centrality within the lives of the faithful are required by all of us priests serving in the diocese during this present crisis.

An integral, individual confession followed by absolution from a priest continues to be the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin can be reconciled to God and to the Church after the reception of baptism (c. 960), apart from cases of moral or physical impossibility in which penitents are advised to make an act of perfect contrition motivated solely by love of God alone, and expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness together with a firm resolution to make recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible (*votum confessionis*).

Nevertheless, in her wise and maternal concern for the availability of the sacrament under exceptional circumstances, Holy Mother Church provides the means for confessors to impart absolution to many penitents at once without previous individual confessions—though such general confessions are highly regulated by universal law as they can be prone to abuse (cc. 961-963; *Ordo Paenitentiae*, nn. 31-35). All priests are authorized to grant general absolution in immediate danger of death when individual confessions are impossible; in other cases of grave necessity the diocesan bishop is competent to determine whether the appropriate conditions have been fulfilled and to authorize general absolution in certain cases. Wherefore the Apostolic Penitentiary, in a letter dated 20 March 2020 to assist bishops in that determination, has decreed that it “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... will occur.”¹

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

Whereas the diocesan bishop possesses all ordinary, proper, and immediate power which is required for the exercise of his pastoral governance without prejudice to the norm of law (c. 381 §1); whereas the diocesan bishop is high priest and principal dispenser of the sacred mysteries as well as director, promoter, and guardian of the whole liturgical life of the particular church entrusted to his care (c. 835 §1); whereas it belongs to the diocesan bishop to judge whether the conditions required for the lawful celebration of general confessions are present (c. 961 §2), I hereby decree that the aforementioned conditions born of grave necessity **exist in hospitals and nursing homes** within the territory circumscribed by the Diocese of Fort Worth, and instruct that the following norms are to be assiduously observed by all priests within the selfsame territory until further notice, without prejudice to the prescripts of universal and particular law as well as those liturgical adaptations already in force throughout the diocese on account of the pandemic.

NORMS

1. Apart from immediate danger of death, authorization of general confession and absolution according to the prescript of canon 961 §1, 2° is restricted to celebrations within hospitals and nursing homes including residents, staff, and all workers present. **General absolution remains forbidden elsewhere in the diocese.**
2. For the validity of the sacrament, it is required that the penitents receiving general absolution not only are properly disposed, but that they at the same time must also intend to make an individual confession of each grave sin as soon as possible (*votum sacramenti*), i.e., once the current crisis abates (c. 962 §1).
3. Thus, confessors are to inform the faithful of the requirement of n. 2 prior to granting general absolution. Moreover, the faithful are to be exhorted to make an act of contrition prior to granting general absolution (c. 962 §2).
4. Recipients of general absolution are to approach individual confession as soon as possible before receiving another general absolution, unless a just cause intervenes (c. 963). A just cause means a good reason; thus, for example a just cause exists if a penitent receives general absolution while in quarantine at a nursing home, but then is later admitted into hospital ICU and still cannot approach individual confession.
5. Apart from moral impossibility, recipients of general absolution pardoned of grave sin are bound absolutely to approach individual confession within one year of the granting of general absolution insofar as all members of the faithful are bound by the precept to confess their grave sins at least once a year after attaining the age of reason (c. 989; *Ordo Paenitentiae*, n.34; Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pastoral Norms for the administration of general sacramental absolution *Sacramentum paenitentiae*, June 16, 1972: *AAS* 64 (1972) 512-513, n. 7).
6. Priests alone are the ministers of the sacrament of penance (c. 965). **General absolution cannot be validly granted by deacons nor by lay ministers, nor can priests validly delegate the power to absolve.**
7. Confessors are bound to observe the prescripts of liturgical law regarding the celebration of general confession and absolution. The rite is similar to the rite for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution, with several modifications (*Ordo Paenitentiae*, n. 35). The rite for general confession and absolution can be found in the ritual book, *Rite of Penance*, pages 33-37.

8. Confessors are to observe all civil regulations, obey lawful orders from police and military personnel, and comply with protocols established by hospital and nursing home staff in the celebration of general confession and absolution.
9. Likewise, confessors are to use sound, prudential judgment in administering general absolution and the other sacred mysteries. With permission from the hospital or nursing home staff, effort should be made to use microphones, megaphones, and the like so that the words of absolution can be heard by all properly disposed penitents.

Given this 21st day of March, 2020, at Fort Worth.

+ Michael F. Olson

Bishop of Fort Worth



E. James Hart

Chancellor