



Updated 3/31/2020

Questions and Answers regarding sacramental practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Q If a patient is dying of COVID-19, must the priest administer the anointing of the sick?

The priest should make every effort to administer the anointing of the sick, working with medical authorities to insure proper protection against further spread of the virus. If it is not possible to administer the anointing, he can provide the patient the prayer of the Church, prayers for a dying person, the prayer of Apostolic Pardon, and the assurance of the Plenary Indulgence granted the person with COVID-19.

Q If a priest does take protective measure and anoints a patient with COVID-19, should he touch the patient, or may he use an instrument to administer the holy oil?

The Code of Canon Law allows for an “instrument to be used for serious reasons to avoid direct contact with the person.” That instrument could be a cotton swab or a surgical glove. The priest must safeguard himself and follow the safety protocols of the institution.

Q What should be done with the holy oil that was brought into the infected patient’s room?

The spiritual care department’s stock of oil should only be used and only the amount needed for the administration of the sacrament should be used in a disposable container, as well as the ritual prayers on a disposal document. Both the paper containing the prayer/ritual and the receptacle of the oil need to be disposed of in the patient’s room before leaving the room. If a non-staff priest is being asked to anoint, the priest would need to follow the safety protocols of that hospital and its spiritual care department.

Q If the priest planning to administer the Sacrament of Anointing cannot enter the room of the infected person can he say the prayers from outside the room and have someone else, such as an attendant nurse, do the actual anointing?

No. The integrity of the Sacrament requires the priest to apply the anointing himself. Therefore, it cannot be delegated to anyone else. In these extreme cases, the priest and faithful can find consolation in the Church’s belief that anyone in good faith and with the disposition of seeking God’s mercy, forgiveness and healing is already in God’s compassionate arms and will receive the necessary graces.

Q How do I explain to people the meaning of this Apostolic Penitentiary Decree on Plenary Indulgences.

On March 20, 2020, the Apostolic Penitentiary, which is the office of the Church that provides guidance on the forgiveness of sins, decreed, with the authority of Pope Francis, that a plenary indulgence, or a full pardon for sins, be granted to any person who cannot access to the Sacraments of Penance, Eucharist (even *Viaticum*), or Anointing of the Sick, who seeks God's mercy, forgiveness, and healing, and who firmly intends to receive any of those sacraments when they are available again, has the assurance of God's full forgiveness and mercy. It reminds the believer that the Church is praying for that person, "entrusting each and every one to divine Mercy by virtue of the communion of saints and granting the faithful a *Plenary Indulgence* on the point of death, provided that they are duly disposed and have recited a few prayers during their lifetime."

It's the Church's way of communicating to all believers that our merciful, compassionate God is with us, bringing us near, forgiving us, and embracing us in this time of great suffering, anxiety and fear.

Q. For whom is this intended?

This is extended to the victims of coronavirus, as well as their families, health care workers, and all who care for them.

Q. Do I communicate this in a rite? How do I express this?

The best option in cases where no priest can enter is to explain to the family and to the patient if possible the meaning of the plenary indulgence given by the Holy See and secondly, to have someone pray the prayers of the dying. The plenary indulgence covers the reconciling effects of the sacrament of confession, anointing and Apostolic Pardon.

If the person is near death, you can use the above language or something similar to express the assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness. You could extend your hands toward the infected person if the person can see you, pray with/for them the Lord's Prayer and include a message, such as, "Be assured by the words of our Holy Father Pope Francis that if your intentions are to receive the sacraments and you have called on the name of the Lord, you will receive God's full pardon and forgiveness and you are in God's compassionate love and embrace." This prayer and message can also be offered virtually.

A priest who is physically present can also pray the Apostolic Pardon.

"Through the holy mysteries of our redemption, may Almighty God release you from all punishments in this life and in the life to come. May he open to you the gates of paradise and welcome you to everlasting joy."

Or:

"By the authority which the Apostolic See has given me, I grant you a full pardon and the remission of all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Q. Can the prayers of Commendation of the Dying in the Pastoral Care of the Sick be used by a non-Catholic for a Catholic patient?

The prayers of Commendation of the Dying are prayers that can be prayed by a lay person. They are not sacramental formula prayers. The preference is that they be used by a baptized Christian who believes the content of the prayer.

Q. How can we offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation under these circumstances?

If it is possible to communicate in-person, privately, and with the necessary protection against exposure to the virus, it might be possible to hear Confessions. If the local bishop has authorized the use of General Absolution, it might be possible to absolve groups of patients from the doorway of a ward. When celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not possible, however, phone conversations between patients and chaplains (whether priest, lay, or religious) can be considered important and healing pastoral visits. Patients can be encouraged to pray prayers of repentance and can be assured of God's mercy. "The message of Pope Francis extends to you is of the Church's ongoing prayer for your spiritual welfare and to be assured of God's full mercy and forgiveness. Let's call upon God together with trust with the Lord's Prayer."

Q: May Catholic chaplains continue to distribute Holy Communion to patients who are asymptomatic of COVID-19?

This will depend on local circumstances and guidelines of dioceses and medical facilities. Most Catholic health care facilities have asked their Extraordinary Ministers not to come into the facility during the COVID-19 pandemic, so the regular distribution of Holy Communion to patients is currently limited to patients with serious illness or who are near death and not showing symptoms of the coronavirus. Many are providing their Catholic patients who are accustomed to receiving communion with a prayer of spiritual communion, such as:

Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.
I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul.
Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

Q: Can Mass still be celebrated in the hospital or other type of health care facility?

Most facilities are not offering Mass with congregations in attendance. They are however offering closed-circuit or pre-recorded Masses through the patients' television in their room.