

OFFICE OF WORSHIP

ARCHDIOCESE
OF
SAINT PAUL &
MINNEAPOLIS

MEMORANDUM

Date: March 24, 2020
To: All Clergy of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis
From: Reverend Tom Margevičius, Director, Office of Worship
Re: General Absolution During the Coronavirus Pandemic

- I. **Introduction.** As Archbishop Hebda indicated in his March 20, 2020 letter, in response to the Coronavirus pandemic the Apostolic Penitentiary issued a Note regarding the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation using Form III (General Absolution). Since this may be unfamiliar, I offer this memo to address certain questions. Feel free to contact me margeviciust@archspm.org with any issues not mentioned here.
- II. **Wasn't Form III Always Allowed?** The Church has been offering sacramental absolution to many persons *en masse* for centuries, and the 1975 revised *Rite of Penance* was not novel in including a Form III. However, it stipulated the conditions whereby it could be legitimately celebrated. First, in danger of death (The ship is going down). Second, in mission territories where priests are scarce and the faithful would be deprived of sacramental absolution for a long time. The USCCB determined that “a long time” meant one month. In other words, conditions for routine Form III celebrations do not exist in most of the United States. It was in that vein that Archbishop Nienstedt wrote on November 19, 2008 that “General Absolution is not, under ordinary circumstances, permitted in this Archdiocese.” But clearly the Coronavirus pandemic is no longer an ordinary circumstance.
- III. **Who May Absolve This Way?** All priests who have the faculty to hear confessions within the Archdiocese may use Form III during the pandemic, should they determine it beneficial and it can be done while respecting current governmental restrictions.
- IV. **For How Long?** For as long as the pandemic makes individual confessions impossible or dangerous. The Apostolic Penitentiary did not set an end-date, probably because no one yet knows how long the pandemic will last.
- V. **Are We Eliminating Form I (Private Confessions) During the Pandemic?** No. Priests have found creative ways to keep using Form I (individual confession and absolution) such as sitting in the parking lot and inviting penitents to drive up, one at a time, and confess their sins while remaining within their cars and maintaining the necessary separation. Until the State of Minnesota mandates ALL public events be shut down, we welcome priests to do what they can, within governmental social distance guidelines, to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation in its ordinary celebration.
- VI. **Who May Receive General Absolution?** Any who meet the criteria for receiving sacramental absolution under usual circumstances: those who are baptized, properly-disposed, desire to repent, etc. But this Decree is especially geared toward those who would not have the ability to receive absolution because they are quarantined.

- VII. How Should Form III to Be Celebrated?** Follow the structure found in the *Rite of Penance*, including a Liturgy of the Word, Examination of Conscience, Expression of Contrition, etc. The Rite allows for abbreviation, but this is intended only when time is urgent; in most health care facilities, you won't need to abbreviate the Rite.
- VIII. How Close Must the Priest Be to the Penitent(s)?** Ideally, the closer the better, while maintaining social distance guidelines. It is best if the priest and penitents can hear and see one another. But in some cases this might be difficult. For example, a hospital might not allow the priest to walk down the halls. While not ideal, broadcasting the priest's voice over the loudspeakers is permitted, provide the priest is at least on-site at the institution. What is not permitted is granting absolution from a distance over the phone, by text messages, video calls, on a voice recording, etc.
- IX. What Must the Faithful Be Told at a Form III Liturgy?** Remind them that this is an extraordinary opportunity, and outside of times like these individual confession remains the ordinary means of celebrating this Sacrament. Tell them the conditions necessary for licit celebration of Form III. There are basically 3, and these are summarized in the "General Introduction" of *The Rite of Penance* n. 34:
- "Those who receive pardon for grave sins by a common absolution should (1) go to individual confession before they receive this kind of absolution again, unless they are impeded by a just reason. They are strictly bound, unless this is morally impossible, to (2) go to confession within a year. The precept which obliges each of the faithful to (3) confess at least once a year to a priest all the grave sins which he has not individually confessed before also remains in force in this case too." (N.B. the penitent is not obliged to re-confess venial sins, though it may prove beneficial to do so.)
- You could also helpfully remind them of the opportunity to receive the Plenary Indulgence (see the other memo from March 23), and that their having received General Absolution fulfills one of the conditions for receiving the Indulgence.
- X. Can Form III Be Repeated?** If the pandemic lasts many months, this might be a "just reason" that warrants celebrating Form III again. The Archbishop will reevaluate the situation in the weeks ahead.
- XI. What Next?** Your guess is as good as mine.