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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- People who cannot get to confession because of the coronavirus lockdown or another serious reason can go to God directly, be specific about their sins, request pardon and experience God's loving forgiveness, Pope Francis said.

"This is the right time, the opportune moment. An act of contrition done well, and our souls will become white like the snow," the pope said March 20 during his live streamed morning Mass.

Pope Francis began the Mass by praying again for doctors, especially in northern Italy, where the COVID-19 pandemic still is infecting thousands and leading to the deaths of hundreds of people each day.

The Italian health ministry announced late March 19 that the number of deaths in Italy had reached 3,407, surpassing by 277 the number of people who had died in China because of the virus.

Italy began a nationwide lockdown March 10 in an attempt to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Churches are open for private prayer and priests can hear confessions if they are wearing a mask and gloves and stay more than 3 feet away from the penitent. But people are being encouraged not to leave their homes at all.

The first reading at Mass March 20 was from Hosea, and it encourages people to return to the Lord with all their hearts, recognizing their sins and letting God forgive them, the pope said in his homily.

"Return to your father who is waiting for you," the pope said. "The God of tenderness will heal us; he will heal us of the many, many wounds of life and the many ugly things we have done. Each of us has our own!"

God welcomes every repentant sinner with open arms, he said. "It's like going home." Lent is a special time "to let God wash us, purify us, to let God embrace us," the pope said, and the best place for that is the confessional.

"But many people today would tell me, 'Father, where can I find a priest, a confessor, because I can't leave the house? And I want to make peace with the Lord, I want him to embrace me, I want the Father's embrace.'"

The pope said his response would be, "Do what the Catechism (of the Catholic Church) says. It is very clear: If you cannot find a priest to confess to, speak directly with God, your father, and tell him the truth. Say, 'Lord, I did this, this, this. Forgive me,' and ask for pardon with all your heart."

Make an act of contrition, the pope said, and promise God, "'I will go to confession afterward, but forgive me now.' And immediately you will return to a state of grace with God."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, N. 1452, says: "When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called 'perfect' -- contrition of charity. Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible."

"As the catechism teaches," Pope Francis said, "you can draw near to God's forgiveness without having a priest at hand. Think about it. This is the moment."

Apostolic Teaching for those who cannot get to confession due to Corona Virus-19.

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer’ (Rom 12:12). The words written by St. Paul to the Church of Rome resonate throughout the entire history of the Church and guide the judgement of the faithful in the face of all suffering, sickness and calamity.

The present moment in which the whole of humanity, threatened by an invisible and insidious disease, which for some time now has become part of all our lives, is marked day after day by anguished fears, new uncertainties and above all widespread physical and moral suffering.

The Church, following the example of her Divine Master, has always had the care of the sick at heart. As St. John Paul II points out, the value of human suffering is twofold: “It is supernatural because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply human, because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission” (Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, 31).

So that all those who suffer because of COVID-19, may rediscover ‘the same redemptive suffering of Christ’ this Apostolic Penitentiary..., trusting in the word of Christ the Lord and considering with a spirit of faith the epidemic currently underway, to be lived in a spirit of personal conversion, grants the gift of Indulgences in accordance with the following disposition.

The **Plenary Indulgence** is granted **to the faithful who are subject to quarantine** by order of the health authority in hospitals or in their own homes if, with a spirit detached from any sin, they:

Unite spiritually **through the media to the celebration of Holy Mass**, the recitation of the **Rosary**, to the pious practice of the **Way of the Cross** or other forms of devotion, **or if at least** they will **recite the Creed**, the **Lord’s Prayer** and a pious **invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary**,

Offering this trial in a spirit of faith in God and charity toward their brothers and sisters, with the will to fulfil the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion and prayer for the Holy Father’s intentions), as soon as possible.

**Healthcare workers, family members and all those who, following the example of the Good Samaritan, exposing themselves to the risk of contagion...** will obtain the same Plenary Indulgence under the same conditions. The Apostolic Penitentiary also willingly grants a **Plenary Indulgence** to all **those faithful who offer a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or Eucharistic**

**adoration, or reading the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour, or the recitation of the Holy Rosary or the pious exercise of the Way of the Cross, or the recitation of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, to implore from Almighty God the end of the epidemic, relief for those who are afflicted and eternal salvation for those whom the Lord has called to Himself. 4**

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The Church prays for those who find themselves **unable to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and of the Viaticum**, 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 (in this case **the Church makes up for the three usual conditions** required). For the attainment of this Indulgence the use of the crucifix or the cross is recommended

(cf. *Enchiridion indulgentiarum*, no.12).

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and of the Church, Health of the Sick and Help of Christians, our Advocate, help suffering humanity, saving us from the evil of this pandemic and obtaining for us every good necessary for our salvation and sanctification.

The present Decree is valid notwithstanding any provision to the contrary.

Given in Rome, from the seat of the Apostolic Penitentiary, on March 19, 2020.

+ Mauro Cardinal Piacenza

Major Penitentiary”