



Memo

Date: March 22, 2021
To: Priests serving in the Archdiocese of Atlanta
From: Fr. Daniel Ketter, Judicial Vicar, Metropolitan Tribunal
Re: Valid and licit celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

In this busy season of Lent when we are spending significant amounts of time celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation, often in difficult circumstances arising from the ongoing pandemic, I write at the direction of Archbishop Hartmayer to offer a reminder about the requirements for the valid and licit celebration of the sacrament.

The sacrament of reconciliation must always and only be celebrated in person. *It is not permitted, and is indeed invalid, to celebrate the sacrament or administer absolution over the phone or via video conference.* If circumstances make it impossible to meet in person for the celebration of the sacrament, the penitent should be instructed how to make an act of perfect contrition and be assured of the infinite mercy of God whose grace is not bound by the sacraments. As part of his instruction, the minister must remind the penitent of the necessity of confessing each grave sin not so confessed at the earliest possibility.

In addition, the following points are to be kept in mind:

- Pastors are obliged to make confession available on days and times convenient for the faithful. (can. 986 §1)
- Penitents should always have the option of confessing anonymously, i.e. behind a screen. (can. 964 §2)
- In celebrating the sacrament, ministers are to adhere faithfully to the doctrine of the magisterium. (can. 978 §2)
- The confession of sins must be integral, that is, grave sins must be confessed in kind and number. Confession of venial sins is not required, though recommended. (can. 988)
- A suitable penance should always be imposed. (can. 981)

- The minister is to invite the penitent to express his/her sorrow through an act of contrition or other prayer. (Rite of Penance, no. 45, 85-92)
- Absolution must always be imparted for the valid celebration of the sacrament. The essential words are, "...I ABSOLVE YOU FROM YOUR SINS, IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT." (Rite of Penance, no. 19)
- Confessors must always be zealous to maintain the sacramental seal, which is inviolable. (can. 983)

Lastly, I recommend two helpful resources that can serve to inspire our love for this sacrament and refresh our knowledge of the requirements for its valid and licit celebration: Pope St. John Paul II's 2002 *motu proprio*, [*Misericordia Dei*](#), and the Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments's 2015 document, "[Rediscovering the Rite of Penance](#)."

Appendix – Full text of the above-referenced canons from the Code of Canon Law.

Can. 964 §2. The conference of bishops is to establish norms regarding the confessional; it is to take care, however, that there are always confessionals with a fixed grate between the penitent and the confessor in an open place so that the faithful who wish to can use them freely.

Can. 978 §2. In administering the sacrament, the confessor as a minister of the Church is to adhere faithfully to the doctrine of the magisterium and the norms issued by competent authority.

Can. 981 The confessor is to impose salutary and suitable penances in accord with the quality and number of sins, taking into account the condition of the penitent. The penitent is obliged to fulfill these personally.

Can. 983 §1. The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.

Can. 986 §1. All to whom the care of souls has been entrusted in virtue of some function are obliged to make provision so that the confessions of the faithful entrusted to them are heard when they reasonably seek to be heard and that they have the opportunity to approach individual confession on days and at times established for their convenience.

Can. 988 §1. A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.

§2. It is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins.