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Pope Francis hears the confession of a priest at Rome's Basilica of St. John Lateran in March 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Announcement of the Vatican's offering of new plenary indulgences to those around the world affected by the coronavirus may have left some Catholics asking, "We still do that?"

The answer is yes. And theologians say the move, made in a March 20 decree from the apostolic penitentiary, shows a seemingly unprecedented level of pastoral care for those who suffer from the virus — especially those who may die in isolation without being able to receive final rites.

Jesuit Fr. James Corkery, an Irish theologian at the Pontifical Gregorian University, said the decree fits with Pope Francis' vision for a "merciful, welcoming, 'ridiculously-pardoning' church."



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"He wants people to be 'received back,' to be forgiven, above all to be loved," said Corkery, who has written extensively on the church after the Second Vatican Council.

In Catholic teaching, an indulgence is the remission of the eventual punishment due for sins that have been confessed and forgiven. A plenary indulgence, which can only be granted in various ways outlined by the Vatican, involves the remission of all of a person's eventual punishment.

The penitentiary's new decree offers special plenary indulgences to any Catholic affected by the virus, to health care workers and their families, to those who pray for the end of the epidemic, and to those who die without access to the sacraments.

For those in the first three categories, the indulgence can be obtained if the person is sorry for their sins and prayerfully watches a celebration of the Mass, a recitation of the rosary, a practice of the Via Crucis, or some other devotion.

For persons near death from the virus and unable to receive the sacraments because of isolation measures, the decree says they can obtain the indulgence "at the point of death, as long as they have recited some prayers during their life."

Jeremy Wilkins, a theologian at Boston College, said he sees "something new" in the offering to those who are dying.

"The conditions there are waived. It says ... the church fulfills the conditions for you," said the theologian. "That's quite amazing."

"It really is tender," said Wilkins, who has focused his work in the areas of Christology and grace. "I think the church very tenderly wants to say, 'Be sorry for your sins, and know that you're not alone, and it will be OK.' "

Jesuit Fr. Peter Folan, a theologian at Georgetown University, said he found the decree's treatment of the dying "especially moving."

"There's just a deep theology behind that, and just a deep understanding of who God is, that God doesn't ever turn God's gaze away from anybody, especially those at that most important event of their life, which is our death," said Folan.

Both Wilkins and Folan said that it appeared that the penitentiary had two primary objectives in offering the new indulgences: to show mercy to Catholics facing a

severe time of trial, and to encourage them to think of their suffering in relation to that endured by Christ, and all the saints who have come before us.

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Said Wilkins: "The over-riding thing is that it's an attempt to find a way to say, 'You're not alone in your suffering. Your suffering is not meaningless. And it's not solitary. Because it actually fits into this great mystery of the suffering of Christ on behalf of his church, and the suffering of all the members on behalf of one another.' "

Folan, who has focused his work in sacramental theology, said an indulgence tells those it is offered to, and the wider church, that "there's something about what these people are experiencing now that's integrating their lives more fully to be like the life of Christ."

"Those who are infected with the virus, their families, remind us that they're configured with Christ, who suffered, and who witnessed suffering," said the U.S. Jesuit. "Health care workers are configured to him in the sense that he too was a healer."

Corkery said indulgences are ultimately about "a generous remission of sin."

"Indulgences, in the hands of Francis, must be seen in the context of his dream of a loving, merciful, pardoning, welcoming church," said the Irish Jesuit.

"Older people who still have fears about dying and not being in the 'state of grace,' about dying without divine forgiveness because — even though they are repentant — they haven't been able to confess their sins, could be greatly helped by what Francis is seeking to do for them, for us all," he said.

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