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LEXINGTON — In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and instructions issued by the Vatican, there may arise conditions under which Catholics in the Diocese of Lexington may receive general absolution, obtain forgiveness of sins through perfect contrition or obtain a plenary indulgence granted to those suffering from COVID-19. Bishop John Stowe, OFM Conv., outlined these conditions in a letter all priests in the diocese on March 25.

“Thank you for your creative ministry to the people of God during these most challenging circumstances. I am appreciative of all those who are reaching out to the faithful by phone, through videos and other means of social communication, and sharing the great message of our faith — that God is with us,” Bishop Stowe wrote.

While priests in the diocese continue to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation, hearing confessions by appointment and observing the necessary social distancing measures, a practice that will continue until there are different directives, the bishop also addressed the possibility of making use of general absolution, a practice by which absolution is granted to a large group of people, usually who are in danger of death.

According to guidelines from Rome and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “if conditions become such that gatherings of patients in a hospital ward or a place functioning as a hospital ward are in need of absolution, general absolution could be offered with a simple explanation by the priests of how the penitents are to participate,” Bishop Stowe wrote.

The bishop also shared that, in the tradition of the Catholic Church, when sacramental confession is not possible, perfect contrition obtains forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones. The bishop outlined the requirements for perfect contrition: the love of God, the sincere desire for forgiveness and the commitment to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation when possible.

Finally, Bishop Stowe outlined the conditions under which the Vatican has granted special indulgences related to COVID-19, both to those suffering from the virus and to health care workers, family members and all those exposed to contagion. Per the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a plenary indulgence removes all temporal punishment due to sin.

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