

Cardinal Vincent on 'Easter Duties' and the forgiveness of sins

At this time, we are coming nearer to Holy Week - to that most important week in our year. The week in which we celebrate with real solemnity, the final events of Our Lord's life. His entry into Jerusalem, His last supper with His apostles, His death on the Cross on Calvary, His entombment; and, of course, the glorious Resurrection of our Saviour from the dead.

Now, this year, with great distress and sadness, we know we will not be able to come together to celebrate these great days and we will have to do the best we can by the means that are at our disposal.

Now, I want to talk about a very important aspect of this.

You will know that it is an obligation on all Catholics to fulfil what is known as their 'Easter duties'. This is to receive Holy Communion at Easter time, or thereabouts, and it's often coupled, with the desire or the need to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I want to say with all clarity that this obligation is removed from us this year - in the same way as it is not an obligation on us to attend Mass on Sunday, because these circumstances make it impossible. So, too, the obligation to our Easter duties is removed.

I would not want anyone to be burdened by the thought they are failing to fulfil their Easter duties. You are not. Now, also at this moment, we can recover another part of our Catholic tradition, a bit like the act of spiritual communion, which comes to our aid in times of great distress and difficulty.

It is the teaching of the Church that the Lord, in His mercy, will forgive our sins, even our grievous sins if we cannot go to Confession - go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation - as long as we make what is termed a perfect Act of Contrition, and resolve to confess our serious sins when we next have the opportunity to do so.

As I say, this is part of a deep Catholic tradition. It's not something new thought up for these very difficult circumstances.

So let me explain a little more.

What the Church teaches us, is that God in His mercy, forgives our sins when we are truly sorry for them. And when we turn to Him and express our sorrow in an Act of Contrition, it's called an Act of Perfect Contrition when its focus is on the mercy and the love of God rather than on the burden of our guilt.

So to make an act of Perfect Contrition, we simply need to turn to God and be, as it were, overwhelmed by God's mercy, and then express in our own words or in the words of the traditional Act of Contrition, the sorrow we feel for our offences against the goodness of God.

When we do that in all sincerity of heart, we may rest assured that God forgives our sins and that we come away from that Act of Perfect Contrition freed from those sins.

And, as I say, the only thing we have to remember is, when it is possible to make a Confession again, that we mention the grievous sins which were forgiven by this Perfect Act of Contrition.

You might say, well, why do we have to go to Confession and name our sins?

Part of the reason is often we don't really own them until we name them. And in the act of naming our serious sin, then we take hold of them and hand them over to Jesus on the Cross, because he takes on the burden of our sin.

And we, for our part, when we have that opportunity, name it to the priest who is there representing the person of Jesus and his mercy.

So we can approach Easter with a clear conscience.

And we can make use, under these extreme circumstances, of this great tradition of the Church. Through it, the Lord forgives our sins that we may enter fully into the joy of the Resurrection.

Let us just pray for a moment.

Lord,

I am sorry for the times I have sinned against you.

I am sorry because I've offended your infinite goodness
because I've turned my back on you.

I ask your forgiveness now.

Embrace me in your mercy.

Out of your love that I may pick up again in full joy,
the call of discipleship to follow your son, Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns forever and ever. AMEN