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## Rt Rev. Joseph Toal STB KC\*HS Bishop of Diocese of Motherwell

27<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The matter of priests visiting the sick and dying to administer the sacraments in hospitals and at home has been much in my thoughts in recent days, and I offer some reflections for your consideration.

Shortly after my Ordination as a priest in 1980, I was appointed to St Peter's, Daliburgh, in South Uist. Memory survived there of a priest who died in Daliburgh about 100 years previously, Fr George Rigg. In Fr Rigg's time in South Uist an infectious disease spread among the people and some were dying from it. There was great fear, especially in regard to entering the homes of those who had the disease. Fr Rigg chose to visit an elderly lady with the disease, who lived on her own and whose house others would not enter. Fr Rigg's mission was to administer the sacraments to this lady as she was in mortal danger. By entering house and administering the sacraments he himself caught the disease and died. His memory is honoured in South Uist as a priest who acted heroically in order to bring the sacraments to a dying woman. The stories of some of our saints are very similar. Fr Rigg has come to my mind in recent times as I have wondered about how much can be asked of priests as we live through the present pandemic. Are they expected to have Fr Rigg's 'self-sacrificing spirit' and take the risk of catching the virus in attending to the sick, or should it be decided that it is wiser not to take the risk as the Church supplies the necessary reassurance to both the faithful and the clergy that our faith in the Lord himself and his mercy, and the intercession of his Body, the Church, in heaven and on earth, guarantee a safe passage into eternal life? While I have been inspired by Fr Rigg and his willingness to sacrifice himself, I have also found guidance this week in the instructions offered by the Apostolic Penitentiary on how to spiritually live through serious illness and possibly death without the consolation of the sacraments.

The Note on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Current Pandemic says:

*"Where the individual faithful find themselves in the painful impossibility of receiving sacramental absolution, it should be remembered that perfect contrition, coming from the love of God, beloved above all things, expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness (that which the penitent is at present able to express) and accompanied by votum confessionis, that is, by the firm resolution to have recourse as soon as possible, to sacramental confession, obtains forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones (cf. CCC, no. 1452)."*

Then the Decree on the Granting of Special Indulgences to the Faithful in the Current Pandemic says:

*"The Church prays for those who find themselves unable to receive the Sacrament of the Sick and of the Viaticum, entrusting each and everyone to Divine Mercy by virtue of the Communion of Saints and granting the faithful a Plenary Indulgence on the point of death, provided 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."*

The mention of the Cross brings to mind St Luke's account of the Crucifixion, and in particular the dialogue between Jesus and the man we know as the 'good thief'. The dying criminal turns to Jesus and pleads "*Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom*". Our dying Lord replies "*Today you will be with me in paradise*". The Lord himself, through his wonderful words, is the ultimate guarantee of our salvation. By turning to him in the same spirit as the man dying with him he promises that, sharing in his cross through illness and ultimately death, we will share also in his resurrection and eternal life. Even without the consolation and blessing of his sacraments, we know that our Crucified and Risen Saviour is very close to us in the extreme moments of life and remains with us whatever happens. With such confidence in the Lord's goodness and mercy we can entrust ourselves and our loved ones through Him into Our Father's hands, sharing his last words on the Cross – 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'.

Whether the faithful are able to receive the sacraments or not through this pandemic they must be reassured that the Lord is with them and will not leave them. We have his words that this is true, and the faith and tradition of the Church as added reassurance. It is always desirable for the sick and dying to receive the sacraments but I am aware that, as the virus spreads and more people become seriously ill, access to hospitals will be further restricted and this may include the possibility of priests being able to administer the sacraments. I ask the faithful to understand this would not be our wish but a consequence of the grave emergency we are in and the need to protect against the spread of the virus. My words are intended therefore as encouragement and solace if this does happen. I also advise that great caution is necessary if a priest is requested to visit a sick person at home. Priests over 70 or with any underlying health issues cannot do so, and those that are able to can only come if properly protected and to meet only the sick person. Visits should be brief and the priest should touch nothing while in a house.

I offer you all my prayerful support in these difficult days,

Yours in Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Joseph Toal". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**+ Joseph Toal**