

Dear Fathers and Deacons

Dear Parishioners

I invite you to read this letter together with the two attached statements as they outline our present liturgical and pastoral practice in the light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. These cannot cover every possible situation so I would ask you to exercise prudent pastoral judgement in respect of these guidelines.

I ask all recipients to share this information as widely as possible. I also ask clergy to make copies of this email and accompanying statements available for those who do not have access to them electronically and to leave them at the back of their churches.

Each bishop has been asked to write to his own diocese and so I offer the following guidelines as a clarification of the national guidelines for the clergy and faithful of the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

The measures outlined may seem very drastic but they are a necessary and proportional temporary response to protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

O God, come to our aid;

O Lord, make haste to help us!

Care for Priests and Deacons

Those who are over 70, and those with significant underlying health issues, should take particular care at this time not to make themselves vulnerable to any risk. General contact with parishioners should be minimised so that the risk of transmission of the virus is significantly reduced.

Celebrations of Holy Mass

As of Friday 20th March, a major change is that **the celebration of Mass will not be public in any setting**. Can clergy please put a notice on their church door notifying people of this change, especially in time for this Sunday.

Priests will celebrate Mass privately each day. As they do so, the church will remain closed to the public – which includes all parishioners.

Mass intentions attached to these Masses will be honoured. As priests will only be required to celebrate one Mass each day, some Mass intentions will need to be postponed to a later date.

In line with the Bishops' Conference guidance, **only priests may be present for the celebration of Mass**. As even Deacons are not permitted to be present, I need to emphasise that nobody else may be present for the celebration of Mass.

The obligation for the faithful to attend Holy Mass on Sundays and Holydays of Obligation is removed until further notice.

Since all of the faithful will be asked to make a **Spiritual Communion** (rather than receiving Holy Communion) during this time, those confined to home who normally receive Holy Communion from Sunday Mass will also be asked to make a Spiritual Communion. This will mean they will not receive Holy Communion regularly as at present. Clergy may make visits to sick parishioners in accordance with the guidelines already given. Care should be taken to ensure social distancing of the most vulnerable is maintained, including the welfare of those who visit. I draw priests' attention to specific guidance already given on the anointing of the sick.

Live-streaming of Masses is advertised on the Diocesan website (www.birminghamdiocese.org.uk) and we expect the number of these live-streams to grow, including at St Chad's Cathedral in the near future. If clergy could inform the Communications team at Cathedral House if they can add to the facilities already listed, that would be appreciated.

At other times and wherever this is possible, **churches should remain open for private prayer**. This may include periods of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament but the emphasis must be on private prayer and not gathering the people. I ask that there is no Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament since this constitutes a public service.

Baptisms, Sacrament of Reconciliation, First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony

Please follow the guidelines given in the Bishops' Conference Liturgical Advice document.

Funerals

Regrettably, while public Funeral Masses must also cease, it is recommended that on the day of a Funeral, a Mass without the faithful may be offered by the priest for the intentions of the deceased and the family. This will be of some consolation to the family in the absence of a public Funeral Mass. I recommend that a later Mass with the faithful be celebrated when restrictions are lifted.

We live in difficult and unprecedented times. I, together with my brother Archbishops of England and Wales, will be reviewing these guidelines regularly and taking into account best advice. I shall update you on any changes that are necessary. In all we face, we know that the Lord never abandons his people.

In conclusion, as a Catholic community, we must treasure the power of prayer during these days: prayer for the world and its needs; prayer for our country at this time of uncertainty and sickness; prayer for the families and communities to which we belong, not only in terms of health but also for the many concerns of livelihoods affected; prayer for ourselves.

*Merciful God,
come to the help of your people.
Be our shelter in this time of peril
and strengthen the bonds of our community.
Bring healing to all who suffer the ravages of disease
and assist those whose skill and art can put an end to this affliction.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Assuring you all of my prayers for you at this time and asking for your prayers for me and those who work with me for the good of the Archdiocese.

Yours devotedly in Christ

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CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

A letter from the President and Vice-President on behalf of all the Bishops of the Conference

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, so many aspects of our lives must change. This includes the ways in which we publicly express our faith. It is very clear that, following official advice and in order to keep each other safe, save lives and support the NHS, at this time we must not gather for public acts of worship in our churches. This will begin from Friday evening, 20th March 2020, until further notice.

Our churches will remain open. They are not closing. They will be a focal point of prayer, where you will find solace and strength. In visiting our churches at this time, we will observe with great care the practices of hygiene and the guidance on social distancing.

However, the celebration of Mass, Sunday by Sunday and day by day, will take place without a public congregation.

Knowing that the Mass is being celebrated; joining in spiritually in that celebration; watching the live-streaming of the Mass; following its prayers at home; making an act of spiritual communion: this is how we share in the Sacrifice of Christ in these days. These are the ways in which we will sanctify Sunday, and indeed every day.

We want everyone to understand that in these emergency circumstances, and for as long as they last, the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days is removed. This is, without doubt, the teaching of the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2181). This pandemic is the 'serious reason' why this obligation does not apply at this time.

You will find more details about the pathway of prayer and sacramental life we are now to take in the accompanying document and on the Bishops' Conference website (www.cbcew.org.uk). Your own bishop and parish priest will provide further support, encouragement and information about our way of prayer together in the coming weeks.

The second vital aspect of these challenging times is our care for each other. There are so many ways in which we are to do this: being attentive to the needs of our neighbour, especially the elderly and vulnerable; contributing to our local food banks; volunteering for charitable initiatives and organisations; simply keeping in touch by all the means open to us.

During these disturbing and threatening times, the rhythm of the prayer of the Church will continue. Please play your part in it. The effort of daily kindness and mutual support for all will continue and increase. Please play your part in this too. For your commitment to this, we thank you.

'The Lord is my shepherd, There is nothing I shall want.'

May God bless us all.

Vincent Cardinal Nichols Archbishop Malcolm McMahon OP President Vice-President

18th March 2020

CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

Liturgical Advice for the Bishops of England and Wales in the light of the COVID-19 Pandemic 18th March 2020 This advice will be reviewed and developed as necessary weekly

The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, having consulted the Ordinaries of the Dioceses, has agreed that the cessation of public liturgies should begin from Friday evening 20th March 2020. Because of the situation the Church finds herself in, the obligation for the faithful to attend Holy Mass on a Sunday or Holy day of Obligation is removed, until further notice.

The following instruction is now given for the celebration of the Sacraments and sacramentals of the Church at this time.

Celebrations of Holy Mass

Priests (parish priest and assistant priests) who hold parochial office should continue to celebrate Mass in a church within their parish without the faithful on a daily basis. Other priests (i.e. retired from office or entrusted with a non-parochial ministry) may celebrate Mass without the faithful in a church, chapel or their private home. Deacons should not participate in these celebrations.

The continuing celebration of Mass ensures that the faithful can join in spiritual communion with the priests of the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states (1364): As often as the sacrifice of the Cross by which 'Christ our Pasch has been sacrificed' is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out. Daily liturgical resources for those at home, including those for making a "Spiritual Communion" with the priest, will be available on the CBCEW website.

Information about the live-streaming of the celebration of Mass will be made widely available in our dioceses so that the faithful can participate in the prayers of the priest at Mass at home. A fine example of this is from The National Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham will continue its full liturgical programme and this will be available to all via the Internet (www.walsingham.org.uk)

Wherever possible, during this period, churches will remain open, especially on Sundays, for individual private prayer, without any organised services, and offering prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

Baptisms

Baptisms should be deferred until such time that the public health advice is that congregations can gather safely. In case of necessity, baptisms should be celebrated with all the hygiene precautions that have been laid down by the Church in its COVID-19 advice.

Sacrament of Reconciliation Confession may be offered on request as long as hygiene and social distancing requirements are observed (eg a physical barrier between the penitent and the priest such as a grille and cloth). The use of Rite II and Rite III of the Rite of Penance is not permitted as this, by necessity, requires the gathering of people in our churches.

First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion

These celebrations should be postponed until a time that allows for families and friends to gather safely within our churches.

Confirmation

The celebrations of Confirmation should be deferred until such time that the public health advice is that congregations can resume public worship.

Matrimony

If possible, the celebration of the sacrament of Matrimony should be deferred until such time that people can gather in numbers safely. However, if this is not possible and only in the most pressing of circumstances, then those present for the marriage should be

restricted to the celebrant, bride and groom and immediate family, and if necessary, the legal Registrar.

Anointing of the Sick

No pastoral visits should be made to people who are self-isolating until the isolation period ends. However, do offer phone support. When anointing the sick, the Oil of the Sick can be applied using a cotton bud which can be burned afterwards (one end for the head and the other for the hands) and the priest extend his hands over the sick person for laying on of hands, without physical contact. This has been confirmed as a valid mode of celebrating the sacraments which involve “laying on of hands.” Visits to people in care homes or hospitals should follow advice from the staff on infection control.

Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil

This will be dependent on the forthcoming decisions of the Bishops for the Holy Week ceremonies.

Funerals

There must be great pastoral sensitivity to this issue. The funeral service should take place at the graveside or at a crematorium, subject to the conditions laid down by the cemetery or

crematorium authorities. Arrangements should be made for a Mass to be celebrated in memoriam when congregations are allowed to gather.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas General Secretary 18th March 2020

Final