

A Message from the Metropolitan Archbishops of the Catholic Church in England

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

On Tuesday we heard the announcement that, from the 4th July this year, places of worship will be able to reopen for prayer and services. We welcome this news with great joy. Since the lockdown began, members of all faiths have faced restrictions on how they have been able to celebrate important religious festivals. Our own experience of Easter was unlike any other we have known. Now, in our churches, and with our people, we can look forward again to celebrating the central mysteries of our faith in the Holy Eucharist.

The recent reopening of our churches for individual private prayer was an important milestone on our journey towards resuming communal worship. Our churches that have opened have put in place all the measures needed to ensure the risks of virus transmission are minimised. This includes effective hand sanitisation, social distancing, and cleaning. We remain committed to making sure these systems of hygiene and infection control meet Government and public health standards.

We want to thank everyone within the Catholic community for sustaining the life of faith in such creative ways, not least in the family home. We thank our priests for celebrating Mass faithfully for their people, and for the innovative ways in which they have enabled participation through live-streaming and other means. We are grateful for the pastoral care shown by our clergy to those for whom this time of lockdown has been especially difficult, and, in particular, towards those who have been bereaved. We recognise too the chaplaincy services that have played a vital role in supporting those most in need. Gaining from the experience of all that we have been through, and bringing those lessons into the future, we must now look forward.

With the easing of restrictions on worship with congregations, we tread carefully along the path that lies ahead. Our lives have been changed by the experience of the pandemic and it is clear that we cannot simply return to how things were before lockdown. We remain centred on the Lord Jesus and His command at the Last Supper to "*do this in memory of me.*" We must now rebuild what it means to be Eucharistic communities, holding fast to all that we hold dear, while at the same time exploring creative ways to meet changed circumstances.

It is important to reaffirm that, at present, the obligation to attend Sunday Mass remains suspended. A significant number of churches may remain closed as they are unable to meet the requirements for opening for individual prayer. Fulfilling these requirements is a precondition for any church opening after the 4th July for the celebration of Mass with a congregation.

Please be aware that there will be a limit on the number of people who can attend Mass in our churches. This will be determined locally in accordance with social distancing requirements. We therefore need to reflect carefully on how and when we might be able to attend Mass. We cannot return immediately to our customary practices. This next step is not, in any sense, a moment when we are going 'back to normal.'

We ask every Catholic to think carefully about how and when they will return to Mass. Our priests may need to consider whether it is possible to celebrate additional Masses at the weekends. Given there is no Sunday obligation, we ask you to consider the possibility of attending Mass on a weekday. This will ease the pressure of numbers for Sunday celebrations and allow a gradual return to the Eucharist for more people.

Moving forward, there will still be many people who cannot attend Mass in person. We therefore ask parishes, wherever possible, to continue live-streaming Sunday Mass, both for those who remain shielding and vulnerable, and also for those unable to leave home because of advanced age or illness.

When we return to Mass there will be some differences in how the celebration takes place. For the time being, there will be no congregational singing and Mass will be shorter than usual. None of this detracts from the centrality of our encounter with the Risen Christ in the Eucharist. We ask everyone to respect and follow the guidance that will be issued and the instructions in each church.

"As I have loved you," said the Lord Jesus, "so you must love each other." (Jn 13:34) The lockdown has brought forth remarkable acts of charity, of loving kindness, from Catholics across our communities as they have cared for the needy and vulnerable. We have seen love in action through charitable works, and through the service of many front-line keyworkers who are members of our Church. Now we can begin to return to the source of that charity, Christ himself, present for us sacramentally, body, blood, soul and divinity, in Holy Communion. As we prepare to gather again to worship, let us, respectful of each other, come together in thanksgiving to God for the immense gift of the Holy Eucharist.

Yours devotedly in Christ

✠ Vincent Cardinal Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster

✠ Malcolm McMahon OP, Archbishop of Liverpool

✠ Bernard Longley, Archbishop of Birmingham

✠ John Wilson, Archbishop of Southwark

This letter is addressed to the Catholic Community in England; the opening of the Catholic Churches in Wales is devolved to the Welsh Assembly who are still evaluating their position on opening Places of Worship.