

Dear Fathers
Dear Deacons

You will be aware that in his Address to the Nation last night the Prime Minister outlined further necessary steps to be taken to combat the spread of the Coronavirus. The Government has mandated the *closure of all shops selling non-essential goods, including clothing and electronic stores, and other premises including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms, and places of worship.*

This morning I received the following message from Canon Chris Thomas, General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales:

Closure of Churches

Following the instruction that the Prime Minister gave last night, there has been an inconsistent message from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government regarding the opening of churches. In the published guidelines, it states that "places of worship should remain open for solitary prayer."

The instruction is very clear on the occasions when someone can leave home:

- *Shopping for basic necessities, for example food and medicine, which must be as infrequent as possible.*
- *One form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household.*
- *Any medical need, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person.*
- *Travelling to and from work, but only where this absolutely cannot be done from home.*

None of these four specific reasons for leaving home concur with the visiting of a church for solitary prayer. In addition, keeping churches open could undermine the desire of the Government for people to remain at home, the very fact of them being open may draw people out of their homes, many of which would be the most vulnerable to infection.

*Prof. Jim McManus has spoken with a senior civil servant and it was quite clear they just had not thought through the issues of infection and security of churches and when he made these points clear, they were appalled and agreed they had made a mistake. Keeping churches open sends an utterly inconsistent message and therefore they **must be closed** for the benefit of others and stopping infection.*

As a sad but necessary consequence we must, from this morning, ensure that the doors of all churches and chapels in the Archdiocese are closed to the public and that they remain permanently locked until these restrictions are lifted. In this way we shall continue to play our part within every parish in fighting the Coronavirus and to show our solidarity with all those who are striving to overcome the current pandemic.

In the meantime it will still be a great consolation to your parishioners to know that Mass is being celebrated daily in their local church and that they are spiritually united with the celebrant and with one another as beneficiaries of the Sacrifice of Christ.

The Prime Minister also stated that all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals, must henceforth cease. I would ask you to continue to follow the restrictive measures already put in place by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in relation to baptisms, marriages and funerals.

Our natural instinct as Catholics to gather together and to pray in the real presence of Our Lord is expressed in the Second Eucharistic Prayer: *Humbly we pray that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit.* The live-streaming of Mass from twenty-three of our churches (with the Cathedral soon to join that number) is proving to be a great spiritual resource and a powerful way of expressing and deepening our communion in Christ during these challenging days.

Please continue to keep in your prayers all those working in the NHS and all those who are ill because of the Coronavirus. I particularly thank all our Hospital and Healthcare Chaplains, working alongside deanery clergy and volunteers at this time, for the hope and trust in Our Lord that they are fostering and for their support of healthcare staff and patients alike.

Please remember that Pope Francis has called on the world's Christians and people of goodwill to join together to pray the Lord's Prayer on **Wednesday, 25 March at 11am UK time**(midday in Rome). Please take good care of yourselves so that you are able to care for others.

With my prayers and kindest wishes.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

Most Rev Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham