

Covid-19 update

I know that many of you are worried and concerned about the Covid-19 situation, however as you also know the Holy Father has specifically asked us to be courageous in the face of this crisis. All of you have already shown your courage and willingness to continue to work among your people in these difficult weeks, and I want to thank you for that and assure you of my prayers for each one of you at this time.

Courage, however, does not preclude prudence and so, once again, I would like to ask all of you to make yourself aware of and carefully follow all the public health advice about how to limit the spread of this virus.

For those of you who are over 70, or who have underlying health conditions, I would like to ask you specifically to minimise your contact with others and to please let the Dean, or me, know of your health status and of the steps that you intend to take to keep yourself safe.

If any of you test positive for the virus or have been in contact with someone who has tested positive, obviously please follow the present Government guidelines on self-isolation and please let the Dean, or me, know of your health status and if you need any help.

Suspension of public Masses

As you will have seen, the Bishops' Conference, upon Government advice, decided today to suspend the public celebration of all Masses in our churches across the country (see attachment). This decision was not taken by us lightly and will be reviewed regularly in the coming weeks. You can be sure that the Bishops will continue to monitor public health advice closely and that we will contact you as soon as the Government tells us that it is safe for us to congregate in numbers for the public celebration of Mass again.

Nevertheless, I urge each of you to continue to celebrate daily Mass privately, and to let your parishioners know that you will be celebrating Mass for them, even if they cannot be present. Please also encourage them in whatever way you can (on your websites, or through emails, or e-newsletters) to deepen their spiritual lives during these weeks and specifically to make acts of "spiritual communion" at the times when they would otherwise be at Mass.

Please also make sure that you have enough hosts consecrated should individual Catholics request Holy Communion at this time. Many people may even need to be taught to make such requests, as they may be quite unaware of this possibility.

Please note, and please communicate to your parishioners in whatever way possible, that there is no obligation to attend Sunday Mass at this time.

Sunday Mass online

I am presently arranging for Sunday Mass to be available in English, Polish, Syro-Malabar and Ukrainian on our website, each Sunday, until the situation changes. I hope all will be available from this Sunday onwards. You may also wish to look into recording or streaming Mass from your parish if you or your people have the "know how" to do so.

Even if we cannot attend Mass, we are all obliged to keep the sabbath holy, and so we will make resources available online so that people may keep the sabbath at home. They will involve the readings and prayers of each Sunday and are a suggestion to those who wish for guidance.

Christian Initiation at Easter

I ask that you proceed to initiate those who are due to become Catholics this Easter. However, please do so with a shortened Easter Vigil celebration, held in private, that is for immediate family and sponsors only. The rites should be as short as possible, and must take into account all the Government's hygiene precautions. If you are over 70 or have underlying conditions, please ask a neighbouring PP to take over instead.

Celebration of the Sacraments in large groups

All other public celebrations of the Sacraments are also suspended. This includes first Reconciliation, first Holy Communion, and Confirmations. At the moment, it would seem prudent for you to discuss planning for them in the new school year, that is from August 2020 onwards.

Visiting the Sick and Elderly, and taking Holy Communion to them

Both you and your Eucharistic Ministers may, for now, continue visiting and taking Holy Communion to the Sick. If you or the Ministers are over 70, or have underlying conditions, please have someone else go. Those visiting must observe strictly all the Government's hygiene precautions, especially about washing hands before and after giving Holy Communion, keeping one's distance from each other and keeping the visit and the rites brief. If those being visited are over 70, or have underlying conditions, ask them by phone first if they wish to be visited. If they have tested positive for the virus, Government instructions limit visits to them severely, except for delivery of food, and keeping in touch by phone or other media.

Penance & Reconciliation

I see no difficulty in continuing the practice of the Sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation, providing you take into account all the Government's hygiene precautions. This means there must be a significant distance or a barrier between the penitent and priest; that in turn suggests the use of physical barriers such as a confessional box, or a private room where priest and penitent may remain at a proper distance from each other.

The Anointing of the Sick & Viaticum

This is problematic for obvious reasons. We are urged by the Holy Father to be courageous, but we too could carry the virus, so precautions are necessary. Touching head and hands is not permitted at this time. So, as with for example a bad accident, anointing should be done elsewhere on the body, e.g. just the back of the hands, using a piece of cotton wool, to be used once and then disposed of properly. You may also be required to put on a disposable gown, mask, and gloves. Please respect and comply with the hygiene rules put in place by the medical professionals.

Baptisms, Marriages* & Funerals

For now, all of these may be celebrated, but privately, that is with only immediate family members in attendance. As with other celebrations, the rites should be dignified, brief, and in keeping with prevailing Government hygiene precautions. If you have questions about a particular case, please get advice from your Dean, or me.

*Specifically, regarding **Weddings**: Some of you will be preparing couples for marriage who will require dispensations and permissions from the Chancery. In some cases, papers will have to be sent to other dioceses or abroad. Papers for weddings that are due over the next three months should be sent to the Chancery now. It may be the case that the Chancery will be closed over the coming weeks and so it is important to process as many papers as possible. At the moment, do not send papers to the Chancery for weddings that are more than three months away so that we can prioritise weddings that are happening sooner.

As you will know, different dioceses around the world are taking varied approaches to protecting the health of the public and it is worth encouraging couples who are being married in other places to check if their wedding is still able to go ahead as planned.

Churches to remain open

As of 18 March, our churches are allowed by the Government to remain open. I ask you, therefore, to arrange for your churches to be kept open to let individuals come to pray. Consider exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for a time each day. If numbers come at the same time, the Government's precautions about hygiene, distance from each other, and numbers in buildings are to be observed. Please take extra care to make sure your churches are clean, especially surfaces touched by hand. Please put signs, gel, tissues and bins in clear view.

Gillis Centre

The Gillis Centre has suspended all events there until the end of May. The Centre is not open to the clergy, the public or volunteers. Staff are however still available and happy to help with any queries. Contact should be made in the first instance by telephone on 0131 623 8900 or by email. Please also keep in touch with your Dean should you have any questions about coronavirus issues affecting your parish.

Deaneries consultation 20 March 2020

I had asked the deans to carry out a consultation with you on pastoral matters such as Holy Week, but events appear to have overtaken us. Nonetheless, I would still value any comments or suggestions you have on the remaining items on the list found in my 14 March email to you.

St Joseph's Day cancelled at Sighthill

In the circumstances, the Augustinians have had to cancel their farewell Mass at St Joseph's tomorrow. We nonetheless wish them well and look forward to another opportunity to say goodbye to them properly in the future.

SCIAF Sunday 22 March 2020

Unhappily, our annual missionary appeal on behalf of SCIAF will be seriously affected by these events. You may still encourage your people to help with SCIAF's appeal this Sunday, including by making donations online. Here is Bishop Toal's message in the circumstances:

"As we face the present crisis in our world the number of people able to attend Sunday Mass in our parishes is rapidly falling and this will have a massive effect on our parish finances and our ability to maintain our churches and ministries, and our charitable activities. One immediate casualty is bound to be our collection on 4th Sunday of Lent for SCIAF. I would encourage the faithful to continue to support the SCIAF "Wee Box "Appeal for the Groups of Vulnerable Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, both through filling the Wee Boxes and through making donations on-line. I think the on-line donations, accessed through www.sciaf.org.uk, will be vital this year in maximising our donations. These donations, which can be made up until 20th May, will benefit from UK Government Match Aid, whereby every £1 donated is worth £2. I hope people will respond well and continue to support the poor abroad and at home, even as we experience our own difficulties and uncertainties.

+Joseph Toal
Bishop Chair of SCIAF"

Day of Prayer, 22 March 2020

Please join all the Churches in the UK in the Day of Prayer, scheduled for this Sunday. As we do every Lent, and more fervently today, we pray that the Lord may spare His people.

Finally,

I would also ask you to encourage everyone to pray the Memorare once a day to our Lady, Health of the Sick. She will surely hear us in our time of need.