

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ

18 March 2020

Dear Father, dear brother,

This is a message I never imagined having to write. But you know the circumstances and the decisions we bishops have had to take.

It breaks my heart to know that Catholics in this country are now being deprived of the consolation of attending the Holy Mass personally, and that this will be the case for some time to come. I know you will be bearing the same sorrow and frustration. Yet this is what we must do. The reasons are perfectly clear and compelling. It would be irresponsible and potentially scandalous not to follow the formal and official advice we have received.

Now we must draw on all the resources of our faith, some of which I outline in the Pastoral Letter. They include our encouraging and enabling people to deepen their life of prayer, to practice the Act of Spiritual Communion, to establish strong patterns of prayer in their lives. You know what is required. You do not need me to tell you.

There are plenty of on-line resources available. Some of them are listed on the attached sheet. This is a time when we need to be freshly creative and imaginative in our ministry, encouraging and supporting each other while observing scrupulously the safeguards now required of us. There are so many ways in which we can keep in touch with parishioners, especially those who are more confined now in their freedom of movement, other than by visiting them in their homes.

This is also a time for encouraging a generous and prompt response to those who are in need. I know that the reservoir of the usual volunteers is shrinking. Please encourage new people to step forward. You may have to do this on line, around your parish, or by phone. Please don't hesitate to make these requests. There are many generous people who know the present needs and simply may not know what to do.

May I now touch on some more particular points.

1. This weekend

- a) I suggest you prepare a notice for the Church board or door which says clearly that the Church is open for prayer, but not, sadly, for the public celebration of Mass. Invite people to come in.
- b) Please be around at your normal times on Sunday. How you do this most appropriately, I leave to you. But you must not shake hands or get too close to people, but observe carefully 'social distancing' especially if, like me, you are over 70 years of age. If you are worried, then simply stay at the sanctuary end of the Church, perhaps in prayer. But please be visible. I will do this in the Cathedral.
- c) If possible, please expose the Blessed Sacrament in our customary way, so that the Sacramental Presence of the Lord is the focal point of prayer.

- d) Please make available copies of the Pastoral Letter I have written, together with the list of parishes with streamed celebrations of Mass across the Diocese. Please make them available to your parishioners as seems best to you. This page also contains some helpful websites. You may well wish to add some more.

2. Yourself

- a) Please take good care of yourself, keeping up the correct hygiene practices and keeping to the 'social distancing' we are to observe. Keep in touch with your friends. Much can be done by phone. If you feel particularly vulnerable then seek help from another priest, or get in touch with Mgr. Hayes to see if there is some way of bringing some assistance to you.
- b) Please take care over anyone who helps you in the presbytery. Bishop John Sherrington this afternoon has sent you guidance on this.

3. Funerals

One of the most difficult discussions this morning concerned funerals. Each situation will be different: the capacity of the undertakers, the requirements of the cemetery or crematorium authorities. Please do not hesitate to consult with Mgr. Martin or one of us bishops. However, we have agreed that Funeral Masses cannot be included as that would undermine the fundamental norm we have had to establish.

4. Overall

Please do observe the liturgical advice you received this morning. These are the instructions we must now follow, together with the official Government advice that is being issued and updated. This liturgical advice will be updated too, including instructions about Holy Week, in due time.

I think that is enough for now. In these days, we must keep calm and simply do our best. Levels of anxiety are high, I know. Yet our leadership is so important. It needs to be clear, calm and reassuring. That reassurance is, of course, rooted in our trust in the Lord. Certainly, this pandemic is teaching us the limits of our control over our own lives and circumstances. I believe that through it doors are opening to the things of God and it is our task, our joy, to present them ever afresh in these dangerous and uniquely challenging times.

Please pray for me, as I will for you.

With all good wishes and prayers,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Vincent". The signature is written in a cursive style.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster