

# Diocese of Shrewsbury *Ad Clerum*

2020/26 June  
(COVID-19)





Dear Fathers and Deacons,

## **A MOMENT OF GREAT JOY**

We are about to embark on the next, decisive stage of our re-emergence from the state of national lockdown with the public celebration of Mass and the availability, at set times, of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. All is due to begin from Saturday 4th July however, I wish to stress that every parish must feel free to go safely and surely at its own pace.

The reports which you have shared with me of the joy that has marked the re-opening of church doors, came about thanks to all the hard work involved in the detailed preparation of some 60 of our churches to open for private prayer. I am very much aware of the pressure which the demands of COVID safety have brought. However, nothing can take away the joy of being able to assist many to return, in the weeks ahead, to Confession, Mass and Holy Communion. Amid the pressure of the many details of our compliance with standards of safety may we keep in sight the goal and great joy to be shared.

## **MESSAGE FROM THE METROPOLITAN ARCHBISHOPS**

I attach a message of encouragement for this Sunday from Cardinal Nichols, together with Archbishops Longley, McMahon and Wilson on behalf of the bishops, which I would be grateful if you could share with your parishioners in every way you can. We are approaching a moment to be celebrated and also to be approached with care and caution. I think this is the note clearly sounded in the Archbishops' note to the Catholic faithful.

## **SUNDAY AND HOLY DAY OBLIGATION**

The faithful continue to be dispensed in this national emergency from the obligation to attend Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days. We have not yet returned to a state of "normality" and there are parishioners who may remain shielded/isolated for many medical reasons. For this reason, I would want to encourage the livestreaming of Mass to be continued wherever possible and the encouragement of prayer in the home and acts of spiritual communion for those unable to attend Mass.

## **TWO GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS**

I always want to share the advice I have received and today I am pleased to share with you two documents issued this morning from the Bishops Conference. I should note that we are expecting more general guidance from the Government at some stage, however, the guidance prepared for the bishops takes into account the best advice and practice available. The guidance assumes that all the provisions for the safe re-opening of a church for private prayer have already been put in place. The documents places a great responsibility on us to ensure that the Mass and the Sacraments can be celebrated safely in the weeks and months ahead. I think it likely that we will receive additional guidance as new questions and issues inevitably arise:

### **1) Guidance for The Celebration of Mass**

In reading this document you will notice that a decision is to be made, which I entrust to each Parish Priest who will best know the local situation:

#### **Safe Numbers**

- a) To remain with the two-metre social distancing within the church and the number agreed in your risk assessment.



- b) To adopt the one metre plus social distancing provision and to consult with the Vicars General and Julie Tinsley our Health and Safety Officer to establish a new and significantly larger safe number for the church. The adoption of one metre plus will require the wearing of face masks for all who attend and the closure and cleaning of the church after every celebration of the Mass.
- c) It may be possible for you to consider an outdoor Mass with all the vagaries of an English summer this would allow one metre plus social distancing without the use of face masks and would significantly increase the numbers able to attend. The Altar would of course need to be covered and shielded from wind, rain and even sunshine!

## **Distribution of Holy Communion**

The national guidance leaves us with two choices:

- a) To distribute Communion silently at the traditional time for Holy Communion and in the traditional place in the manner described in the first option using a kneeler or perhaps a small table to create the social distance required of us
- b) To distribute Holy Communion silently at the end of Mass from an established point with a kneeler or table allowing the faithful to depart from Mass immediately after receiving Holy Communion

I think you will see that there are no easy options and we will need to find our way forwards in a way that is both reverent and safe for the parishioners.

## **Readers**

I think you will note the requirement of single use gloves and the possible need to adjust face masks for the purposes of reading. I would wish to add

that according to your judgement, I am happy in these extraordinary circumstances for the clergy to read all of the Scripture readings at Mass.

## **How Do We Regulate Numbers?**

I dearly wish I was able to offer you a ready-made solution to this most difficult question. I fear that it will be a source of upset when people arrive to take part in Mass and are not able to attend for safety reasons. It is the stewards who will most often be faced with this situation and a very unpleasant dilemma. I would suggest a clear and compassionate notice be prepared to clearly indicate at the entrance, that the safe number of participants has now been reached and it would be necessary to either attend Mass in the grounds of the church or to return for a later Mass. It may help the stewards simply to be able to point to this notice when the church has reached capacity.

Some dioceses are considering an on-line pre-booking of places in church or a ticket distribution, however, this doesn't overcome the difficulty when people or entire families arrive at the church door without prior booking. One means to help overcome this problem would be to increase the number of Sunday Masses celebrated. The simplification of the Liturgy should allow us to do this more easily. At the Cathedral, this will be the approach that I will propose. I would ask you to seriously consider whether this would be possible. As already mentioned, it may also be helpful to consider the possibility of an outdoor celebration of the Mass which allows a greater number to attend.

## **2) Guidance for Confession**

In my previous *Ad Clerum*, I outlined the benefits at this time of hearing Confessions out of doors. In the guidance received today, we can now envisage Confessions within the church with social distancing and hygiene requirements



in place, either in the church itself or with extra conditions within a confessional where there is an enhanced physical divide between priest and penitent. I commend all the advice to you in the light of your local circumstances. However, this is the time for us to begin announcing and making provision for the return of many to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

## **FUNERAL MASSES**

I want to note that from 4th July, following the safety requirements for Mass, it will be possible to celebrate Requiem Masses once more. Again, I leave the judgment as to whether this is possible to the local Parish Priest.

## **FURTHER GUIDANCE**

We might expect further guidance in the weeks to come on the pastoral care of the sick. I would want to record all of our thanks to Canon Chris Thomas, the General Secretary of the Bishops Conference, who has done such outstanding work in helping co-ordinate our response to this public health emergency. I have certainly been very grateful for his availability to assist the bishops and dioceses through every difficult day of this crisis.

## **FOR TODAY ...**

I think the documents attached will be sufficient for today! I hope you will be able to ponder the content over the weekend and then consider the next steps in the coming week. I am sure there will be many questions arising which I will do my best to address. Be assured of my understanding of the difficulties and complexities involved in taking these next positive steps forward in the parishes.

With remembrance in my prayer and with my gratitude,

+ *Mark*

*Bishop of Shrewsbury*

*Enc.*

- *Message from the Metropolitan Archbishops*
- *Guidance for the Celebration of Mass*
- *Guidance for Confession*