

Dear Fathers,

Further Guidance on the Opening of Churches

Accepting the Guidance set out by the Government, and that of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, the following advice may be helpful to Parishes.

A local determination should be made by each parish priest about the Mass schedule for Sundays and weekdays and the opening of churches for personal prayer. Wherever possible, please enable people to attend Mass and visit the church for prayer, with all necessary stewarding and sanitisation measures in place. If, however, it is not possible to ensure the church buildings are properly stewarded and sanitised, or the risks are deemed too great, or the priest himself becomes unwell or needs to self-isolate, and no alternative provision can be made, please take whatever temporary action is judged necessary. This decision should be reviewed each week. It will, obviously, be important to communicate any changes to our parishioners, explaining the temporary nature of this action and the reasons for it.

Unless exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise, it is important that our churches remain open for the celebration of Mass and personal prayer. This is vital to our spiritual health and wellbeing. With the correct measures in place, our churches are safe places. It is, however, paramount that clergy and laity alike follow the requirements for distance, stewarding, and sanitisation, as specified in the guidance sent out previously. The instructions concerning the liturgy must also be followed in full. Failure to implement these measures is an extremely serious matter, and potentially jeopardises peoples' health. The laity have the right to the reassurance provided by the guidelines for the celebration of the Sacraments in the context of the pandemic. On this basis, any Catholic church that cannot open safely, with all necessary Covid measures in place, should not do so. In light of this, some Catholic parishes have taken the decision to close churches temporarily.

Allowing people to exercise their right to public worship in Catholic churches, ensuring at the same time that all proper regulations are in place, provides an important support for spiritual and human wellbeing. Catholic faith centres on the celebration of the Mass and accessibility should only be overridden where there is an evidentially based rationale that Catholic churches poses a definite risk to public health. Some have suggested that the new Covid variant means places of worship must close. Any such judgement, however, requires accurate, evidentially based information.

We are keeping this situation under constant review. Should there be any change in the Government regulations, we will continue to respond accordingly in collaboration with public health professionals.

I enclose with this Guidance a letter sent by Bishop John Sherrington to the Westminster Clergy which you may find helpful.

I assure you of my support and prayers during this rapidly changing situation as you continue to care for the people of God.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm