

18 May 2020 Statement from Bishop Noel Treanor on the Reopening of Churches for Private Prayer



Last week, the NI Executive outlined a five-step recovery plan with the gradual and phased easing of restrictions that had been placed upon movement and public gatherings in response to Covid-19. This phased recovery plan is welcomed by all as a sign of hope and progression in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

The tentative steps outlined by the NI Executive in this recovery plan have been possible only through the ongoing heroic and professional efforts of healthcare workers to safeguard public health and save lives. Once again, we are

indebted and pay tribute to all those who are keeping our families and friends safe. Steps towards the easing of restrictions have only been possible because, as a society, we have taken the appropriate measures and carried the cross of isolation in the interests of the common good and public safety.

For the continuing good of all we must remain clear sighted and vigilant: the real and present threat of coronavirus remains, particularly for many vulnerable family and friends. The cautious steps towards recovery are steps towards a 'new normality'. The pandemic has not passed. We need to be vigilant and maintain good hygienic practices and safely exercise personal maturity and responsibility as our freedoms of movement and social interaction return. It is necessary and incumbent upon all of us to maintain the social distancing measures that have allowed us to keep the infection rate down. In protecting those around us, we protect ourselves and those we love.

As part of step 1 of the recovery plan, the NI Executive have indicated today that some churches and places of worship may choose to open for the singular purpose of private individual prayer. As a Diocese, we warmly welcome this decision and I know it will bring tremendous consolation to all people of faith throughout the North of Ireland. Over the past few weeks, parishioners and clergy have voiced to me the sacrifice of not being able to gather within the sanctuary of the Church to offer personal prayer. It has been particularly difficult for families who continue to grieve the loss of loved ones. They desire to gain consolation in offering prayer to God as they remember their loved one before the altar of God.

To facilitate the opening of churches for private prayer, churches within the Diocese of Down and Connor, following a full risk assessment, will reopen for private prayer according to the capacity of each parish to do so safely and in accordance with public health guidance and best practice.

The Diocese takes seriously its duty of care towards parishioners, employees and clergy. It has therefore issued specific guidance to parishes of the measures required to be put in place before any church may be opened. Each Church will open only when it is safe to do so and this may vary from place to place. The support and patience of parishioners while these measures are put in place is greatly appreciated.

All visitors to churches must strictly observe the social distancing regulations and good hygienic practices outlined at Church entrances. In the exercise of personal responsibility, anyone who is unwell or exhibits symptoms of Covid-19 should stay remain at home. Those who are at increased risk from the virus, and/or have been advised to shield themselves, should also remain at home. There is no obligation to visit Church and Mass will continue to be streamed privately via social media without a congregation present.

In the interest of public health and safety, during this first phase of reopening of churches, visits are for individual, personal prayer and private devotions only. Organised gatherings for prayer or devotions are not permitted at this stage and the public celebration of Mass and the other sacraments remain suspended.

These directives will be kept under regular review.