

**STATEMENT BY THE NORTHERN BISHOPS  
ANNOUNCING THAT PUBLIC WORSHIP MAY RESUME  
IN NORTHERN IRELAND  
FROM FRIDAY 26<sup>th</sup> MARCH**

- *Bishops in the North announce a cautious return to public worship for the faithful from Friday 26<sup>th</sup> March, in time for the celebration of Holy Week and Easter.*
- *Bishops emphasise the need for continued caution and a rigorous application of all mitigations and safeguards required to ensure the safest possible return to public worship in our Churches.*
- *Every person should consider carefully if returning to collective worship is the safe and appropriate step for them, at this time. Families are encouraged to join those celebrating the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus in Churches, from the 'domestic church' of their own living rooms, via live-streaming.*
- *Bishops, together with other Church leaders, encourage all on Easter Sunday to pray and reflect in a spirit of remembering, solidarity and hope in the context of the current pandemic.*

**STATEMENT**

***Re-opening of Churches for public worship.***

Following ongoing consultation between representatives of the Churches, the Executive Office and our public health authorities, and in light of the most recent review of lockdown provisions by the NI Executive yesterday, the Northern Catholic Bishops are pleased to announce that, where possible, there can be a cautious return to public worship for the faithful from Friday 26<sup>th</sup> March, in time for the celebration of Holy Week and Easter.

We note that other Christian Churches will be making a similar announcement, in keeping with key dates in their liturgical traditions around Easter.

***The need for continued vigilance and caution.***

In making this announcement, made possible through the collective and heroic effort of so many in our society in their response to the current pandemic, especially our health care workers, the Bishops emphasise the need for continued caution and a rigorous application of all mitigations and safeguards required to ensure the safest possible return to public worship in our Churches. They also stress that public worship should only begin again after a thorough risk assessment, in consultation with those Covid-19 Support Teams in our Parishes. This means that some Parishes may decide that, in their particular circumstances, it is not possible to return to public worship until a later date.

In emphasising the cautious nature of this return to public worship the Bishops remind the faithful that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days remains suspended and that every person should consider carefully if returning to collective worship is the safe and appropriate step for them, at this time. We continue to strongly encourage participation, where possible, including in the ceremonies of Holy Week, by way of live-streaming.

While Baptismal liturgies, prayer gatherings and other acts of worship can take place publicly in our Churches in accordance with today's announcement, subject to rigorous risk assessment and with all necessary mitigations in place, it is important to note that Weddings and Funerals will continue to be subject to the relevant state regulations in terms of the numbers that can attend.

***Amendments to the Liturgies of Holy Week will be required.***

This year the celebration of Holy Week and Easter will also require adjustments to certain aspects of the liturgy to take account of the need for safe social distancing, sanitising and other mitigations necessary in the context of the current pandemic. Guidelines for the Liturgies of Holy Week in a time of pandemic will be issued separately to parishes over coming days. We strongly encourage families to participate from the "domestic churches" of their living rooms and join with those who are gathering in their local churches in commemorating the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord this Easter.

Priests are asked to work closely with Parish Pastoral Councils and Covid19 Support Teams in making decisions at a local level on how best to celebrate Holy Week and Easter in a safe manner. We take this opportunity to extend our sincere gratitude to parish teams throughout the country - including caretakers, stewards and cleaners - who generously ensure that our churches are safe environments where people can confidently assemble for worship. Their task is not an easy one and we appeal to all the faithful to cooperate fully with them.

### ***First Confessions, First Communions and Confirmations.***

Given the ongoing uncertainty about the public health situation and the gradual lifting of restrictions, it will be necessary for every Parish and school to give careful consideration to how the sacraments of First Reconciliation, First Holy Communion and Confirmation can be celebrated in a safe and appropriate manner over the coming months. This includes ensuring that all the necessary catechetical preparations are made, rigorous risk assessments are undertaken and, where necessary, ceremonies are significantly reduced in scale.

### ***The Good Friday collection for the Holy Land and other charitable initiatives.***

Throughout the pandemic, our Parishes have provided a real life-line of hope and solidarity to many in our local communities, including some of the most vulnerable. The joyful message of Easter inspires us to continue to reach out to those in greatest need around us at this time. We therefore ask families and individuals to bring the light of hope to others this Easter by making a particular effort to support the charitable needs of their local parish and by highlighting in a particular way this year the traditional Good Friday collection expressing our solidarity with fellow Christians in the Holy Land. We also draw attention to the ongoing and ever-increasing demands on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and Trócaire, who will welcome much needed contributions as they have been unable to raise funds in the normal way during the pandemic.

### ***A time of mercy and healing.***

We are also conscious that Holy Week and Easter are a time when, traditionally, many people ask for in a particular way God's forgiveness and for healing of spirit. Although it may not be possible for all who wish to, to safely avail of the sacrament of Reconciliation, we strongly encourage all the faithful to confidently renew their trust in God's mercy at this sacred time of the year through an Act of Perfect Contrition.

### ***A time of solidarity and hope!***

As we continue our journey through the season of Lent in preparation for Easter, we strongly encourage the faithful to bring the intentions of all those impacted by Covid19 to the Lord's care in prayer and petition. We are particularly conscious of those whose livelihoods have been seriously threatened by the pandemic. We keep in mind people who are coping with bereavement, families that cannot be together, those in care homes who can only have limited visits from their loved ones. The Easter period will also be difficult for Irish emigrants and migrants living in Ireland, who are unable to travel home. We pray that the time will come very soon when loving connections between families and friends can be fully restored.

On Easter Sunday, we will join with Christians of all traditions in offering special prayers of intercession for those impacted by Covid-19 and provide moments for our entire society to reflect together, in a spirit of hope, on the challenges of the past year arising from the global pandemic. Until then, we continue to journey in the confident hope that the efforts of all those working hard to provide the circumstances in which all sectors of our society can re-open safely will soon bear fruit.