

A People who Hope in Christ

A Message from the Metropolitan Archbishops of the Catholic Church in England and Wales

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The radiance of the risen Lord shines upon us. At a time when so many shadows are cast into our lives, and upon our world, the light of the resurrection shines forever to renew and restore our hope. In the words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis: *'In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side.'* (27 March 2020)

The impact of Covid-19, both nationally and internationally, has been immense. So much of what we take for granted has changed. Our health and physical interaction, our capacity to travel and gather, have all been affected. There is uncertainty in our future, especially with work and the country's economy. As we know, very sadly, large numbers of people have died because of the coronavirus, and others have been or remain seriously ill. Keyworkers, not least in the National Health Service and care sectors, are serving selflessly to sustain the life of our nation. Our hearts and prayers go out to everyone who is suffering because of Covid-19, and to all those battling to overcome its effects. May those who have died rest in peace and those who are bereaved find comfort.

When the Prime Minister announced the lockdown, this included places of worship and therefore Catholic churches. These measures were put in place to stem the general transmission of the virus. It is right that the Catholic community fulfils its role in contributing to the preservation of life and the common good of society. This must continue until the restrictions applied by the Government are lifted.

None of us would want to be in the situation in which we find ourselves. While the live-streaming of the Mass and other devotions is playing an important part in maintaining the life of faith, there is no substitute for Catholics being able to physically attend and participate in the celebration of the Mass and the other sacraments. Our faith is expressed powerfully and beautifully though 'seeing, touching, and tasting.' We know that every bishop and every priest recognises the pain of Catholics who, at present, cannot pray in church or receive the sacraments. This weighs heavily on our hearts. We are deeply moved by the Eucharistic yearning expressed by so many members of the faithful. We thank you sincerely for your love for the Lord Jesus, present in the sacraments and supremely so in the Holy Sacrifice

of the Mass. The bishops and priests of every diocese are remembering you and your loved ones at Mass each day in our churches as we pray 'in hope of health and well-being.' We thank our priests for this faithfulness to their calling.

As the Government's restrictions are relaxed step by step, we look forward to opening our churches and resuming our liturgical, spiritual, catechetical and pastoral life step by step. This will also be of service to those beyond the Catholic Church who depend on our charitable activity and outreach through which much goodness is shared by so many volunteers from our communities.

None of us knows, as yet, how or when the lockdown will end. There is likely to be a phased return to travelling and gathering. As a church, we are now planning for this time and our discussions with the statutory public health agencies and Government representatives are ongoing. Together with Catholics across England and Wales we desire the opening of our churches and access to the sacraments. Until then, we are continuing to pray and prepare.

We want to acknowledge with gratitude the service of our fellow bishops and priests, our deacons and religious, our families and lay faithful, together with all our parish and school communities, for the wonderful ways the life of the faith is being nourished at this time, especially in the home. We also pay tribute to the Catholic organisations and networks that are working to support the vulnerable and needy.

On that first Easter day, the disciples were in lockdown and the doors were closed. In their isolation the Lord Jesus came among them and said 'Peace be with you.' May the peace of the risen Lord reign in our hearts and homes as we look forward to the day we can enter church again and gather around the altar to offer together the Sacrifice of Praise.

We unite in asking the intercession of Our Blessed Lady and assure you of our prayers and blessing

Yours devotedly in Christ,

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster

✠ Malcolm McMahon OP, Archbishop of Liverpool

✠ Bernard Longley, Archbishop of Birmingham

✠ George Stack, Archbishop of Cardiff

✠ John Wilson, Archbishop of Southwark

To the Cloistered Nuns
A letter from the Desert

We turn to you, sisters living behind walls, to ask for your prayers. We ask during this time of special danger and struggle which our communities are experiencing, that you keep your arms raised like those who did so for Moses on the mountain. Our resilience depends on your insistent intercession, as does our future victory. You are the only Italians not to flinch in the face of the downpour of decrees and restrictions which have drenched us in recent days. This is because what we have been asked to do for a time is what you have always done, and that which we put up with, you have already chosen.

Teach us the art of being content with nothing, of living in a confined space, without going out but yet with the art of being charged with the need for that inner journey which requires neither fresh air nor trains. "Give us some of your oil" so we can learn that the spirit cannot be imprisoned and that the smaller the space, the greater is the opening onto the heavens.

Teach us that it is possible to live with very little and to live in joy. Remind us that poverty is the unavoidable condition of every being because, as Primo Mazzolari has said, "to be poor, we only have to be human." Teach us again about the savour of little things, you who smile at a lily flowering outside the window and who salute the swallows when they come to tell us that spring has arrived, you who are moved by sorrow and yet can still delight in the miracle of bread rising in the oven. Give us back that delight in the small things.

Tell us that it is possible to be close without being together in the one place, that we can communicate from afar, kiss without touching, enrich each other with the caress of a glance or a smile, quite simply, just to look at each other. Remind us that the word is important if it has matured for a long time in the heart, if it has been lightened in the storeroom of the heart, if we see it flower on the lips of another when it is spoken quietly, without shouting or being sharpened to wound. Above all, teach us the art of silence, of the light which touches the windowsill, of the sun who rises 'like a bridegroom coming from his chamber', or the art of the sunset in a heaven tinged with fire, of the evening quiet, of the lit candle which throws a shadow across the walls of the choir.

Tell us again that it is possible to wait for an embrace, even to wait a lifetime, because 'there is a time for embracing and a time a time refrain from embracing' as Quohelth says. President Conte has said that when this time of danger and restriction is over, we will once again embrace with celebration. For you, Sisters, there have already been twenty, thirty, forty years of waiting...

Teach us to do things slowly with solemnity and without rushing, to pay attention to details because every day is a miracle, every encounter is a gift, every step an entrance into the throne room, like the step in a dance or the movement of a symphony

Whisper to us that it is important to wait, to send a kiss, a gift, a caress, a word, because waiting for the feast strengthens the light because 'the best is yet to be'. Help us to understand that an accident can be a grace, and a disappointment can hide a gift, that a parting can deepen the love and that distance can lead to being together finally.

To you, mistresses of the hidden and happy life, we entrust our discomfort, our fear, our remorse, our missed appointments with God who always waits for us. Take all this into your prayer and restore us to joy, to the fragrance of flowers and to days of peace. Amen.

+ Arturo Aiello
Avellino, 13 March 2020