



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

Statement from the President and the Vice-President of the Conference on the Prime Minister's Statement Saturday 31st October 2020

This evening, the Prime Minister announced further widespread restrictions in England beginning on Thursday 5th November. The Government have published their New National Restrictions Guidance on their website here. Whilst there was no formal announcement on Places of Worship by the Prime Minister, there is clear guidance on this website that places of worship will be required to end all acts of collective worship, except for funeral ceremonies. In response the following statement is issued by the President and Vice-President of the Bishops' Conference.

The announcement of a new 'national lockdown' in England will, we know, bring hardship, distress and suffering to many. We must hope and pray that this is an effective strategy against a growing pandemic which has tragically taken so many lives already and threatens so many more.

Faith communities have played a vital role in sustaining personal, spiritual and mental health and encouraging vital charitable activities, which support hundreds of thousands of people in all sections of the community, especially the most vulnerable. That critical service towards the common good of all is created and sustained by communal worship and prayer. Part of this selfless giving has been a strong ethic of responsibility in the way in which we have reopened our churches so that essential worship has been enabled. Our communities have done a great deal to make our churches safe places in which all have been able to gather in supervised and disciplined ways.

It is thus a source of deep anguish now that the Government is requiring, once again, the cessation of public communal worship. Whilst we understand the many difficult decisions facing the Government, we have not yet seen any evidence whatsoever that would make the banning of communal worship, with all its human costs, a productive part of combatting the virus. We ask the Government to produce this evidence that justifies the cessation of acts of public worship.

To counter the virus we will, as a society, need to make sustained sacrifices for months to come. In requiring this sacrifice, the Government has a profound responsibility to show why it has taken particular decisions. Not doing so risks eroding the unity we need as we enter a most difficult period for our country.

The Prime Minister has stated that the draft legislation will be placed before Parliament on Monday 2nd November. Members of Parliament will have the opportunity to discuss the issues and vote on the proposed national restrictions. In this short timeframe, questions can be raised with our elected Members of Parliament regarding the cessation of public common worship. They are in a position to require the Government to publish the data that drives the decision to cease public worship under these restrictions.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols
President

Archbishop Malcolm McMahon OP
Vice-President

Dear parishioner,

Following the Prime Minister's announcement on Saturday, I am attaching the latest statement from the President and Vice President of the Bishops' Conference concerning the forthcoming nationwide lock down. I am not normally prone to actively engaging in politics. However, I was greatly saddened to learn that all places of worship are ordered to close as of this coming Thursday. During the last lockdown, I found it extremely difficult, and more than a little painful, celebrating the daily Mass without you, my dear faithful brothers and sister, in church with me. We are told that this time we are to close for four weeks. I fear this is actually a minimum, and could very easily be extended for, who knows how long.

The argument that says supermarkets, with all the to-and-fros; with the touching and picking up and putting back of items; with the brushing past, and the general indiscipline and lack of social distancing inherent in such places, are safer than churches, with all the measures asked for, and in place. This seems utterly inexplicable to me.

Cardinal Nichols and Archbishop McMahon, with the support of the entire Bishops' Conference, are seeking an explanation, and have asked the Government for the 'scientific evidence' upon which they have made this decision. We would ask the same question.

And so, I am asking you all to please write to your member of Parliament TODAY (in time for Wednesday's debate) expressing your sadness and disappointment at the Government's decision concerning worship in Churches, pointing out that there is little, if any, evidence that congregational Mass attendance is increasing the spread of the virus.

As touched on above, I believe that visiting the supermarket, where surfaces which have been touched by other people, and so, not sanitised, is considerably more dangerous than attending Mass, where far more precautions are taken.

As good citizens, we fully recognise our responsibility, indeed our duty, to comply with all necessary and reasonable regulations concerning the protection of our neighbour. However, whereas we recognise the need for caution and accept that the physical body needs feeding and protection, as Christians, we equally recognise, and firmly believe, that the spirit also needs feeding and protection. As Scripture says: 'Man does not live on bread alone.' (*Matthew 4:4*)

May almighty God bless you ✠
and keep you from all harm.
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Fr Jon.