

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ



**Pastoral Letter for the Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare Sunday)
22 March 2020**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

You need no words from me to state the grave seriousness of the crisis of the spread of the coronavirus around the world and throughout this country. We know the steps and the sacrifices we must take in order to play our part in slowing its spread, saving lives and enabling the NHS to continue its vital work. These things are our duty before God.

There are other vitally important aspects of this moment in our history that are less prominent in our media and conversations.

At this moment we stand before God. That is never to be forgotten. Together we turn to God in prayer, at this moment as never before.

Our faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the bedrock on which we live. Prayer is the first and loving expression of this relationship. Prayer is an acknowledgement that we are not in ultimate control of our lives or of our world. That is so clear at this time. Prayer is the recognition that our lives, individually and communally, are marked by failure and sin. Prayer is an expression of our turning to God for that grace which alone can heal us, strengthen us and give us the resolve and generosity to do all that is rightly expected of us today. Please make this a time of prayer, personally, in the family and wherever you happen to be.

The highest form of prayer is the celebration of the Holy Mass. This is at the heart of the rhythm of the life of the Church, the rhythm of prayer which sustains us all. The present crisis will not disturb that rhythm. Mass will continue to be celebrated, day by day. The prayer of the Church will continue day by day.

What will change is the manner of our participation in those celebrations of the Mass. In response to the pandemic and the official guidance, which we must follow, public participation in the celebration of the Mass is not, for now, possible. This is a sacrifice we have to make. It is not easy, for any Catholic, but it is what we must do.

I want to make it exceptionally clear that the teaching of the Church is that, in these circumstances, the obligation of attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days no longer applies. Please have no doubt about this.

This does not mean that we lose our love of the Mass or our desire to take part in the celebration of the Mass. Mass will be celebrated, day by day, in your church. There are many ways of taking part in this prayer. Associate yourself with the celebration of the Mass spiritually. Read the Scriptures of the day. Use some of the materials that are available to be close in your heart. Learn again the practice of spiritual communion. If you are helped by a visual participation in the Mass, then go to one of the websites on which that celebration is being streamed. The list of those websites is available to you.

There are many ways in which we can deepen our participation in the Mass and our life of prayer in these strange and stressful days. Indeed, they are an opportunity for us to do so.

Two other points.

Being unable to attend Mass is the experience of many, many Catholics around the world. They are deprived of the Mass through distance, or through violence, or through persecution. We can unite our experience with them and, like them, return to the Mass with fresh love and enthusiasm when, again, it is possible for us to do so, in bigger numbers than ever.

Secondly, you understand well that from our prayer, and from the prayer of the Mass, flows the love and compassion which we want to show to those around us who are in need. Jesus gives Himself entirely for us in His sacrifice, the sacrifice made present again for us in every Holy Mass. What we receive from Him we offer to others. So please do look out for every way in which you can help those in need around you. Thank you.

We know that this time of crisis is not going to be brief. We are involved in a lengthy battle. We encourage each other. We pray for each other. Together we turn to Mary for her special protection, especially on 29 March when again, in keeping with our ancient tradition, we offer ourselves and our country to her, as our gift, and seeking her protection.

Mary, Mother of Jesus, pray for us
Mary, Mother of Sorrows, pray for us
Mary, Mother of Joys, pray for us.

Amen.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster

PS, I was given this prayer a few days ago. It touched me deeply. It is a prayer for our times.

Dear Guardian Angel, go for me to the church, there kneel down at Mass for me. At the Offertory, take me to God, and offer Him my service: What I am, what I have, offer as my gift. At the Consecration, with your seraphic strength, adore my Saviour truly present, praying for those who have loved me, for those who have offended me, and for those now deceased, that the blood of Jesus may purify them all. During Holy Communion, bring to me the Body and Blood of Jesus uniting Him with me in spirit, so that my heart may become His dwelling place. Plead with Him, that through His sacrifice all people throughout the world may be saved. When the Mass ends, bring home to me and to every home, the Lord's blessing. Amen.

We are still surrounded by the angels and by the saints who are glorifying God and protecting and assisting mankind. Why should we not make them our particular friends and allies in situations where we are touching limits that we cannot overcome?



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

A letter from the President and Vice-President on behalf of all the Bishops of the Conference

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, so many aspects of our lives must change. This includes the ways in which we publicly express our faith. It is very clear that, following official advice and in order to keep each other safe, save lives and support the NHS, at this time we must not gather for public acts of worship in our churches. This will begin from Friday evening, 20th March 2020, until further notice.

Our churches will remain open. They are not closing. They will be a focal point of prayer, where you will find solace and strength. In visiting our churches at this time, we will observe with great care the practices of hygiene and the guidance on social distancing.

However, the celebration of Mass, Sunday by Sunday and day by day, will take place without a public congregation.

Knowing that the Mass is being celebrated; joining in spiritually in that celebration; watching the live-streaming of the Mass; following its prayers at home; making an act of spiritual communion: this is how we share in the Sacrifice of Christ in these days. These are the ways in which we will sanctify Sunday, and indeed every day.

We want everyone to understand that in these emergency circumstances, and for as long as they last, the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days is removed. This is, without doubt, the teaching of the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2181). This pandemic is the 'serious reason' why this obligation does not apply at this time.

You will find more details about the pathway of prayer and sacramental life we are now to take in the accompanying document and on the Bishops' Conference website (www.cbcew.org.uk). Your own bishop and parish priest will provide further support, encouragement and information about our way of prayer together in the coming weeks.

The second vital aspect of these challenging times is our care for each other. There are so many ways in which we are to do this: being attentive to the needs of our neighbour, especially the elderly and vulnerable; contributing to our local food banks; volunteering for charitable initiatives and organisations; simply keeping in touch by all the means open to us.

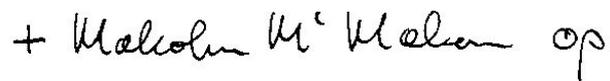
During these disturbing and threatening times, the rhythm of the prayer of the Church will continue. Please play your part in it. The effort of daily kindness and mutual support for all will continue and increase. Please play your part in this too. For your commitment to this, we thank you.

*'The Lord is my shepherd,
There is nothing I shall want.'*

May God bless us all.



Vincent Cardinal Nichols
President Vice-President



Archbishop Malcolm McMahon OP

18th March 2020