

Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland “As many people as possible *stay at home* for the sake of health, life and the Common Good”

7 January 2021

Following further briefing today by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Officer, and in consultation with The Executive Office, we are very concerned at the current serious public health position in which Northern Ireland finds itself: with the extremely high level of transmission of the Covid-19 virus; the continuing escalation of numbers in hospital and intensive care; the number of associated deaths; and, the increasingly unsustainable pressure on our healthcare staff. The clear message from health officials is that this situation is going to worsen significantly over the coming weeks.

We recognise the efforts of so many in our parishes who have been working to ensure that our gatherings for public worship are as safe as possible and we welcome the continuing engagement between the faith communities and the NI Executive which has led to consensus between us on the importance of people being able to gather in person for worship. At this time, however, we acknowledge and support the unequivocal message from public health authorities that the movement and gathering of people should be minimised and that as many people as possible *stay at home* for the sake of health, life and the Common Good.

In light of our ongoing consultations and of the current serious and worsening situation, and in line with clear public health guidance that people should *stay at home*, we have decided that for a limited period (from midnight on Thursday 7 January until Saturday 6 February 2021, subject to review in late January), the celebration of the Eucharist and other liturgies should take place without the physical presence of the faithful - with the exception of marriage, funeral, baptismal liturgies and drive-in services (subject to regulations). Arrangements for recording and/or livestreaming, and making individual visits for private prayer are also permissible in accordance with regulations. We encourage parishes, where possible, to continue to broadcast the celebration of Mass - and other devotions and prayer services - online and on other media, knowing that faith and prayer can be a tremendous support to individuals and society during these difficult times.

We make this decision reluctantly, conscious that not being able to gather for public worship can cause pain for all the faithful, but in the hope that this limited period of sacrifice will be for the protection of life and health and for the greater good of all. We once more ask for prayers for the sick, the bereaved and all those whose livelihoods have been particularly impacted by the pandemic. We keep in our prayers all health workers, carers, chaplains and other essential workers. We welcome the announcement that a similar position is being taken by the leaders of the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland and many other denominations and faith communities in response to the unequivocal message from public health authorities that as many people as possible stay at home at this time.

Most Rev Eamon Martin DD

Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All-Ireland

Apostolic Administrator of Dromore

Most Rev Noel Treanor DD

Bishop of Down and Connor

Most Rev Donal McKeown DD

Bishop of Derry

Most Rev Larry Duffy DD

Bishop of Clogher

Most Rev Michael Router DD

Auxiliary Bishop of Armagh