

Pastoral letter on the Covid-19 crisis
to the faithful and clergy of St Andrews & Edinburgh
Edinburgh, 1 October 2020

My dear friends,

The current international health crisis has dramatically changed the way we live together as a community and as a nation. Unfortunately, it has also had a profound impact on the way we interact in our churches and in our worship. This in turn calls us to reflect on what it means to be part of the Church and what our response to the crisis should be as the People of God.

The very spread of this pandemic, and its social and personal impact on us all, is a reminder that our shared human nature has both physical and spiritual dimensions that are closely intertwined. It is for this reason that Jesus our Saviour, who is The Word made flesh, gave us the Church and the Sacraments as the primary means by which he touches our lives and communicates his saving grace. Most especially in the Holy Eucharist, He invites us to share in His death and resurrection. In the Sacrifice of The Mass we stand again at the foot of the cross along with every generation of Christians since Our Lady and St John and place ourselves, our loved ones, and all the world's cares before the Father. Then in Holy Communion, we receive the body and blood of the Lord as the pledge of our share in the Resurrection. For these reasons the Holy Eucharist is utterly central to our faith.

In recent months, however, it has been necessary to adapt the way in which we participate in the Eucharist. This is because we, as Christians, have a duty towards our neighbours to act for the sake of the common good. It was right, therefore, to respect public health and safety regulations regarding our churches, and I wish to thank all of you who have worked so hard to apply the guidelines, especially the clergy and the many volunteers who have helped keep our churches open and safe.

Although we do not know how long the restrictions will last, it will remain imperative, for a time at least, to continue to be vigilant in order to combat this unseen enemy. But will this situation change forever the way we celebrate Mass and the Sacraments? Does viewing Mass online undermine our gathering in church personally Sunday by Sunday? Is viewing Mass online even a worthy thing to do, or is it something to be shunned? These are questions that some of you have asked and which I would like briefly to address here.

There is an ancient saying that remains true: "The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church". This is why Sunday worship has always been central to our Catholic self-understanding. If we cannot come to Mass physically, impeded by health or age or other circumstances such as the present one, we naturally feel a certain distance from our Lord and from each other.

The Catechism tells us that, "Christians of the first centuries said: 'The world was created for the sake of the Church'. God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the 'convocation' (calling together) of men in Christ, and this 'convocation' is the Church".

So, let me be clear: nothing can substitute for our full and active participation in the Sunday Eucharist, and unless impeded, we will all of us have the right and the duty to gather for Mass when it is safe to do so.

As of the date on this letter, our churches are open for Mass and private worship, subject to prudent conditions of safety. The Bishops' Conference of Scotland has suspended your obligation to attend Sunday Mass until the crisis is over, but already very many people have returned to Mass. Extra Masses have been scheduled in many parishes, and they are regularly

“full” in accordance with the present 2-metre, 50-person, social distancing rules. So, let me encourage you to go to Mass whenever you can, to seize the chance while our churches remain open, and to go to Holy Communion if you can. Although you may not be able to attend every Sunday, go whenever you can.

During the health crisis priests have been offering Mass for you every day, unseen, because of the objective good achieved by the offering of the holy Sacrifice. But many priests have also taken to recording or streaming Mass for their people, and I have heard from many people of their satisfaction at their own priest in their own parish church making Mass available. I believe that this is a good thing, as the local parish church is where most of us encounter God on a regular basis.

Some have expressed uneasiness about online worship, fearing it may encourage a casual and unworthy approach to this most sacred mystery of redemption. And those who see and comment online today may not be Catholics or even Christians. But in recent times papal Masses have frequently been broadcast on TV and online, often to great pastoral benefit. Many have found great solace in these online broadcasts and I am aware that some who were not attending Mass regularly have been joining their families watching together at home. I cannot see into the hearts of those who watch Mass online, but I pray that they will be inspired to become more active members of God’s family as, please God, things return to normal.

If nothing else is stopping you, take every opportunity to go to Mass. But if these circumstances persist for a time, be nimble and imaginative, and set aside time to attend Mass online. It is true that Mass online is a virtual assembly of the People of God; but it is a real assembly nonetheless, of real people raising their minds and hearts to God, in union with the whole Church and doing their best in the circumstances to keep Sunday, the Lord’s Day, holy.

This is something enshrined in the Ten Commandments, and yet some have placed it to one side, sometimes inadvertently, hoping that attendance at Mass alone fulfilled what God asks of us. Sunday opening, and now restrictions upon Sunday worship, have somewhat undermined our sense of our duty on Sundays. The present crisis, however, has helped to concentrate minds again on how we spend our Sundays and how we ought to put aside time for the Lord on the Lord’s own Day. This duty is a sacred one, whether our churches are open or closed, and so I encourage you to learn to spend time in silence, in reading the Scriptures, in prayer, especially as a family. I would also encourage you to dine together as a family, to bless your table, and to think of other small ways to recover the sense and beauty of setting aside some of the Lord’s Day as a family, as the first church, the “domestic church”.

We continue to publish guidelines every week online to help parents and catechists plan worship and instruction for our youngest Catholics and plans are going ahead to initiate our children in First Reconciliation, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Please consult our Archdiocesan Face book page, your parish priest or local primary schools for details.

The Sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation should by now be available everywhere, as normal, in spite of health restrictions and I urge everyone to take advantage of this vital source of grace. The time of lockdown has been one of great stress for many and perhaps also of great temptation. But the Lord is full of mercy: come and be reconciled, so that you can approach full communion with Him and with each other once more.

The Bishops’ Conference of Scotland has urged us all not to receive Holy Communion on the tongue, as it brings a significantly higher risk of spreading germs. For now, I ask you to place your scruples aside and to make the distribution of Holy Communion simpler and safer for all. I assure you that this measure is strictly temporary. For the same reason, the chalice will not be offered to the faithful until the health crisis has abated.

Let me finally thank the priests of the Archdiocese publicly and warmly for their perseverance and hard work in these months. They have been working diligently in these strange circumstances to do what they can, and to learn new skills to help keep parish life alive. I am confident you will want to support them, to pray for them and to encourage with your own goodness and example.

With an assurance of my prayers for you all and asking you to pray also for me,

I am yours sincerely in Christ,

+Leo Cushley Archbishop of St Andrews & Edinburgh