

The Bishops' Conference of Scotland Pastoral Letter

5th June 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Peace be with you!

For several weeks now, we have all been living through something we did not expect and for which we had no time to prepare ourselves, no real precedents to guide us, no previous experience to reassure us. A microscopic virus has thrown the whole world into disarray, including our normal Catholic life. In these circumstances we, the Bishops of Scotland, want to address you as we are reminded that Jesus alone is our great Hope.

First of all, we want to express our closeness to those of you who have lost friends or family to Covid-19 and have not been able to grieve for them in our accustomed ways. We think, too, of those who have been unwell or have felt the pain of isolation in recent weeks, of their loved ones who have not been able to tend to them because of restrictions and also those whose treatment for other conditions has been delayed. We are mindful especially of those of you who are alone, or in care homes, or in hospitals. We hope you have found comfort and consolation. Though public worship has been suspended, the sacrifice of the Mass has still been offered, and Jesus our High Priest “is always living to make intercession” for us (Heb 7:25). God does not abandon his people.

So, even in the midst of all this, we can thank the Lord and you for so many good things. We think of the clergy and religious who have been so assiduous and innovative in keeping care of parishioners, and of the warm response there has been: the participation in online liturgies, the engagement with prayer, the support offered to the elderly and housebound, and much more. We have come together as a Church, priests and people. We have journeyed together and supported each other. We hope that it has been possible to intensify family prayer and to become sensitive to the many ways the Lord is present to us.

We want to thank all who, at a time of financial anxiety, have continued to be mindful of the needs of the Church. We thank those of you who are key-workers and have faced the risks to keep essential services going. There has been so much consideration of others, so much unobtrusive Christian charity, so many new initiatives. All this is surely a “capital growth” that will enrich our future.

The Bishops co-operated with the Government's requirement issued in late March to close public places of worship, along with other public spaces and gatherings. We did so with heavy hearts, but aware that this was a human and Christian duty in these exceptional circumstances. In accordance with the 5th Commandment, we have a fundamental obligation to protect our own and others' health and life. The Church's compliance with civil law, as we know, did not show a lack of faith or any failure to recognise the centrality of the liturgy and sacraments to our Catholic life and spirituality. Happily, as the virus abates and restrictions are eased, we can begin to move firmly and sensibly towards the reopening of churches and the resumption of public worship. We look forward eagerly to the day when it will be possible to gather again, without fear, around the altar and celebrate the Holy Eucharist together.

As Bishops, we have established two Working Groups. The Covid-19 Working Group, under the chairmanship of Sir Harry Burns, is focussing on what will be required to make our churches and liturgies safe spaces for private prayer and a phased return to our common liturgical life. The Pastoral Ministry Working Group, chaired by Bishop Brian McGee, is offering guidance on parish pastoral ministry until the pandemic abates. The initial results of their work are being published at the same time as this Letter.

Our aim is to act in harmony with the guidance of the Government and the health authorities, with whom we are in conversation, and to return to our normal liturgical and devotional practice in a safe and phased way. It is important that we act together as the Catholic Church in Scotland, in step with one another, and clear about what is legitimate and prudent at each stage of the process.

Until further notice, the requirement to attend Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of obligation remains suspended.

There are many imponderables in what we are going through. Perhaps it will prove a historical watershed. There is a sense that the world cannot and will not be the same after this pandemic. This time of lockdown has allowed us to appreciate more human things, like time with family, space to reflect, the opportunity to care for our neighbours and we do not want to lose them in some return to 'normality'. Certainly, any time of trial can prepare the ground for good things, for new beginnings and a renewal of essential values. May this be true for the Church of Christ also! We recently celebrated Pentecost and we know that the Spirit is always renewing.

We encourage you to remain united in faith, hope and love and to keep responding to our current circumstances with confidence and creativity, assured by the promise of the risen Christ, "I am with you always to the end of the world" (Mt 28:20).

Yours sincerely in Christ,

+ *Hugh Gilbert*

Bishop of Aberdeen, President of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland

+ *Leo Cushley*

Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh

+ *Philip Tartaglia*

Archbishop of Glasgow

+ *Joseph Toal*

Bishop of Motherwell

+ *Stephen Robson*

Bishop of Dunkeld

+ *John Keenan*

Bishop of Paisley

+ *William Nolan*

Bishop of Galloway

+ *Brian McGee*

Bishop of Argyll and the Isles