

Getting Ready to Open Churches for Private Prayer – but not yet!

The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales is continuing to work with our Government to enable our churches to be opened as soon as possible for private, individual prayer. As you know, the Government stated recently that places of worship would probably not open until early July. This, however, was with a view to them being able to resume some form of collective worship. Following recent discussions, a Task Force for faith groups has been established by the Government and this met yesterday. It included Cardinal Nichols whom I know has shared with the Government the desire of Catholics to be able to enter their churches to pray. The Bishops' Conference has also prepared information which will assist with the opening of church buildings for private prayer. As soon as these guidelines are finalised through the Task Force, we will be in a position to act.

Therefore, please begin to consider how you might be able to open your church for visits by individuals for private prayer.

- This will be for limited times each day, or even on certain days of the week.
- In this first step, it will not be for the celebration of Mass or any of the Sacraments, but purely for individual prayer
- It will have to be well supervised and will need a team of volunteers to manage the process who are not in any Covid 19 vulnerable category
- There will need to be the facility for socially distanced queuing to enter the church building
- Hand sanitisation will probably need to be available on entrance and exit
- The entrance and exit to the church building may need to be by different routes
- The floor and seating space will need to be properly marked out, and social distancing will need to be in force
- Holy Water will not be available and, depending on demand, visits may have to be limited to a certain length
- It may not be possible to visit every part of the church, or to light candles or venerate statues and images
- Those supervising the entrance, exit, and interior of the church, will need to wear some protective items, such as masks and gloves
- There will need to be clearing and hygiene regimes in place.
- Risk assessment may need to take place before opening can take place

Detailed information about this will be forthcoming when we are nearer to a date for opening; but it is important to begin to give this some thought. **At the moment our churches must continue to remain closed by order of the Government.**

It is very important to understand that:

1. Churches will only be allowed to open if the parish can demonstrate that it can put the necessary measures in place
2. Any parish which cannot do this, for whatever reasons, is not obliged to open. At this first stage, opening will be a matter for local determination with full support from the Archdiocese for any parish that cannot manage to put in place the requirements necessary
3. We are exploring the possibility of centrally purchasing cleaning, hygiene, and protective clothing materials, both to ensure a good supply and to reduce costs. These will then be available from designated locations.

In the words of Corporal Jones in Dads' Army, '*Don't Panic!*' We do not have a date, as yet, for when churches will be allowed to open by the Government. But the discussions are taking place with a view to this happening before the beginning of July. We will need to manage this calmly and sensibly. Not every church will be able to open at once, and not every church will be able to open in the same way according to the same timetable. Each parish and church will need to move at the pace that is right for them. As soon as I have more detailed and precise information, I will send this out. The central services of the Archdiocese are ready to assist in any way necessary.