

Statement of encouragement and support by the Catholic Bishops of the Cashel province

[19 March 2020]

[This statement is issued by Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly SMA of Cashel & Emlý; Bishop William Crean of Cloyne; Bishop Brendan Leahy of Limerick; Bishop Ray Browne of Kerry; Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan of Waterford & Lismore; Bishop Fintan Monaghan of Killaloe; and Bishop Fintan Gavin of Cork & Ross.]

In the face of massive disruption at so many levels because of the Covid-19 crisis, we want to offer words of support and indicate some directions. In its statement two weeks ago, the Irish Bishops Conference reminded us that as people of faith we are called to face the fears of this moment with a courage not our own and with a generous heart. It is a special time for us to turn to God with faith and prayer knowing that he is always with us.

We want to acknowledge the generous spirit of social responsibility shown by so many with all the sacrifice that it entails for individuals, families, business, parish communities and the wider society.

We note the helpfulness of the HSE guidelines and encourage everyone to do all they can in social responsibility to follow the advice being given. On behalf of the people of our Dioceses, we express our gratitude to those working in healthcare, the services relating to healthcare and public services dealing with the fall-out from the virus. We are grateful for the spirit of volunteering on the part of many in local communities and on social media.

The past week has been extraordinary. Despite the difficult loss of Sunday and weekday public celebration of Mass, people have been able to find some comfort and support in spiritual communion with the Masses being celebrated by priests every day. It has been uplifting to see how many have accessed media outlets to follow Mass, take part in prayer moments, and seek out other prayer and religious resources on line. It has been a time to discover the value of quiet time of prayer in the home and prayer as a family, "the Domestic church".

We have heard from many they are very grateful that churches have remained open. Indeed, priests have told us of a constant presence of individuals calling into churches for moments of prayer and recollection. It has been a consolation to know that churches are still open, prayer is always possible, and that there is a vast community of prayer and support available to us even as we follow the recommendations around social distancing.

We want to express our gratitude to all our priests especially those who are elderly and may have health concerns themselves. As well as celebrating Mass daily for the intentions of all the faithful, priests have put new arrangements in place in order to be able to communicate pastorally through telephone and social media. We recognise the challenges priests face in their desire to reach out pastorally while always mindful of the public health recommendations. We call on priests, especially those who are elderly and vulnerable, to take care also of themselves at this time. Their ministry of prayer, blessing and support is valuable and needed, even if it is necessary to curtail to an absolute minimum direct pastoral contact with others.

A particular concern for us is the issue of funerals. In our view attendance at funerals should be restricted to the immediate family and very close friends. The desire to offer condolences is commendable. Indeed, it is a work of mercy. But condolences can be expressed in the form of a letter, a text message, an e-mail. The Covid-19 crisis will pass and there will be other possibilities for Mass or prayers to be said for those who die during this period. Such Masses and prayers will allow for people who cannot now come physically to the church to then come and offer their condolences.

We recommend that all Catholic funeral liturgies in our Dioceses be limited to the funeral Mass. In other words, there should be no removal to the church the evening before. We strongly advise that the priest celebrating the funeral Mass should be the only priest officiating. We give this advice on the basis of the widespread concern that everyone does their part to contain the virus. Mass should not be offered in family homes even in the circumstance of a bereavement. Normally, priests are advised against visiting homes at this time because priests themselves may be carriers of the virus without knowing it or the virus may be in the house.

With regard to the sacrament of the sick to the dying (last rites) which may be as, or even more critical than healthcare for some, it is essential that in anointing the sick, the priest should use a cotton bud or surgical glove for the anointing with Holy Oil and dispose of them appropriately. The rite should be administered while at a distance of 1 metre. It is important to follow recommendations on hand hygiene after the celebration of the Sacrament. The priest should avoid contact with others in the house of the person who is seriously ill.

It is clear that some priests will themselves, because of their health condition or age, feel unable to attend to the sick person in their local parish. They may need to call on another priest from elsewhere to celebrate the sacrament.

On this Feast Day of St. Joseph, may we seek his intercession to protect us, especially those who have contracted the Covid-19 virus, recalling St. Paul's words in the Letter to the Ephesians that we are called to a spirit of solidarity, that is, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, to bear with one another in love" (Eph 4:1-2).