



Thursday, 4th June 2020

**A Pastoral Letter from the Right Reverend Dr Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross  
to the United Dioceses of Cork, Cloyne and Ross**

When I sent you my pastoral guidance on 16th March requesting that, in response to the CoronaVirus crisis, we, like other dioceses of the Church of Ireland, close our church buildings, my prime concern was the safety and well-being of everyone. This was your concern also, I know.

Much has happened since then; there have been many changes, challenges and, for too many people, tragedies. In my monthly letter in the Diocesan Magazine published yesterday, I extended sympathy, not only to the loved ones of all those who have died of COVID-19, but also to everyone who has been bereaved during this pandemic, while also assuring those who have been ill or whose lives have been upheaved, of our prayers.

May I take this opportunity, once again, as your Bishop, to thank you most sincerely, for the ways in which you have responded to this crisis. Your faithfulness, commitment, energy, determination, inventiveness, self-sacrifice, generosity and compassion have all been inspiring and humbling to witness.

The time approaches now when, subject to the public health advice and the public health situation generally, we can begin to look forward to the reopening, progressively, of our church buildings at some stage after 20th July. This is good news and let us anticipate it with joy and hope, rejoicing that, although things will be very different for a time, we can begin to be in community together again as Christians.

Later today, or tomorrow, clergy and select vestries will receive information from the Church of Ireland about what is required in order to reopen church buildings. The protocol that will be circulated is based on the Government's two documents - the *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business* and the *Return to Work Safety Protocol* - both of which have been explained, and the practical implications set out, in such a way that is specific to our church settings.

I know that, in this Diocese, the responsibilities required of us all will be addressed and put into place with pragmatism and commitment; that is our tradition here in Cork, Cloyne and Ross.

In anticipation of the arrival of that protocol, I want first to underline a few key principles:

- + **Safety:** This is still about keeping everyone safe. We do not want, either by our actions or omissions, to put one another or those who join us at risk.
  
- + **Personal responsibility:** A message that we must keep highlighting for everyone is that each person must also take personal responsibility, first, not to come to church if we or anyone in our household has COVID-19 or has the symptoms of COVID-19; and second, to share in the responsibility of making and keeping our church buildings safe places during the current times.

- + **Three core areas:** Church buildings are no different from any other place in the community in that the three core areas will apply to us too, all of which are mentioned in the new protocol:
  - Social or physical distancing in accordance with public health advice.** This may mean that some buildings have a maximum capacity which has to be taken account of. It will mean changes to our usual ways of gathering and seating.
  - Hand hygiene**
  - Respiratory hygiene**
  
- + **The new 'normal':** When we reopen it will not be 'business as usual'. We will all need to be accommodating, flexible and purposeful; determined to get this right for everyone's sake as well as for the long term good of the people, churches and parishes in our Diocese.
  
- + **Step by step reopening.** It may also be both necessary and prudent, according to local circumstances and logistics not 'to bite off more than we can chew' at first, and to open our buildings progressively, one by one, over a period of time. We have to take into account also the situations of those available to take the large number of Church Services in our Diocese each Sunday.
  
- + **The bare basics:** The protocol that you will receive will encompass the basics and essentials needed just to get the building open and in use. Further advice is in the pipeline and will follow soon about other core concerns such as Holy Communion, Holy Baptism, Funerals, and weekday opening for private prayer and visitors. There are also some areas where additional advice is needed and is being sought, such as about singing.
  
- + **The unknown:** There are still many uncertainties and unknowns. We live in a time when there is a lot of conjecture and speculation in the public space as well as mutually exclusive views being articulated by experts. There are political and economic pressures from many directions. It can seem confusing. We need, therefore, to be on our toes and ready to respond to changes in the public health advice as time goes on.

So, dear friends, let us, as faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, continue to walk the path of faith, hope and love. In all of this (as I have tried to do, I hope, so far) I pledge to stand alongside each of our clergy and our parishes, and to give of myself, in whatever practical ways I can, for as long as the good Lord gives me life and strength to do so. May he grant us all those gifts and all that we need to do what needs to be done in these times in which we live.

I end this letter as I ended that on 16th March. I pray that the Lord God who has been with our forebears throughout the ages, including at times of great uncertainty and danger, in being with us all now too, will give us fortitude and calm, wisdom and perseverance, and enable us to live in the Christian way of faith, hope and love. Amen.

With prayerful good wishes,



**The Right Reverend Dr. Paul Colton**  
*Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross*