

Statement from Bishop Noel Treanor

4th June 2020

On the 25th March 2020, I issued a pastoral letter outlining measures to be taken in response to Covid-19. These measures, which included the closing of churches, restricted the celebration of funerals and limited the pastoral services of the diocese, have been acutely experienced by all.

The aim of those measures was to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus, to save lives and to enable us all to protect each other.

Reintroduction of Funeral services and Requiem Masses

There is no doubt that the greatest cross has been carried by those who have lost loved ones over these past few months as they have been unable to observe the rites and rituals associated with mourning that are so much part of our faith and culture. Conscious of the huge sacrifice many families have experienced and heroically made since the introduction of restrictions, we continue to hold them and their deceased loved ones in prayer.

On 28th March, the NI Executive enacted legislation which introduced restrictions on individuals' daily lives and on the pastoral activities of all church bodies. Exceptional provision was made in legislation for the celebration of funerals within churches with no more than ten persons present.

Having consulted widely, it was decided that the most prudent practice for the safety of all was to maintain the restrictions already placed upon the celebration of funerals within this Diocese. I resolved at the time to reintroduce the practice of Funeral services and Requiem Masses within churches when it could be deemed appropriate to do so.

Now, with the gradual and welcome decline in the number of Covid-19 related deaths, reduced levels of viral transmission within the community, having consulted widely with diocesan clergy and with the appropriate sanitary measures provided for within our churches, I have determined that it is the appropriate time to reintroduce the practice of Funeral services and Requiem Masses across the Diocese of Down and Connor.

With immediate effect, Funeral services or Requiem Masses will now be resumed across the Diocese of Down and Connor, while observing the limits on the numbers attending to 10 mourners and observing social distancing regulations.

In reintroducing Funeral services and Requiem Masses across the diocese, it is also necessary to safeguard the health and wellbeing of clergy, especially those who are shielding and those who need to self-isolate. This might require that the Funeral service or Requiem Mass to be celebrated within a neighbouring parish other than that of the deceased.

I pray that, in the near future, the time will come when we will be able to honour and pray for all who have died and were laid to rest without the full participation of those who have shouldered the pain of grief and loss in such unprecedented circumstances.

Provision for Church Wedding Ceremonies

From Monday 8th June, the NI Executive has further extended the exceptional provisions for marriage to include outdoor venues with small numbers and with social distancing measures in place.

Numerous couples, who had been planning their weddings, have had to postpone the celebration of their Marriage, unable to gather and commit their lives together in the presence of families, friends and the Church community.

The Diocese of Down and Connor has considered how it may facilitate the Sacrament of Marriage within the current legislative framework and in accordance with sacramental practice and Church norms. The diocese will circulate guidance and directives to parishes.

Exercising Personal and Community Responsibility

The tentative steps taken recently on the pathway to recovery have been achieved by the sacrifice of all in the common pursuit of health and safety. With a strong sense of duty, community responsibility and, above all, care for each other, many people have exercised personal responsibility in willingly limiting their freedom to protect their families, themselves and wider society. In protecting those around us, we protect ourselves and those we love.

For the continuing good of all we must continue to remain clear sighted and vigilant to the real and present threat of the coronavirus.

In the interests of public safety, may we all continue to follow the public health advice and guidance and maintain social distancing at all times. The responsible exercise of our personal freedom in the choices we make in the weeks and months ahead is vital for our own health and for the health of our families, neighbours and friends.

We continue to pray for those in positions of leadership that they may be inspired in making mature, measured and discerning decisions as they try to balance a desire to return to a new normality whilst maintaining and ensuring a capacity to respond to the current pandemic which remains a threat, especially to the most vulnerable within the community.