

Webcam Broadcast C-19 10

Hello Everyone! I hope you are safe and well.

It's Monday 25th May 2020.

It's now 2 months since churches closed to the public, following the general closure of society and business when the Covid-19 Pandemic spread to Ireland.

The Roadmap for the Reopening of Society and Business says that churches can reopen from 20th July. That depends, of course, on review of how the Irish people respond to the phased reopening between now and then.

I invite you to begin to reflect on what reopening our churches might entail. It has been said that closing down is much easier than opening up again in the context of Covid-19, because it's not just a matter of opening doors again. A new reality has to be taken on board in the form of physical distance, set at the moment at 2 metres, and hygiene. We have to begin to think in terms of a Plan that will respect the new norms that will apply to all public gatherings. And those new norms may continue to apply until a vaccine for Covid-19 is found.

So, we need to put our thinking caps on because what we will be returning to in churches will be quite different to what we have seen before.

All our arrangements will have to respect the public health norms that will be in place at that time. Health and safety of the public will be paramount. So, how can we organise ourselves in such a way that everybody who comes into our churches will be safe? For the moment we will focus mainly on public Mass.

Perhaps a good indicator of what going to church will be like in the future is the experience of going to the supermarket. There's an organised queue with signage, and stewards controlling the entrance. And then at the door there's hand sanitiser.

Many people wear face-covering and gloves. Inside there are announcements about physical distance, and markings on the floor. Browsing and delay are not encouraged. There are strict rules at the checkout, and attendants are well screened. Exit is through another door.

The experience of going to the shops probably helps us to imagine what going to church will be like after the reopening of churches. Access will have to be controlled so as to respect physical distance. Entrance will have to be orderly through one door, and exit will have to be orderly through a different door. Doors will probably have to be kept in an open position for arrival and departure to minimise the need for people to touch them. Places will be marked on the benches at physical distance of 2 metres, and you will be directed where to sit. The number of people who can be in the church building will depend on the number of marked places. People will have to sit and will not be free to move around. It will be a very different environment because of the way people will have to be spaced out.

Holy water fonts will remain empty until further notice. There will be no missalettes, and collection bags will not be passed. Other arrangements for Collections will be made. We are already experimenting with Electronic Giving on the Parish Website.

The distribution of Holy Communion presents a particular challenge and is a clear risk point. Hopefully we can learn from the experience of other countries how best to proceed.

Toilet facilities are very limited in our 2 churches. Will it be possible to make them safe for use?

Access to the Sacristy in each church will have to be limited to the priest and sacristan.

Booking of Masses etc. should be done by telephone or email.

Since we have 2 churches, and given these new conditions, we will need to consider whether it might be more effective to celebrate Mass in one rather than in both churches for the foreseeable future.

There's a saying that to fail to plan is to plan to fail. All parishioners need to reflect on the new reality that will face us as we move towards reopening our churches in the context of Covid-19.

**To implement the new régime, volunteers will be needed. So, I am asking you to consider where it is you can help?
We will need people to steward the entrance and exit.
We will need people to manage physical distance.
We will need people to sanitise the church after each use.
In a couple of weeks I will be asking for volunteers to contact me.**

**We are on a learning curve here.
But when you consider the overall response among Irish people to the crisis so far, we can have confidence that we can approach the stages ahead, one step at a time.**

**What about the over-70s?
Cocooning remains strongly advised for those who are vulnerable due to age or medical condition. Some volunteers, lay ministers and clergy may feel unable to continue in their role under the present circumstances. That would be a very reasonable decision.**

**You may have heard me refer to the 3 collections.
Parish income has collapsed.
That is why we have the Donate facility on the Parish Website.
I urge you to use it.
You could, of course, post contributions, including Easter Dues, to the Parish.**

Pope Francis said recently, in the context of serious decline in donations to Church charities due to the consequences of Covid-19:

The Church continues to advance thanks to the widow's mite and the contributions of innumerable people healed and consoled by Jesus, who for this reason, overflowing with gratitude, donate whatever they have.

These are some initial thoughts on how we advance towards reopening our churches.

There are many other areas that will need attention in due course.

This is just a beginning.

I will be glad to hear your thoughts.

As you can see, the task before us is a mammoth one.

A whole-community effort is required to have the whole parish pull together in a new way.

Until next time.

Slán agus beannacht.