

"WHEN WILL OUR CHURCHES BE OPEN?"

Archbishop George Stack

With the gradual loosening of lockdown regulations and the opening of more and more amenities, the question is inevitably asked, "When will our churches be open?" As with the many other challenges facing us in this pandemic, this is not an easy question to answer. The opening of parks and beaches, of garden centres and supermarkets car showrooms and other amenities is based on the concept of these being "open spaces" of one kind or another. Churches do not seem to be seen in the same category. I imagine this is because they are places where large groups of people come together, sit in close proximity to each other, often for one hour or more. Control of access, movement and social distancing will be part of the conditions laid down in the gradual return to our churches whether for private prayer and public worship.

The Archbishops of England and Wales have been engaged with the relevant authorities on the necessity of opening our churches in the first instance for private prayer. Public worship will begin later. The essence of our coming together for Mass is that it is a communal gathering. We are blessed to have large congregations in many of our churches who sit very closely together. Under social distancing regulations, which will undoubtedly be imposed, this will not be allowed to happen. People will need to sit apart with the consequent significant reduction in numbers being able to attend the same Mass together. Although the rate of infection has been reduced by between 60-70%, as a result of the lockdown restrictions, this does not mean it is completely eradicated. If the R number were to rise again there would likely be a second and equally dangerous wave of infection. Medical professionals are warning of this danger.

The Government in Wales has devolved responsibility in matters of health and in the control of the pandemic in this country. It has not yet announced and relaxation of the many restrictions with which we have become so familiar in recent months. The Catholic Church in Wales, like other Christian bodies and members of the 'Faiths Forum', is working on a common approach to Government on these matters.

The next meeting of the 'Faiths Forum' is on 3rd June.

If and when permission is given for our churches to open, they will be subject to strict health and safety conditions as are all public buildings.

Amongst these will be the necessity to provide in Churches:

- 1. Social distancing measures, seating arrangements, one way system, exits and entrances, clear signage, restricted times etc.**
- 2. Attendance management, queuing, ticketing, online registration, stewarding etc.**
- 3. Staggering of attendance by age or vulnerability**
- 4. Infection control issues such as Holy Water stoups, leaflets, hymn books, missals, newsletters, candles, all of which can harbour the virus**
- 5. PPE materials, sanitiser, deep cleaning materials, surface cleaning materials etc.**
- 6. Liturgical issues, distribution of Holy Communion, frequency of Mass, devotions, organisation of Memorial Masses, care of the bereaved**
- 7. Two or three volunteers (under the age of seventy) to implement these policies in order to keep churches open at specific times. The safeguarding of clergy over the age of 70 and those with underlying health issues will obviously be a priority**
- 8. In the first instance, large, strategically placed churches would be opened. Whether large or small, churches would need to ensure compliance with the above requisites**
- 9. The Diocese is engaged with www.churchmarketplace.co.uk , which is a central purchasing agency in order to acquire the necessary equipment outlined above at competitive prices**
- 10. Needless to say, all these arrangements will cost significant amounts of money at a time when parishes have been deprived of income for almost three months.**

Parishioners are encouraged to make a Standing Order for their offerings in order to maintain their churches during these difficult times, recognising that this will not be possible for those who are struggling financially.

Dear Beloved Parishioners, from the Archbishop's letter we can see there are many things which will need to be put into place before our parishes will be able to open even for private prayer. For the foreseeable future, no meetings or social gatherings will be allowed in our Church buildings. Once we have the go ahead to open for private prayer times will be strictly limited. The opening of our parish Churches is likely to be staggered and it is proposed that initially each of our Churches will open on a weekday and for a limited number of hours. We now ask for volunteers, from each of our Parishes, who would be willing to supervise and implement the strict hygiene rules during private prayer times; however, you must be below the age of 70 and with no underlying health issues. If you are able to volunteer, please contact Fr. Edmund with your name and contact details. Stay safe. God Bless.