

## **Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois**

### **Return to Public Worship: Pastoral Letter from Bishop Francis Duffy, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Tomorrow most of our churches will open for public worship for the first time since early March. Thank God and thanks to the care taken by the Irish people that we are this far. I ask for understanding and patience in these early weeks because of the very restricted numbers that can attend Mass, depending on social distancing and the size of churches. As we return, safe practices such as the distribution of Holy Communion on the hand only, and avoidance of a handshake as a sign of peace, will continue in addition to social distancing and signage.

The Sunday obligation continues to be lifted because the threat endures and there is the danger of resurgence. Many people would like to attend Mass but are rightly cautious about returning and will wait for a few weeks or attend on weekdays. I know you have been following Mass on social media, on webcams, on TV and on local radio. Although our communication is virtual, our personal communication with God and his with us, is real.

I thank our priests for the imaginative and innovative ways they have continued their pastoral outreach by telephone, letters and cards and by various social media platforms. I thank you for your generous support of your priests and your parish in these times. The virtual has become an important means of communication and will continue.

One feature that is largely absent in our strange experience is the community dimension. We miss interacting with others. This is especially true for those who have been cocooning. The closure of schools presented an ongoing burden for families and for teachers. I thank principals and school staffs for their online and remote engagement with pupils; an excellent support to the young people and their parents.

I know that many have felt the very heavy cross of illness and of bereavement. The immediate support that is a natural response has had to be measured and so the grieving experience has lacked that valuable community dimension. Young people who are looking forward to Confirmation will have an opportunity to celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. It will be different than normal, administered by your priest at a date to be decided locally. First Holy Communion will also take place, later than expected.

Economic uncertainty about the future remains and has impacted heavily on many individuals and families. We remember in our prayers, our leaders who are tasked with our safety and our economic recovery.

Our Diocesan Assembly has been postponed, but we continue to be in touch and will incorporate the experience of the past few months into our deliberations when we resume, as our theme puts it, “shaping the future with hope.”

I thank all who will assist in keeping our churches open and safe for the time to come. Such selfless and generous work is a service to the community. We look forward to a careful, albeit restricted and gradual, but welcome return to some degree of normality. We are at this hopeful stage because of the excellent, and at times heroic work, of our front line personnel and the vigilance of people in our country. We thank God for his continuing presence with us in these times and we thank him for the hope and help created by the generosity, good neighbourliness and community spirit of so many. ENDS.