

Pastoral Message from the Bishops of the Six Dioceses of the Tuam Province

Dear Parishioners, brother Priests and Deacons, Religious and Friends

Covid-19: A Year On

This week we mark the first anniversary of the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. As we consider how this has touched our parish communities, particularly given the tragic loss of so many lives, we wish to share some thoughts with you, the people of the six Dioceses of the Tuam Province.

Further to Climb

Many of us will be familiar with the experience of arriving at what we thought was the top of a mountain only to discover that there is still further to climb. Sometimes the last bit can be the hardest of all. We understand the experience of disappointment and frustration that many people feel, at the news of an indefinite extension of lockdown. We are delighted, however, that children have the opportunity to return to school and we wish them and their teachers every blessing.

Until we are all "Ok"

All of us appreciate the efforts and the sacrifices of those in our community who provide essential services. For many people, however, the continued high level of restriction poses practical and emotional challenges. We want to say very clearly that, in the Christian vision of things, every person is essential and no person is more important or necessary than any other. When we pray the Stations of the Cross, we celebrate people like Veronica, who wiped the face of Jesus and Simon of Cyrene who shared with Him the burden of the cross. None of us can say "I'm ok" until we are all "ok".

Serving the Common Good and Supporting Restrictions

As Church leaders, we have consistently supported the public health restrictions on the grounds that they serve the common good. The state has a particular responsibility for the common good and, on that basis, the Church teaches that Catholics must obey the law unless it is manifestly unjust or immoral. That does not mean that we cannot or should not speak out when we believe that something seems unfair or could be done better. We have consistently made representations, not only for the timely reopening of the public pastoral life of the Church, but also for better protection for elderly residents in nursing homes, for equity in the delivery of critical care in our hospitals and for a fair distribution of vaccines both in our own society and in the wider world.

Difficulties with "COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead"

We recognise the need for prudence and caution at the present time, in the light of the terrible loss of life in January and February, and we accept absolutely that now is not the time for a major reopening of society. We have carefully considered the five stage plan "COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead", published by the Government last week.

There are two things in this plan which we find very difficult to support.

One of those is the fact that at level 5, all **funerals** are still limited to 10 people. We believe that a modest increase to 25 would, without compromising safety, bring much consolation to grieving families.

Our second concern is that **public worship is still excluded even at level 3**. This would suggest that we may not have the opportunity to celebrate Mass together for months to come. It ignores the important contribution of communal worship to the mental and spiritual well-being of people of faith. The fundamental importance of Holy Week and Easter for all Christians, makes the prohibition of public worship particularly painful. While, as Christians, we are obliged to obey these regulations, we believe that it is our responsibility as Church leaders to make the case for change. We will continue to make fair and reasonable representation and we encourage you to do likewise.

Sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation

In so far as the Government plan currently offers no clarity about when we might expect to return to public Sacramental life, we find it difficult to have any confidence that the Sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation can be celebrated before the end of the present school year. As of now, we have decided to defer the Sacrament of Confirmation for the 2021 class until the Autumn, and we encourage our parishes to consider doing the same in relation to First Holy Communion. Should the circumstances change for the better, this decision can be revisited in each Diocese. In the meantime, we encourage young people and their parents to continue with their preparation. We have provided online resources to support what is being done through the Religious Education programme with the teachers in the schools.

Continuing Pastoral and Sacramental Care

Bearing all of the foregoing in mind, it is also important for us to do as much as we can within the current restrictions to provide pastoral and sacramental care to our parishioners. Experience teaches us that with suitable precautions, the individual celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is possible, as is the sacramental care of the sick. These, together with various other pastoral initiatives, can supplement the various on-line outreaches that have proved so helpful and successful.

Towards Easter 2021

God's love for us is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who shared our human condition, with all its joys and sorrows. As his disciples today, we can have confidence in his promise to be with us always, even to the end of time. During this season of Lent, He walks the way of the cross with us and we journey in hope towards the joy of sharing in his Resurrection which, one way or another, we will celebrate together at Easter.

Sincerely in Christ

Michael Neary (Archbishop of Tuam)

Brendan Kelly (Bishop of Galway)

John Fleming (Bishop of Killala)

Kevin Doran (Bishop of Elphin)

Michael Duignan (Bishop of Clonfert)

Paul Dempsey (Bishop of Achonry)