



DIOCESE OF PLYMOUTH

Office of the Vicar General

Note to Clergy from the Vicar General

14 October 2020

Dear Brothers,

I hope all is well. I am writing to you in order to remind all of us of the main responsibilities that we have currently, as we all continue to battle with the reality of the COVID-19 Pandemic. I do so, because some misunderstandings, or confusion, seem to have emerged among us, and I include myself within that!

I should share the positive news that Public Health England have indicated that they are not overly concerned about Places of Worship in terms of outbreaks; we are still in the low to medium risk category. So, our Churches are safe places to be in.

Nevertheless, calls and messages have come to the Bishop's Office, as well as to the Safeguarding Office, and to Anthony Akinpelu as Chief Operating Officer, highlighting certain concerns. We have also heard that a few priests have been contacted by NHS England that they have been in contact with somebody who has tested positive and have been told to self-isolate. It is important that we all know what our responsibilities are in this situation, and more generally, and that we can reassure our parishioners. I would be grateful if you would share this letter with them, in Newsletters and on Notice Boards.

Our duty towards each other

Understandably, the messages from the Government, regarding different regions and what stage we are at, in respect of the virus, keep changing. But the fundamentals remain i.e. to keep ourselves safe and everyone around us safe; hence the mantra, "Hands, Face and Space" being repeated many times. We need to ensure these principles remain and are in place in our Churches. This means that parishioners are sanitising their hands on arrival and when departing; that everyone is wearing a face covering, unless speaking in the Liturgy, or where they have a medical reason for not doing so; clergy, too, should wear a face covering when moving around the Church, when distributing Holy Communion and whilst greeting people before or after Mass; and that we keep the necessary social distancing measures in place, at all times, in and around our Church buildings.

For the celebration of Mass and for other services, Churches need to have stewards in place in order to ensure the recording of people's details (including those who use the NHS App), to guide people to their seats, to ensure parishioners do not wander around the Church, and to remind all of us of the social distancing requirements. You will be aware that we have adopted a system of "Track and Trace", for our Churches, which means that names and contact details are kept for each celebration, for three weeks, so

that people can be notified if someone should test positive for the virus. Hopefully, this measure will prevent the closure of our Churches in the event of a local outbreak. If we are unable to demonstrate that people can be traced, then in such an event, the local authorities could deem a Church unsafe, and it would be difficult insurance-wise for that Church to remain open.

I understand that some Churches are reported to be 'overcrowded'. I have not witnessed this, but you will appreciate that each church is to have in place a 'maximum number' that can attend, whilst observing social distancing. This varies, depending on the Church building, and will have been stipulated in the Risk Assessment Form that you submitted. It is important to stick to those numbers, for obvious reasons. It is also true, that a number of people may sit together in a Church because they are of one family and are therefore in the same 'social bubble'. This may not be known to other people attending the same Mass. It is a matter of ensuring everyone is aware of what is expected and communicating clearly in the parish that we are following the necessary protocols to keep everybody safe. Similarly, in principle, it is right to keep some doors and windows open to assist with ventilation.

After Mass, or any public service, you will be aware that the Church needs to be thoroughly cleaned, or the Church building closed for at least 72 hours. One or other of these measures must be taken, to ensure that the virus has no possibility of 'staying' in the Church. A great challenge for many people in this period, is the loss of a sense of community, and there is a huge temptation to "mill around" before or after Mass. As hard as it is, we must ask the stewards to discourage this, as it exposes, especially the vulnerable, to the virus.

Unfortunately, it is increasingly likely that more of us, as clergy, will be exposed to the virus, either by catching it or having been in close contact with somebody who has it. I attach a protocol of what is expected in this eventuality. *Clergy Protocols: Actions to take in case you receive a notification that you may be at risk of contracting Covid-19.* Please follow it carefully and do inform both the Dean and myself if this should happen.

If you are informed by NHS England that you must self-isolate, it is not the case that every parishioner who has come to a Mass that you have celebrated will have to do the same. It is important they know this. This will only be necessary if you have had 'close contact' with a parishioner, or parish employee. In such a scenario it is worth bearing the following advice in mind.

NHS Guidance

The official guidance from the NHS is as follows:

- Coronaviruses can be spread when people with the virus have close, sustained contact with people who are not infected. This typically means spending more than 15 minutes within two metres of an infected person, (whilst wearing a mask) such as talking to someone, for instance, in a pastoral setting.



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- The NHS has identified a concept called ‘**COVID-19 Contact**’, as being a person who has been close to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 anytime from 2 days before the affected person was symptomatic.

Applying the above principle, a Priest would be deemed as a *COVID-19 Contact* if he had a closed, sustained contact with a parishioner, based on the occurrence of any of the following:

- They both spent more than 15 minutes together either during or outside the Mass celebration
- The Priest had a face-to-face conversation within one metre with the parishioner wearing no mask
- The parishioner coughed on the Priest at some stage
- They both travelled together in a small vehicle

The above scenarios would also indicate the situations where a priest may have passed on the virus to a parishioner, and a priest should inform NHS England of any individuals with whom they have had such contact. The official NHS guidance dated 28 September 2020 states that “*Covid-19 Contacts* who need to self-isolate will be notified and advised accordingly by the NHS Track and Trace service. If you have not been notified, ‘officially’ you do not need to self-isolate”.

A copy of the guidance is attached with this note. Please click the link below for an electronic copy directly from the Government website.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-contacts-of-people-with-possible-or-confirmed-coronavirus-covid-19-infection-who-do-not-live-with-the-person/guidance-for-contacts-of-people-with-possible-or-confirmed-coronavirus-covid-19-infection-who-do-not-live-with-the-person>

We know, when we reflect on it, that although these measures may seem cumbersome, at times, they are in place in order to protect everyone, and most especially the elderly and the most vulnerable, from the spread of the virus. In fulfilling our responsibilities, we are putting our love of neighbour into concrete action. This follows directly from, and is intimately connected to, our love of God.

On behalf of Bishop Mark, and all the Diocese, I thank you for all that you are doing, in what are challenging times for us all.

Canon John Deeny
Vicar General.