

Important Guidance from the Diocesan COVID Working Group

7/1/21

Dear all

As you know COVID cases in London and the south east, including Essex, continue to be very high and it is clear that the new variant of the virus is very transmissible and extra care must be taken when opening our churches. The Bishops' Conference have reminded us that It is important that the Guidance for the Celebration of Mass published on 3rd August 2020 should be adhered to

see <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/health-social-care/coronavirus-guidelines/guidance-collective-worship/mass-covid-19-guidance/>

Priests should ensure hand washing/sanitising is available for all in the Church, that his own hands are sanitised before handling anything and especially that the hosts for consecration for the people are covered throughout the celebration until the moment of distribution. Those assisting with the distribution of Holy Communion should remember that they should receive Holy Communion first, then replace their face coverings, and then sanitise their hands before receiving the ciborium/paten. After distributing Holy Communion, they should sanitise their hands again.

Communion should only be administered on the hand, without the usual individual formula of words, and keeping a safe distance between priest and communicant with the help of a barrier if necessary. The priest should always have a face-covering. In the celebration of the Extra-ordinary form, it is recommended that there be no general Communion for the time-being to prevent any possible contagion.

We are aware that Local Directors of Public Health have recommended that churches should close. This is not the current national government or Catholic Church view. However, where a church is open, we have been strongly advised to assess our current risk management in the light of actual space and practice and

what is known of the new variant. You should think about safety as people arrive, during any activity and as they leave. Actions should include much longer fallow times, ensuring people can always keep at least two metres apart, more thorough and more frequent cleaning, closing off spaces, shorter services, no singing and encouraging people to disperse straight away. Please consider this advice in the light of the current situation in our diocese. If you need any assistance please contact the Health and Safety Team. As you know, reviewing risk assessments on a regular basis is vital - now is the time to update your checklists.

We are still waiting for an update to the Places of Worship Guidance on the GOV.UK website. However, a few points have arisen since the national lockdown was announced, responses to which are set out below. These have been produced by Canon Chris Thomas in collaboration with Prof. Jim McManus.

Q. Can churches open for individual prayer?

The Government guidance does not explicitly prohibit this, nor does it permit it. The updated guidance from 22nd December makes no mention of individual prayer, but this was commonplace across the denominations in that churches were not open simply for celebrations of Mass or other sacraments, but also for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and other personal devotions.

Looking more closely at the guidance, it does state, regarding those who are at increased risk of severe disease from covid-19, that worship communities should consider “strongly discourage them from attending faith gatherings during this time or set aside a time for them to attend for individual devotions.” My reading of this would allow for churches to be open for periods of time for individual prayer in order to facilitate those who may feel more vulnerable in attending a formal act of worship.

Q. Are baptisms allowed and how many can attend?

There is nothing stated prohibiting baptisms (or other sacramental celebrations) in the published guidance. What is said is that the number of people attending if the celebration forms part of the normal cycle of worship is “they are subject to the requirements for communal worship set out above,” that is according to the covid-secure capacity of the church determined by the risk assessment.

If a celebration is not part of the normal cycle of worship (ie a baptism outside of Mass) it would appear, although not explicitly stated, that the numbers attending should be limited to 6 people, excluding anyone who is working as part of the celebration. This is extrapolated from the stated guidance for weddings and commemorative events for Tier 4.

However, since the Government Guidance states that weddings “should only take place in exceptional circumstances” again, by extrapolation, it would seem that other sacramental celebrations should be postponed until restrictions are lifted unless there is a need in extremis.

Q. What if the priest is clinically vulnerable?

Extreme sensitivity is required in this situation. If the priest feels that it is safe to celebrate Mass, he should do so with the minimum of contact with others. That would entail being at least 2m away from others at all times during the celebration. This may require altering the seating arrangements on the sanctuary. He should consecrate the Hosts for the congregation and then withdraw so that a Minister of Holy Communion could distribute them.

It may be that priests are not comfortable with this situation and so other provision should be made in consultation with the local Ordinary.

If you have any questions please let us know.

These are difficult times and we and the Bishop thank you for your support at this time.

With best wishes and prayers

The COVID Working Group