

BRIEFING PAPER – *Mass is Essential: Lockdown 2 and the suspension of public worship*

Date: Wednesday 4th November 2020

Introduction

New restrictions, announced on 31 October and set to come into force from Thursday 5 November, state that “places of worship will be closed” with exceptions for funerals, broadcast acts of worship, individual prayer, essential voluntary public services, formal childcare, and some other exempted activities. These restrictions will once again make participation in the celebration of Mass unlawful.

The President and Vice-President of the Catholics Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales say the measure is “a source of deep anguish” and have objected to it as unjustified:

“Whilst we understand the many difficult decisions facing the Government, we have not yet seen any evidence whatsoever that would make the banning of communal worship, with all its human costs, a productive part of combatting the virus. We ask the Government to produce this evidence that justifies the cessation of acts of public worship.”ⁱ

This briefing paper aims to give context to the position taken by the English and Welsh bishops, including the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, and to clarify the concerns and underlying motivations. Our hope is to enable Catholics, as well as people of all faiths and none, to better understand the issues involved, and so facilitate a necessary public dialogue.

The bishops have been the first to recognise the heavy burden of responsibility on the Government during the Covid-19 pandemic, and its duty to serve the common good by imposing restrictions for the sake of public health. They have constantly emphasised to the Catholic faithful the importance of carefully following health measures to avoid transmission of the virus. At the same time, they are concerned that well-intentioned but poorly thought out legislation in this second lockdown misunderstands and mischaracterises the role and importance of public acts of worship.

Catholic Voices is a charity that helps ordinary Catholics explain the Church’s perspectives in the media and the public square, with the aim of assisting and understanding dialogue. By clarifying and contextualising the bishops’ concerns, we hope to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, and encourage better policymaking now and in the future.

Catholic Voices aims to speak from the perspective of mainstream, faithful Catholics supportive of the bishops of England and Wales. Although we enjoy the support and blessing of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, only the conference’s own statements and communiqués should be taken to express their position.

Summary of key messages/concerns

1. Protecting the vulnerable and prioritising health is a primary concern of the Church.

The Catholic bishops of England and Wales have been very keen to observe the rules, indeed more strictly than the government required, during the last lockdown, closing churches for private prayer even when this was allowed, in order to reduce movement and help curb the contagion. But now they have indicated that church closures are excessive and unwarranted. What has changed?

Firstly, the Church has developed robust means and mechanisms; secondly, far more is now known about the virus and how to control it than was known in March. Since then, the Church has made significant investment in PPE and altered its patterns of public worship to meet and go beyond the regulations, while ensuring churches can and will continue to be centres of essential social action and outreach.

Along with other Churches and faith communities, the Catholic Church has been commended by the Government and its advisors for the extraordinarily responsible way in which they have sought to make places of worship Covid-secure. Faith communities will continue to be model institutions that show the highest regard for public health, determined to be pivotal players in the national response to the pandemic.

2. What the Church is asking for is a reasoned explanation.

The bishops are asking for provision for “congregational services, including pre-arranged or scheduled acts of worship and communal prayer” to be made available in England, as it is currently in Scotland and most of mainland Europe.ⁱⁱ To suspend public acts of worship (especially Masses) in England but not Scotland necessarily raises the question of the criteria used by governments in each case. Religious leaders are asking for an explanation as to why services are deemed unnecessary in England in a way it is seemingly not elsewhere.

3. The Church is asking to see the evidence that justifies banning acts of worship.

Public acts of worship involve people gathering in a shared space and are therefore potentially virus-spreading events. But if strict measures are taken, they can be made safe. The anecdotal evidence suggests that you are no more likely to get Covid in a church than in a hospital, and rather less likely than in a supermarket.

Therefore, if acts of public worship constitute a sufficient threat to public health to warrant their suspension, this assumption ought to be supported with evidence from the available data. Yet the Government’s Chief Medical Adviser and Chief Scientific Adviser have admitted that the decision to close churches in England is not based on any such evidence.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, places of worship have been included in a blanket ban that includes gathering in pubs or gyms, for example, but which excludes supermarkets and hospitals. This raises the question, therefore, of the criteria which the Government has used in distinguishing between types of activity.

In questioning the suspension of public acts of worship, both now but also in the future, the Church is not asking for special treatment, but to be treated like other services deemed essential for health and wellbeing. Any limitation on freedom of religion in the interests of health must

demonstrate that the measures are proportionate and appropriate. Without such a demonstration, the suspicion may arise that acts of collective worship are not considered important.

4. Suspending public acts of worship deprives vulnerable people of an essential source of emotional, spiritual and mental well-being.

The pandemic has, if anything, revealed the greater urgency and importance of people's spiritual needs. At a time of great uncertainty, of economic meltdown and widespread death and illness, as the country enters a long winter, the need for religious services is greater now than at any time in the recent past.

Of course, people can and do pray at home, or outside. But for Catholics, Mass is a collective act which makes us conscious of our belonging to a wider Body, providing relief from an obsessive self-focus. Mass plays an essential role in the lives of Catholics: essential to our spiritual health and wellbeing.

5. Mass is essential.

When something is essential, we can and should make provision in a way that is pragmatic and prudent. Throughout lockdown people will continue to do many of the essentials: go to the supermarket, attend urgent business meetings, receive vital medical care. The bishops argue that Mass, too, is essential.

The danger, in other words, is not that Catholics are not willing to sacrifice for the common good: they have shown a constant willingness to do this and will continue to do so. The danger, rather, is that Government policy is framing Mass as non-essential.

In the legislation that will come into force there are a variety of exceptions that all but declare that if something is essential, we can and should make provision. People of all faiths need to communicate clearly the essential nature of communal worship, but Catholics in particular need to communicate that the Mass is essential.

At stake, therefore, is not just the question of allowing Mass in the next month, but of how the Government treats and will continue to treat the Churches in future lockdowns and future pandemics. This is why the bishops have spoken up, and why Catholics need to urge the Government to enter into dialogue with them at this time.



Brenden Thompson
CEO, Catholic Voices

ⁱ <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/statement-from-the-president-and-the-vice-president-of-the-conference-on-the-prime-ministers-statement/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.christian.org.uk/news/whitty-vallance-no-evidence-to-back-church-closures?fbclid=IwAR3kviHIL0SGzplwmw7Bi9wkVIGGu6rYCQlaJfF2J7fSwIV4XEiqKr-MtqU>