



Pastoral Letter

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. These words of the Apostle Paul root us firmly where we belong, in the grace and peace of God. Things are not turning out as we may have imagined, even a few weeks ago now, and this is not the letter I had hoped to send you as my first communication with you! It is unfortunate that the episcopal ordination took place as it were, behind closed doors. That very image speaks to us of the Easter Gospels, and the disciples gathered together in fear and anxiety within a locked room. But the coronavirus is certainly affecting every aspect of our society. We have heard so much about what it can do, how it attacks the respiratory system and can cause damage, even fatalities. Those who have political responsibility are obliged to offer sound advice to us in this state of crisis, and we must be prudent in our response to this advice. However, we should not allow this virus to rob us of the breath of the Spirit. The Holy Father encourages us to deal with this viral threat in these encouraging words, 'with the strength of faith, the certitude of hope and the fervour of charity' (Pope Francis, March 8, 2020).

Unfortunately, the coronavirus means the need to make some drastic changes to the way we live and celebrate the mysteries of faith. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales have said that the most responsible thing for us to do, is to suspend public worship from the evening of Friday 20th March. This is an action which needs to be taken in the face of a potentially deadly virus. As you may have heard, this decision has already been made and enacted in other parts of Europe and the rest of the world. Many of our priests and faithful parishioners are over 70 and others have underlying health conditions. We have a duty of care towards them. It is an act of charity to seek their protection from this deadly thing. Of course, nothing attacks the priestly heart more than being told he is unable to serve his people and to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with them. Nothing is more painful for our faithful people, than not being able to receive the sacraments. This is a sacrifice we must reluctantly take during these weeks of a deadly epidemic. Our priests will continue to offer Mass every day, but without a public congregation. Some are able to stream their celebration of Mass, especially on Sundays. Masses and other services and devotions will be streamed from the Cathedral. I will celebrate the 11.00am Sunday Mass at the Cathedral and it will be offered for every community and individual in our Diocese.

We had hoped to be able to keep our churches open. Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament would have given much solace to thirsting souls. Since the Prime Minister's announcements on the evening of Monday, 23rd March, this is unfortunately no longer possible.

The situation is changing daily as we all seek to heed the advice of the medical and public health professionals. Again, it has to be said, we must be prudent in our response to their advice. Those responsible for advising us about liturgical matters, and especially as Holy Week and Easter approaches, will soon be able to share some guidelines with us to guide our response to this pandemic.

During these days of the Season of Lent, we have sought to join with our Saviour in His fast in the wilderness. Let's remind ourselves of the Gospel of the temptations we heard on the First Sunday of Lent. Jesus put His trust in His Father and the Word of God in the Scriptures. In Jesus' fasting from food, our Saviour learnt how to trust in God's mercy and compassionate presence. Our Lord's time in the desert echoes the earlier time that Israel spent in the Exodus journey to the Promised Land. We know how they struggled in these forty years, turning away from the Lord on occasions, entering into repentance and experiencing God's powerful forgiveness. In all of this, I love the image of God walking with His people, a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. May we know that the Lord is walking with us, His pilgrim people. Let us pray that the Lord will strengthen us all in faith and hope, and help us to see how we can live our faith and hope with fresh charity towards others.

Yours devotedly in Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

✠ David J Oakley
Bishop of Northampton