

Diocesan Statement in Response to the Decision of the NI Executive to implement the first step of its Pathway to Recovery

The NI Executive has outlined a five-stage recovery plan for the phased easing of restrictions that had been placed upon movement and public gatherings in response to Covid-19. This phased recovery plan is to be cautiously welcomed by all as a sign of hope and progression in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

We are able to take such steps towards the easing of restrictions only because, as a society, we have taken the appropriate health measures and carried the cross of isolation in the interests of the common good and public safety.

However, the real and present threat of coronavirus remains, particularly for many vulnerable family and friends. The pandemic has not passed and we need to be vigilant and maintain good hygienic practices and exercise personal responsibility and mutual concern. It is necessary that all of us maintain the social distancing measures that have enabled us to keep the infection rate down. In protecting those around us, we protect ourselves and those we love.

The NI Executive has indicated today that some churches and places of worship may choose to open for the singular purpose of private individual prayer. As a Diocese, we warmly welcome this decision which will come as a great consolation to many in our communities.

The Diocese takes seriously its duty of care towards parishioners, employees and clergy. It has issued guidance to parishes about the required measures to be put in place before any church may be opened. Each Church will open only when it is safe to do so and this will vary from place to place. We are sure that parishioners will be both supportive and patient while these measures are put in place.

Following a full risk assessment, churches within the Diocese of Dromore will reopen for private prayer according to the capacity of each parish to do so safely and in accordance with public health guidance and best practice.

All visitors to churches are asked to strictly observe the social distancing regulations and good hygienic practices outlined at Church entrances. **Those who are at increased risk from the virus and/or have been advised to shield themselves are also strongly advised to remain at home.** Mass will continue to be streamed privately via social media without a congregation present.

In this first phase of reopening of churches, visits are strictly for individual, personal prayer and private devotions. Organised gatherings for prayer or devotions are not permitted at this stage and the public celebration of Mass and the other sacraments remain suspended.

These directives will be kept under regular review. [18th May 2020]