

Briefing on Covid 19 and Catholic Churches in the Archdiocese of Southwark¹

- 1.1 The ongoing impact of the Covid 19 pandemic must be treated with the utmost seriousness. The Catholic Church accepts the important role it has to play in ensuring that Catholic churches are safe places at the service of the spiritual and human wellbeing of anyone who might wish to enter.
- 1.2 There have been calls from the Mayor of London, and some Local Authorities, for places of worship to close. This briefing only relates to Catholic churches, but reiterates that measures are in place for Catholic churches to be properly compliant with Covid regulations. It also recognises the important service that Catholic churches provide, not least to the marginalised, many of whom face isolation at this time. There is certainly fear and anxiety about the present situation, and some people will choose to stay at home to avoid and further transmission. At present there is no obligation to attend Mass and anyone who has any underlying health conditions, or any other concerns, should avoid any risks of Covid infection.
- 1.3 The current Covid 19 regulations, retrospectively put to parliament on 6 January 2021, take precedence over, and define, the permissions and restrictions previously outlined. These were set out by the Government on 4 Jan and state: ²

Places of worship

You can attend places of worship for a service. However, you must not mingle with anyone outside of your household or support bubble. You should maintain strict social distancing at all times. You should follow the [national guidance on the safe use of places of worship](#).

- 1.3 The national guidance on the safe use of places of worship allows people to:

...leave home to attend a place of worship for communal worship, a funeral or a related event for someone who has died, or to visit a burial ground or a remembrance garden, or to attend

¹ The Archdiocese of Southwark is geographically located within the London boroughs south of the River Thames, the county of Kent and the Medway Unitary Authority. Consisting of approximately 85,000 parishioners, 175 parishes and 169 schools.

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home?priority-taxon=774cee22-d896-44c1-a611-e3109cce8eae#places-of-worship>

a wedding - but funerals, linked events and weddings are all subject to limits on the numbers that can attend.³

- 1.4 The Government has not delegated to Local Authorities any powers to amend these regulations.
- 1.5 Local Authorities have powers of enforcement over individual premises which breach the regulations, and have powers over individual venues which are non-compliant or present a serious risk to public health. In such cases, appeal must be made to a court or other appropriate body.
- 1.6 A Local Authority can, therefore, act to close individual premises that are shown to be in breach of regulations. They cannot, however, impose a blanket closure of generic premises, such as 'places of worship' for public health reasons. None of the powers given to Local Authorities specify places of worship.
- 1.7 In addition, the police also have enforcement powers. However, the police have no powers either to order the closure of all places of worship in an area for public health purposes.
- 1.8 Local Authorities may invite places of worship to close, or suggest they do so, and some places of worship may decide this is necessary. However, it is incumbent on Local Authorities to present the evidence for why they believe places of worship should close. Specifically, they should provide an evidentially based public health rationale for asking Catholic churches to close.
- 1.9 Where Catholic churches follow a proper regime of Covid regulations, which have been affirmed by public health professionals, they are safe places.⁴
- 1.10 Accepting the Guidance set out by the Government, and that of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, the following advice has been sent to Catholic parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark:

A local determination is to be made by each parish priest or parochial administrator about the Mass schedule for Sundays and weekdays and the opening of churches for personal prayer. Wherever possible, please enable people to attend Mass and visit the church for prayer, with all necessary stewarding and sanitisation measures in place. If, however, it is not possible to ensure the church buildings are properly stewarded and sanitised, or the risks are deemed too great, or the priest himself

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-2-december>

⁴ Details of the Catholic Church's Guidance can be found at: <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/health-social-care/coronavirus-guidelines/guidance-collective-worship/>

becomes unwell or needs to self-isolate, and no alternative provision can be made, please take whatever temporary action is judged necessary. This decision should be reviewed each week. It will, obviously, be important to communicate any changes to our parishioners, explaining the temporary nature of this action and the reasons for it.

Unless exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise, it is crucial that our churches remain open for the celebration of Mass and personal prayer. This is vital to our spiritual health and wellbeing. With the correct measures in place, our churches are safe places. It is, however, paramount that clergy and laity alike follow the requirements for distance, stewarding, and sanitisation, as specified in the guidance sent out previously. The instructions concerning the liturgy must also be followed in full. Failure to implement these measures is an extremely serious matter, and potentially jeopardises peoples' health. The laity have the right to the reassurance provided by the guidelines for the celebration of the Sacraments in the context of the pandemic.⁵

1.11 On this basis, any Catholic church that cannot open safely, with all necessary Covid measures in place, should not do so.⁶ In light of this, some Catholic parishes have taken the decision to close churches temporarily.

1.12 Allowing people to exercise their right to public worship in Catholic churches, ensuring at the same time that all proper regulations are in place, provides an important support for spiritual and human wellbeing. Catholic faith centres on the celebration of the Mass and accessibility should only be overridden where there is an evidentially based rationale that Catholic churches poses a definite risk to public health. Some have suggested that the new Covid variant means places of worship must close. Any such judgement, however, requires accurate, evidentially based information.

1.13 We are keeping this situation under constant review. Should there be any change in the Government regulations, we will continue to respond accordingly in collaboration with public health professionals.

1.14 The Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Southwark is committed to following the approved Covid safe guidelines for communal worship, and working in collaboration with Local Authorities to achieve this.

⁵ Email to Clergy and Parishes of the Archdiocese of Southwark, 2 Jan 2021

⁶ There are clear protocols for ensuring the Covid regulations are in place in Catholic churches, produced in consultation with Public Health Officials. These require: social distancing, sanitisation, wearing of masks, no social interaction, ventilation of building, reduced length of services etc.

1.15 We remember in prayer, and with gratitude, the remarkable dedication of those in the NHS, those who care for the elderly and vulnerable, and all key workers. We want our churches to be safe for prayer and worship so that the spiritual and human support they offer might help those who need it to maintain their wellbeing.