

Pastoral Letter from our Bishop

Friday 12th June 2020

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE RIGHT REVEREND JOHN ARNOLD

BISHOP OF SALFORD

To be distributed in June 2020

My dear brothers and sisters,

I want to write to you and assure you that my thoughts and prayers are with you all, at this time. There are many resources available on the Diocesan website and being circulated among parish communities, by Catholic organisations and among small groups. It has been very encouraging to see so many positive and practical initiatives during these difficult times – not least in the live-streaming of Masses, liturgies, and devotions. My thanks and sincere appreciation to all who have been so imaginative in minimising the impact of physical isolation and allowing people to feel included and a part of community in so many different ways. This includes the contact by phone and other initiatives for those who do not have access to the internet and live streaming.

All churches were closed in March by government directive out of concern for the safety and well-being of people. Public gatherings were banned as an attempt to limit the danger of contagion. And safety must continue to be our priority as we move towards the re-opening of churches. Even when churches are allowed to re-open on Monday 15th June, not all churches will be able to re-open at once. It is intended that several named churches, spread around the Diocese, will be ready to open for private prayer, and are currently being prepared. Other churches will follow as quickly as it can be assured that they are able to fulfil the conditions for cleanliness, and social distancing. All parishes will be assisted in these preparations. It is likely to be several more weeks before we will be able to celebrate Mass publicly and, even when that is possible, social distancing will limit the numbers of people able to attend – even in our largest church buildings. We must all be patient. We are under no obligation to attend Mass during this time, and making spiritual communion is a powerful way to welcome Christ into our lives at home.

During this time, we have every reason to be grateful to all who have been working on the frontline, in hospitals, care homes, in the community and emergency services and all those ensuring vital supplies. Many of them are our own parishioners. It is real faith in action.

It is important that we continue to remember those who have died and those who have lost loved ones during this time. It must be particularly difficult to have the funeral of a loved one under present circumstances. In addition to any individual Requiem Mass or Memorial Service for those who have died during this period, it will be important that each parish has some form of special Memorial Services to which all the bereaved are invited as an opportunity to support each other in faith.

The limitations on our personal freedom should not restrict, in any way, our lived practice of our Faith. On the contrary, we are being called to re-visit and develop our private prayer, our understanding that – wherever we are – we are the Church, members of the Body of Christ. We are invited to build that sense of “Church at home”, renewing the reality stated in St John’s Gospel “Remain in me as I in you” (Jn 15:7), and “He is with you, He is in you” (Jn 14:17). Christ lives in us wherever we may be. I am so impressed by the many creative ways that people have found to encourage each other in prayer. Hopefully, this will continue in our journey ahead, centred on Christ and guided in prayer.

Pope Francis is adamant that we are best able to express ourselves as Church when we can come together for the celebration of the Sacraments, to pray together and then to go out as missionary disciples, especially to the poor and the marginalised. But Pope Francis also recognises that this is not always possible but that does not restrict us from being Church and “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20). And during this difficult time of not having access to our churches and while we are unable to participate fully in Mass and other liturgies we can be in solidarity with those many Catholics throughout the world who, because of persecution or military conflict, are unable to receive sacraments for years on end. There are many people, in the squalor of refugee camps, who have no access to a place of prayer or sacrament. But they are very clearly Catholics to be admired for their strength of Faith.

We must now be absolutely sure to think globally and understand the impact that we have on one another throughout the world, and how we depend on others as they depend on us.

We can no longer simply look inwards to our own needs and welfare. In these last three months many of us have been living our lives quite differently with our walking and cycling, reduced shopping. Is this a sign of a “new normal”? The pandemic has taught us that we are all so closely connected, across all nations, which is a lesson that Pope Francis has been teaching, particularly in his encyclical letter “Laudato Si”, where he appeals to us all to recognise our duties to all our brothers and sisters and our care for our common home. It is said that we are the first generation that has learned about the damage that we are doing to our environment and we may be the last generation to be able to avoid irreversible damage for future generations.

The recent violence in the United States is a further reminder of our need to think globally and to recognise the dignity of every person of whatever colour, creed, or gender. We are privileged to be entrusted with the challenge which, with the grace and power of God, working in us and through us, we can achieve for our children’s future. Let us make the pandemic a steppingstone to a brighter and safer world for all. Governments will need to collaborate, globally. Industry and technology must develop in more environmentally sustainable ways. Every one of us must be determined to promote that global thinking and care in our homes and parishes and communities.

“Stay with us, Lord, on our Journey”

We ask the intercession of Mary, Our Mother, in a prayer of St Pope John Paul II

‘Mary, woman clothed with the sun, help us to fix our gaze on Christ amid the inevitable sufferings and problems of everyday life. Help us not to be afraid of following him to the very end, even when the cross seems unbearably heavy. Make us understand that this alone is the way which leads to the heights of salvation. And from heaven, where you shine forth as Queen and Mother of Mercy. Watch over each one of your children.’

Yours devotedly,
+ John Arnold Bishop of Salford