

IRISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

**FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT FOR A
RETURN TO THE PUBLIC
CELEBRATION OF MASS AND THE
SACRAMENTS**

9 JUNE 2020

TO THE PARISHES OF KILDARE AND LEIGHLIN FROM BISHOP DENIS NULTY

‘We are in this together’ has often been said in recent months as we have sought to protect ourselves against the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an essential stance to take as we acknowledge the need for both personal and collective responsibility in tackling and overcoming this virus.

As your Bishop, I welcome this all-island framework document as another expression of our individual and shared responsibility, and of our reliance on one another. As Pope Francis has said many times, “we are all connected”.

This document sets out a framework for our 56 parishes to return to public worship that will necessitate all of us, bishop, clergy, parish workers, parish volunteers and individual parishioners, to work together. To implement what is set out here, parishes will likely need to seek out and involve people who may never have volunteered in the parish before. Whatever our role, we will each have to co-operate with the measures that must be put in place locally if we are to safely gather for prayer in our churches.

I am asking parishes in our diocese to take this document and to implement what it is laying out for all of us. We are a diocesan family and we will continue to support one another at this difficult time. No parish should feel alone in this task. Parishes are invited to share practical resources and information with one another as much as possible. As a diocese, we will assist in bringing such information to parishes through our weekly emails and other means of communication.

For every parish, the starting point for moving towards a resumption of public worship is the steps, checklists and liturgical considerations as laid out here.

INTRODUCTION

This document is intended to support dioceses and parishes in their own preparations for a return to the public celebration of Mass and the sacraments and may be supplemented at diocesan level. These guidelines should be read in conjunction with return to work protocols and insurance advice. Diocesan bishops are encouraged to put in place appropriate mechanisms for the implementation and verification of the guidelines.

The guidelines provided in this document may need to be adapted in some cases, depending on factors such as the capacity and layout of churches, the size of the parish/church community, etc. However, in all circumstances the safety and health of people, ministers, and priests must be paramount. No church should be opened for public prayer or worship until satisfactory arrangements, as indicated in this Framework, have been put in place.

It is most important that people who are vulnerable or unwell, and especially those with any symptoms that might suggest Covid-19 infection, should stay at home and, if possible, participate, as now, via webcam, social media, television, or radio. The same applies to those who have been in recent contact with someone who has the virus, in accordance with public health advice.

INITIAL STEPS

The following steps should be undertaken in each parish to ensure that the preparations in each church are efficiently and effectively planned.

ACTION	CONFIRM / COMMENT
1. Establish a Covid-19 Support Team of parishioners to organise preparations and to oversee their implementation and verification. (the verification process may be assisted at Pastoral Area and/or Diocesan level)	
2. Identify volunteers to assist with the implementation and verification.	
3. Provide appropriate induction and training where necessary to priests, ministers, readers, employees and volunteers.	
4. Secure an appropriate supply of signage, cleaning/sanitising materials and accessories and items necessary for protection.	

CHECKLISTS

Dioceses and parishes should at all times follow the most up-to-date public health advice and associated regulations and obligations. To reduce the risk of transmission of Covid-19, public health advice emphasises the importance of strict adherence to **physical distancing, good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette**, and **regular cleaning and sanitising of shared spaces**.

A. Physical (Social) Distancing

Public health authorities advise that people should maintain physical distance from each other (currently at least 2 metres). In our churches this will mean that the maximum number of people who can be accommodated for any communal prayer or liturgy will be much reduced. The demands of physical distancing will also need to be considered in relation to people entering the church and leaving it.

The following checklist is offered to assist dioceses and parishes in ensuring that physical distancing can be observed in our churches:

ACTION	CONFIRM / COMMENT
<p>5. Having considered the most up-to-date advice on physical distancing, what is the number of people that can be accommodated safely in each church?</p>	
<p>6. How will this be managed?</p>	
<p>7. How will this be communicated to the people?</p>	
<p>8. Have we clearly indicated the areas in the church where people can sit (e.g. by closing off rows of seats, allowing one person to sit at the end of each free row while permitting those from the same household to sit together, etc.)?</p>	
<p>9. Have we stewards available, as necessary and appropriate, to assist people entering or leaving the church and to direct them to available seats?</p>	

<p>10. Have we provided appropriate marking to help people to maintain physical distance, particularly when approaching for Holy Communion?</p>	
<p>11. Have we taken account of the needs of people with disabilities?</p>	
<p>12. Have we issued clear advice regarding people observing physical distancing while outside the church?</p>	
<p>13. Is there appropriate signage to communicate these messages?</p>	

B. Maintenance of Hygiene

While each person has individual responsibility for following advice on hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, the church environment should itself be as safe as any enclosed public space.

The following checklist is offered to assist dioceses and parishes in maintaining the standard of hygiene required in our churches at the present time.

<p>ACTION</p>	<p>CONFIRM / COMMENT</p>
<p>14. Have all Holy Water fonts been emptied?</p>	

<p>15. If it is decided to continue providing toilet facilities, are these clean and appropriately stocked?</p>	
<p>16. Can doors be kept open when people are arriving and departing from Mass or other celebrations to minimise contact with door handles, etc. and to improve ventilation?</p>	
<p>17. Have sufficient hand sanitisers been provided at all entrances and exits?</p>	
<p>18. Has the issue of the sharing of missalettes been considered? (reusable prayer books, hymnals, hymn sheets, etc. should not be distributed at this time)</p>	
<p>19. What safe mechanism has been put in place for taking up church collections (e.g. secure and supervised boxes near the doors of the church)?</p>	
<p>20. Have we identified those areas and objects in the church which will require frequent cleaning (i.e. seats, ambo, microphones, shrines, door handles, etc.)?</p>	
<p>21. Has a process been put in place to ensure the regular cleaning of these, including after every gathering?</p>	

<p>22. Is there a schedule for, and appropriate monitoring of general cleaning and sanitising of the church, including the sacristy?</p>	
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LITURGICAL MATTERS

A return to public worship, even gradually, will be a source of great joy and hope to our parish communities. Public health considerations will, however, require some practical adjustments to the way we celebrate our liturgies. These should not in any way compromise the integrity of the liturgy and every effort should be made to support active participation and prayerful and joyful celebration.

23. The following should be noted:

- i.** The dispensation from the Sunday and Holy Day obligation is extended for the time being.
- ii.** Careful consideration should be given to the number of priests and other liturgical ministers that can be safely accommodated in the sanctuary, allowing for physical distancing and ease of movement.
- iii.** The sanctuary area should be arranged in such a way that those exercising a liturgical role can do so while respecting the required physical distance.
- iv.** Concelebration should be limited, and concelebrants should receive Communion under both kinds using separate chalices or by intinction.
- v.** Deacons should continue to proclaim the Gospel and give the Homily, but caution should be exercised regarding ministering at the altar for the time being.
- vi.** Parishes are recommended to have designated places for Readers and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.
- vii.** In the interests of physical distancing, parishes may wish, for the time being, to limit music ministry to a single cantor and a single instrumentalist.

- viii.** Altar servers should assist only when all physical distancing/hygiene considerations have been taken into account, and with careful supervision.
- ix.** Regarding processions, the simple Entrance and Recessional format is recommended at this time.
- x.** Rather than an Offertory Procession, the gifts of bread and wine should be brought by the celebrant from a credence table, placed near the altar, which will also hold the water bowl and finger towel.
- xi.** Care should be taken to avoid the contamination of the hosts which are to be consecrated. It is recommended liturgical practice to consecrate at each Mass a sufficient number of hosts for that celebration only.
- xii.** At this time, the optional exchange of the Sign of Peace can be omitted, or offered in a manner which avoids any physical contact.
- xiii.** The procession for people approaching for Holy Communion should be carefully planned. Stewards may assist if required.
- xiv.** For the time being, it is recommended that Communion should not be given under both kinds, and should be received in the hand.
- xv.** Priests and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should visibly sanitise their hands both before and after the distribution of Communion.
- xvi.** Priests and ministers should wear a face-covering while distributing Communion.
- xvii.** It is advisable to provide a small table at each point of distribution with a bottle of sanitiser. This would enable the priest/minister to re-sanitise their hands if necessary during the distribution of Communion.
- xviii.** Care should be taken to thoroughly clean all vessels and to change purificators and finger towels after each Mass.
- xix.** At the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism, the celebrant will sign the child with the Cross without touching.
- xx.** A jug of fresh water will be blessed for the Baptism. For the time being, priests may prefer to have only one child (or children from one family) baptised in each ceremony. However, if there are a number of Baptisms in sequence, the same jug of Blessed Water could be used, but water may not be re-used from the font or basin.
- xxi.** The anointing with the Holy Oils will be administered by the use of cotton buds.

- xxii.** For the Sacrament of Reconciliation, provision should be made in the body of the church for a confessional area. Consideration should be given to the privacy of the sacrament as well as the requirements of physical distancing and hygiene.

COMMUNICATION

Each Diocese should plan for the clear and effective communication of all necessary protocols and procedures to all parishes in the Diocese.

KILDARE AND LEIGHLIN VERIFICATION AND COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The timing of a return to public worship must follow government advice. As was stated here from the outset, even when such advice has been given, no church should be opened for public prayer or worship until satisfactory arrangements, as indicated in this Framework, have been put in place. Every parish is to take the time needed to ensure a safe opening of any church. In practice this may mean that some parishes resume public celebrations sooner than others. It may mean that one church may open sooner than another church in the same parish. While the aim of every parish should be to open its churches at the earliest permitted opportunity, this is not to be done with risk to people's health.

Parishes will need to clearly communicate with parishioners when churches are ready to open, the calculated capacity of the building given current restrictions, and the weekly schedule for both private and public prayer. Local decisions will also need to be made in relation to how people are allocated places for attendance at Mass over the course of the week.

Before a parish resumes public worship it will be necessary to complete and return to Bishop's House a one page 'DECLARATION OF READINESS' form. As well as confirming that the necessary steps have been taken in order to resume public worship, this form will include details of the church building's calculated capacity, the weekday and Sunday schedule and the intended commencement date, not before June 29th. This information will be uploaded to the diocesan website. As details are likely to change over time, any subsequent changes to this information are to be communicated as they happen so that the diocesan website is accurate and up to date.

CONCLUSION FROM BISHOP DENIS

What we are undertaking is unprecedented. But our objective goes to the heart of who we are as a Christian community. We are readying ourselves to physically gather once more around the table of the Lord. In these past months, as a Christian community we have hungered for a presence; the presence of Christ in the gathering of the community and in the Eucharist. While the Church has continued to live and breathe through the charitable outreach of

parishes, in the setting of the domestic Church of the family, and via an extraordinary array of online Masses and prayer services, we have felt deeply the loss of this presence. As a confirmation candidate wrote in a letter to me, 'Online Mass is good but it is even better when you get to go in real life'. We know the truth of these words.

The immediate work ahead of us is focused on bringing us back into the Eucharistic presence of the Lord and one another. This is essential to who we are as followers of Jesus. When we gather it will be different. We will need to be patient with ourselves and with one another as we come to terms with a new 'normal', an evolving way of being together. We must not undo the enormous good achieved by the sacrifices we have all made to date. As we make the necessary practical arrangements for a safe return to public worship, we must share a common commitment to maintaining safe practices in our parishes. These safe practices should not deter us from continuing to share in the mission of Christ in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

This is a time of great challenge but it is also a time of grace, a time of new possibilities, a time of shared solidarity. God is with us, we need not be afraid.

Every blessing,

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