

Cardinal Vincent Nichols speaks to us from Westminster Cathedral just before churches in England re-open for private, individual prayer

I'm glad we're now looking forward to the 15 June when church doors may be opened. People may enter to just pray individually and quietly. It's a first step. It's a first important step. I think it's important because there is something quite corporeal – quite to do with the body – about the practice of the Catholic faith. It's the way we pray, it's the places in which we choose to pray. It's the fact that we build churches and we make the church an outward expression of our faith. To enter the church is again to enter, in a particular sense, our sacred space. And I know people are looking forward to this.

Here at Westminster Cathedral we've had people praying at the closed door. Often there's been a bunch of flowers left at the door of the church as a symbol of a yearning, a longing to be in the presence of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament that's part of our deep-rootedness of faith that we know that Jesus is present with us and He makes that presence into a visible, tangible sacrament.

So we yearn to be back in the aura, in the presence, so that we can express our love for Him in this way, which is a more full expression of who we are. Now, we've got to do this carefully; we've got to do this properly. We've had guidance, and that will no doubt continue, but I'm confident that great care will be taken by everybody entering a church and by those responsible for the opening of churches that they do it a good way when they're ready. This will be a big step forward for us.

I also think it's a big step forward for society, actually. I think the image of a church door closed is quite stark. It carries its own meaning. The image of a church door wide open is also a very important message – come and enter into what we know to be the house of God and in entering and placing yourself there, we know that we live in God's presence always. When that dimension of God is seemingly absent from a way of life, from a society, when we forget about God, then the lesson is that we soon forget about each other as well. We become absorbed in ourselves and in the limited reach of our own immediate experience. So a wide open door of a church can create a wide open heart to the reality of God, to God's living presence, and to the compassion that we show for each other.

In practice, it means that each church will look at the guidance and look at its capacity, and I hope talk to its neighbouring parishes and go step-by-step and open when those responsible for the church, the priest and his team, know that they can do this properly. It's good to be limited because we have to work out how we can offer seats for people that maintain, at the moment, two metres – six feet – distance between one another. It should be a method that, if at all possible, we go in through one door and out through another, so we're not passing each other at the entrances. It should be an entrance that requires everybody to use hand gel to make sure that they're not bringing in the virus and also so they don't pick it up.

It means a routine of cleaning as well, at the end of the day, so that we do as best we can to ensure that there's no transmission of this silent, very, very deadly virus for some people and that it's safe – safe to come and pray in church again.

The announcement that was made on Sunday (7 June) about the opening of churches on 15 June was quite explicit. It said it was for individual prayer, and it explicitly said that this does not include the celebration of Mass with a public congregation present. So that has to wait – and it has to wait for all sorts of reasons. Obviously announcing a public celebration of Mass draws people together and therefore creates a group, a large group, even if it's limited to some extent. It also involves much closer physical contact, particularly in the distribution of Holy Communion, and customarily, it would involve some singing and public shared proclamation. And all of those things, we're told, have an element of risk of the transmission of this virus. So we have to be patient and we have to cooperate with public authorities on these public health issues. That's a grave responsibility that we have.

There's many things that we've learned and there are some old treasures that we've recovered and some practices, I think, that we've restored as part of the pattern of our life. I think, for example, many families have found this both a difficult and an enriching time. A friend of mine in Liverpool told me she was in a queue for the supermarket and there was a young family in front of her and they said, "oh, come on, you come in front of us". They got talking. And a mother with two young daughters said, "we're having a great time". She said, "we do all the school work in the morning. And then in the afternoon I teach them. I teach them how to cook. I teach them how to sew. I teach them how to knit, how to darn their socks and repair their clothes. And every Friday then we come out and get some sweets." So she was enriching their family life through having extra time together and I know lots of people are doing that.

At its best there are lots of things that we're learning. We're learning the importance of generosity – looking out for those in need. We're learning the importance of appreciating people who do ordinary jobs, like street cleaners and lorry drivers and delivery man and people who stack the shelves in the supermarket – they're appreciated more now. So we've got a deeper appreciation of the dignity of workers.

There are lots of things that we mustn't lose. There's different ways of reaching out, of teaching the faith, of sharing faith, of having a rosary network on the telephone – all sorts of things. We have to keep these things as we move into what people like to speak of as our 'new normal'.

One of the most difficult things of these months has been trying to do my job in a new way. It's almost like learning a new job because most of the ways in which I try to fulfil my responsibilities involve meeting people – going from parish to parish, working closely with the team here at Archbishop's House and all of that has had to stop. I've had to find new ways of keeping links with people, trying to share responsibility. And that's not been easy. Each day seems the same as the previous one. Life has almost become monochrome, whereas normally it was polychrome – it had lots of colour in it. So that's been quite hard. I think, like everybody else, one of the things I've learned is the benefit of not rushing around, the benefit of being able to stop still, the benefit of doing a bit of gardening. The benefit of having a bit more time to pray. The benefit of sitting, regularly, having a routine pattern to every day – something that has kept us steady. And those things, too, we shouldn't just throw away because we should keep that inner stillness even when the speed increases again. (Cardinal Vincent Nichols 10/06/2020). Edited by Fr Jim