



A PASTORAL LETTER

ON PUBLIC WORSHIP AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

To be read at all Masses on the Sunday after the Epiphany

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

10th January 2021

My dear brothers and sisters,

As I write, a third National Lockdown has begun with many restrictions reducing our daily lives to “essentials.” The Government now recognises public worship as one of those essentials. Not a few may ask why churches remain open when other activities are prohibited; and some will question why worship remains the only legally permitted public gathering. Yet, we know that worship is not only a fundamental freedom: it is our primary human vocation. In short, worship is what we were made for!ⁱ The Catholic faith teaches that this worship is supremely offered in the Sacrifice of the Mass in which God is glorified and humanity sanctified.ⁱⁱ

It is your witness to this truth, which I have no doubt, has enabled public worship to be recognised as essential to society during this renewed lockdown. It is almost certainly the care with which all safety measures have been implemented in parishes which has now allowed the celebration of Mass and the Sacraments to continue. I wish, once again, to record my thanks to the clergy, the teams of parish volunteers and every member of the faithful who have together implemented and followed these safety requirements.

In all of this, we recognise the seriousness of our responsibility to help ensure the continuance of public worship and the safety of all. I ask you at the beginning of this New Year and a renewed state of lockdown, not to assume we have yet returned to “normal life” in our parishes; nor to give way to any sense of complacency, especially whilst a new variant of the virus is spreading rapidly. The continuance of public worship into Lent and Easter will, in large measure, depend on our vigilance and all our efforts to follow the measures which have already made our churches among the safest places in society.

In my letter to you in March of last year, I wrote of how these safety requirements can be lived in a spirit of charity. We continue to see how these demands call us to a refinement of charity. Requirements as strange - yet now so familiar - as social distancing, hand sanitising in church and wearing face coverings can serve as expressions of our love for our Lord and our love for the Mass, which continues to be publicly celebrated because of the careful fulfilment of such duties. If we ever feel fatigued in carrying out these requirements, let us renew them with love. At the end of the Christmas celebration, let us also do so with our gaze fixed on the Holy Eucharist, where the same Lord Jesus is now truly present whom wise men once fell down and worshipped; and whom Saint John the Baptist declared himself to be unfit even to kneel at His feet.ⁱⁱⁱ

As I picture you gathered in all the churches of the Diocese, may Saint Joseph - *the man who goes unnoticed, a support and guide in time of trouble*^{iv} - accompany us through these troubled times in fulfilling the greatness of our call to worship and our responsibility both to each other and to the whole of society.

Entrusting each of you to Saint Joseph's prayers,

+ *Mark*

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 2096

ⁱⁱ Second Vatican Council Sacrosanctum Concilium n. 7

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Mt. 2: 11, Mk. 1: 8 & Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist, Council of Trent Session 13

^{iv} Cf. Patris Corde 8th December 2020