

Bishops' statement on the Covid-19 restrictions in Republic of Ireland

On 19 February the four Catholic Archbishops had a meeting with Taoiseach Micheál Martin to continue the dialogue about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of people in our Church. At that meeting the Archbishops affirmed the Church's commitment to the protection of life, health and the promotion of the Common Good. During their Spring Conference, bishops reflected on that meeting and released the following statement:

“We strongly believe that people's freedom to worship publicly should be restored as soon as the current Level 5 restrictions begin to be eased. It is particularly painful for Christians to be deprived, for the second year running, of the public expression of our faith during the most sacred time of Holy Week and Easter. This is especially true given that it has been clearly demonstrated that church buildings are among the safest places for people to gather. We also re-emphasise that the ongoing severe restrictions on attendance at Funeral Masses (currently limited to ten) are causing untold grief to many families.

“Throughout this time of pandemic the approach of the Church has been firmly grounded in the protection of health and life and in the promotion of the Common Good. We recognise that strong restrictions are necessary in times of grave threat to public health. However, such restrictions on personal freedom should be proportionate and for the shortest time possible. Consideration must also be given to people's mental, spiritual and emotional wellbeing. For people of faith, gathering for worship is fundamental to their identity and to their spiritual lives.

Despite assurances from the Taoiseach last month that the concerns expressed by the Archbishops would be given serious consideration, we note with disappointment that none of the issues raised has been responded to. We therefore make an urgent appeal that the following matters be addressed:

- That the easing of restrictions from Level 5 should include the restoration of public worship, albeit in a safe and limited way. For people of faith not to be free to worship until regulations return to Level 2, whilst many other restrictions are eased, is seen as particularly distressing and unjust.
- That the number of mourners permitted at funeral services be increased, with immediate effect, noting that in Northern Ireland this number has not been reduced below 25. The current restriction places immense burdens on grieving families, compounding the pain of their loss.

We strongly believe that allowing these measures would contribute greatly to giving a sense of hope and consolation to many in our Church - in line with the central message of Easter. These measures would be a substantial support to the wellbeing of individuals and parish communities, and ultimately serve the Common Good of all. We encourage Catholics to make their views on these issues known to their own TDs and local representatives. We wish to remain responsive to public health messaging. For this reason we are recommending the postponement of the sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation ceremonies for the time being.

We continue to keep in prayer all who are suffering in this time of Covid, and all who contribute so much to their care.

*Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, Archbishop Dermot Farrell of Dublin,
Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly SMA of Cashel & Emly and Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam.*