

## **A message from the Irish bishops: “Keep Christ at the Centre of Christmas”**

With the beginning of Advent last Sunday, preparations have begun in earnest in parishes across the country for the celebration of Christmas – albeit in a very different context this year. Priests working with Parish Pastoral Councils are making decisions at a local level on how best to celebrate Christmas in a safe manner. We extend our sincere gratitude to parish teams throughout the country - including stewards and cleaners - who generously ensure that our churches are safe environments where people can confidently assemble for worship. Their task, as Christmas approaches, will not be easy, and we appeal to all the faithful to cooperate fully with them.

We strongly encourage the faithful to *keep Christ at the centre* of Christmas this year. Clearly it will be impossible for our usual large congregations to assemble for Mass on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. We wish to remind Catholics that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days remains suspended during the pandemic. But Christmas is about more than just one day. Families are welcome to attend Mass at some point during the twelve days from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. Christmas Masses will also be widely available over webcam and we strongly encourage families to “tune in” from the “domestic churches” of their living rooms and join with those who are gathering in their local churches in welcoming the birth of the Christ-child.

It is possible to experience the spiritual richness of this special season in many ways. Our homes can become “little churches” where we invite the Christ-child in. The age-old tradition of having a Christmas crib in the home and gathering there as a family to pray or to sing a carol will be especially meaningful this year. We also invite families or “household bubbles” to pay a visit to their local church at some time during the twelve days to offer a Christmas prayer at the crib and pray together for their families and for those particularly impacted by the pandemic.

The hope of Advent and the joy of Christmas inspire us to reach out to those in greatest need at this time. *Keep Christ at the centre this Christmas* by bringing the hope and joy of his birth to people who are sick, isolated, lonely or poor. A simple act of kindness can make such a difference. Charities such as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Crosscare, Trócaire and World Missions Ireland will welcome much needed contributions as they have been unable to raise funds in the normal way during the pandemic.

We are particularly conscious of those whose livelihoods have been seriously threatened by the pandemic. We keep in mind those for whom Christmas time may bring feelings of sadness – people coping with bereavement, families that cannot be together, those in care homes who can only have limited visits from their loved ones. Christmas can be difficult for Irish emigrants and migrants living in Ireland, who are unable to travel home. We pray that the time will come very soon when sorrow will ease and loving connections can be fully restored.

Traditionally many people turn at this time of the year to ask for God's forgiveness and for healing of spirit. Although it may not be possible for all who wish to go to Confession to safely avail of the sacrament, we encourage the faithful to confidently place their trust in God's mercy through an Act of Perfect Contrition.

As we continue our journey through the season of Advent, waiting in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, we are acutely aware of the yearning in our country and in our world for hope and consolation. In some ways the Covid-19 restrictions open up greater opportunities for prayer and for reflection, for family time and space to enter into the true meaning of Christmas