

A Pastoral and Personal Letter from Fr Charles
Sunday 29th March 2020 Fifth Sunday of Lent

My dear friends,

Six and a half years ago, on our Patronal Solemnity, 24th September 2013, Bishop Kieran Conry inducted me as your parish priest. As part of that ritual and ceremonial he presented me with the keys of the church. Little did anyone know until today the full power, weight and magnitude of that symbolic act. That I should use those keys to let only myself in was beyond imagining. But that is where we are.

Physically, it is a lock-down and lock-out. But spiritually and sacramentally it is not. The Bishop's words to me were: "Receive the keys of the Church which is the centre of the sacramental life of the Parish." My responsibility and pledge now is to maintain that sacramental life and centre: to enter the church and celebrate daily Mass for you, because you can't, to pray before the Blessed Sacrament for you, because you can't. As I like to put it: I'm not letting the altar in our church 'go cold'.

We draw on ancient, perhaps less fashionable, notions of priesthood and ministry: entering the tent of meeting, the holy of holies, the sanctuary, on behalf of the people, the world of rood screens and altar rails. I celebrate Mass facing the Crucifix and Our Lady's Statue, partly because I can't bear to face the empty church, but also because the action fits the need. OUR Mass at my hands is addressed to God in urgent prayer and supplication for us all.

I will not be broadcasting these Masses. I asked the Lord about this in prayer, and the answer came at the Mass of the Annunciation. I sobbed my way through that Mass, with many mid-sentence crashes and snotty moments. And that's right and true, the offering at Mass of our pain. Priesthood and ministry are often about doing other people's crying for them. A camera would have killed it. I thank my brother priests most deeply who are live-streaming their masses, and I know many of you are finding great solace there, but I think the Lord is calling me to an intimacy with him and with you that no technology can mediate.

For those still out there doing stuff, travelling to work, risking contact with others for the good of many: our thanks, our gratitude, our admiration, and our urgent prayers. But for many, open time and anxiety now yawn wide before us. And both spiritual and secular advisers agree: put in place some structure, some timetable, some new routine to keep it together and mark the days. The basics of the spiritual life are invaluable in this moment: morning and evening prayer, spiritual communion, scripture reading, prayer at mealtimes, rosary and so-on. And acts of kindness, care and charity to our neighbours. And silence.....

.....And silence. Do not fear to be silent. Do not fear to be still. "If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord." (*Romans 14:8*). The Lord is inviting us in this moment, one way or another, to a deeper communion with Him. The Ancient Greeks had a word for this, *Kairos*, meaning the right, critical, or opportune moment. Do not rush to fill the time with activity like an addict returning to their 'fix'. Use your time wisely and well; it is God's gift, precious, and of unknown length.

And now some practical bits and housekeeping:

- **Sunday Obligation.** Stating the obvious, but just for clarity, the obligation of Mass on Sunday and Holydays does not apply in these circumstances. The 'Easter Duty' of Holy Communion is also dispensed.
- **Perfect Act of Contrition.** The Bishops have asked that all should make a Perfect Act of Contrition at this time. Perfect contrition (or a Contrition of Charity) is true and real sorrow for our sins which is created when we realise the immense love of God for each one of us. We express this contrition when we realise how we offend God by our sinful words, deeds and omissions in contrast to the immeasurable love and mercy that he continually shows us. This requires us to be contrite of heart for what we have done, know and be overwhelmed by the love and mercy of God for his children, and to approach this grace with humility and resolution not to sin again.
- **Emergency Baptism.** All should be aware of the provisions of Canon 861 n.2 that 'in a case of necessity, any person who has the requisite intention' may baptise. Plain water will do. The words are 'I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen'
- **Sick Calls.** Calls for a priest should still be made if someone is becoming gravely ill. The response will vary case by case, whether to attend, offer prayers over the phone, or to pray before the Blessed Sacrament.
- **Easter Triduum.** The Decree from Rome is that I should go ahead with the Easter services even if alone. Don't ask me how, I haven't even started to face that yet. If restrictions are no tighter than at present and we are still allowed out for walks then I may set up the Good Friday cross just outside the big ceremonial doors for walk-by (or even drive-by) Veneration from the road. Updates on this next week.

Our Gospel this Sunday is John, chapter 11, the Raising of Lazarus. Famously, it contains the shortest verse in the bible: 'Jesus wept' (*John 11:35*). Our Lord is not unmoved by our grief, loss, fear and pain. Instead he takes it into himself and raises it up. Let us then be free with Him, tell Him our joys and tell Him the dark fears we hardly dare to speak. Pour it out in prayer and in communion with our Masses where I will be pouring it out with you and for you.

Let us hear again with Martha the ultimate reason why we do what we do. "Jesus said 'I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'" (*John 11:25,26*)

I miss you all very much. I want to use my keys again to open the church and gather you in. Keep an eye on the website, and church doors if you're passing. Updates will appear there.

With my love and prayers

Fr Charles

PS. Q: 'How do you make Fr Charles' nose itch?'
A: 'Tell him he mustn't touch his face.'