



Joint Statement from Ss. Peter & Paul's Parish, St. Anthony's Friary and St. Mary's Parish, Athlone regarding the Return to Public Worship

Ss. Peter & Paul's Parish, St. Anthony's Friary and St. Mary's Parish in Athlone have been working together to establish a co-ordinated plan for return to public worship. The Bishops' Conference released a Framework Document in early June, with measures that needed to be put in place before our churches could re-open for public Masses. Committees were formed in each of our faith communities to implement these measures from the Framework Document. In all of our planning, the health, welfare and safety of our congregations were always our uppermost concern. The Framework Document allowed us to prepare our churches for the maximum number of people our churches could accommodate, whilst maintaining the current two-metre social distancing requirement. We had each mapped out the seating arrangements in our churches, the ushering and cleaning requirements, how people could move within the church building, and safe entry and exit routes.

It was to our great dismay that the Government, nine days ago, suddenly announced that numbers permitted to attend our churches were to be capped at 50, inclusive of the priest, staff and all other helpers required to fulfil the regulations. This limit of 50 took no regard of the capacity of our churches or the number of people wishing to attend. It was then with great relief when three days ago, on Thursday evening last, the Government had a change of mind and said they were exempting churches and places of worship from the limit of 50 people for indoor gatherings. Protocols were to be worked out with the various churches and religious bodies on the exact nature of this exemption. However, to our utter frustration, the following day on Friday evening last, our dioceses communicated to us that the government had rescinded the promised exemption for places of worship and had re-imposed the 50-person limit once again.

In a large urban centre like Athlone, where thankfully Mass attendance is quite high, restricting access to our churches to a mere 50 people which includes the priest,

staff and volunteers is simply unreasonable and unworkable and would only serve to upset and offend many of our cherished parishioners, who may end up being refused entry to the church to comply with these regulations. This is totally at variance to the spirit of the Gospel and the vision of welcome we hold for our congregations.

In consultation with our respective and various committees and councils, a joint decision between Ss. Peter & Paul's Parish, St. Anthony's Friary and St. Mary's Parish has been made that we will continue our current ministry of celebrating the Eucharist on a daily basis by means of live-streaming, social media and local radio, and we will NOT re-open our churches for public worship as long as the 50-person limit applies. We want to move forward together and not leave anyone behind or exclude anyone. Our churches will continue to remain open for private prayer each day and we, the priests and friars, continue to remain available for our pastoral ministry as we have done throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

When larger numbers are allowed into our churches for Mass and public worship, we will then need your help as volunteers in maintaining a safe environment for all our indoor gatherings. And so we appeal for volunteers to assist with the cleaning and ushering that will be required. Without you volunteering, we will not be able to return to public worship. Like everything in life, the more volunteers we get the easier it will celebrate public Masses once more. This could be a time of 'new beginning' in the church but please don't wait or expect someone else to volunteer, we need you! If you feel you can help, please make contact with your local priest.

Whilst we all share the frustration with the current situation, let us remember that nothing can separate us from the love of God and we look forward with hope to gathering once more around the table of the Lord.

We will continue to keep you informed of any developments and we thank you for your continued support, encouragement, patience and understanding. May the Lord continue to bless us all and keep us safe in these challenging times.

(Issued by Fr. Gabriel Kinahan, Fr. John Deignan and Fr. Declan Shannon - to be announced publically on the morning of Sunday, 28th June 2020 at 11.00 a.m. and posted on our respective Parish Websites and Social Media at 12.00 noon)