



Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

To the Clergy of the Diocese of Southwark

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, who is our Light, our Hope, and our Salvation,

I commend to you the letter written by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, together with the Bishop of London, concerning the impending lockdown which will begin on Thursday.

Once again national policy is being driven by a concern to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed as the rate of Coronavirus infection increases. We must pray with all our hearts for those suffering from the virus as well as those who are particularly vulnerable and affected adversely in our communities, which is just about everyone!

The Church has a particular role, not least as a beacon of hope, in these bleak times. I am grateful for all that is being done to reach out to so many people, in various conditions of need, as well as sustaining the life of our parish praying communities day by day. The exemplary good practice which has been so evident in our churches as they have steadily re-opened for public worship since the beginning of July, makes it a matter of considerable alarm that from Thursday the use of our churches will be restricted to private prayer and the recording of online worship. We know that this will be so for at least the coming four weeks and is subject to the vote in Parliament on Wednesday. Priests will, however, in this second lockdown have full access to their churches for private prayer and recording online worship. Government and National Church advice and guidance will be sent out by the Coronavirus Task Group as soon as possible. The Prime Minister announced in his statement to the House of Commons today that Remembrance Sunday events can go ahead provided they are held outside and observe social distancing. I ask you, therefore, to make necessary preparations for this Sunday and those following on the assumption that these restrictions will be implemented on Thursday as we will need to undertake what is legally required of us.

The use of churches for essential community outreach programmes, such as foodbanks and nursery provision, will be permitted, but we are facing a second set of restrictions on the conduct of public worship where people are gathering together physically under the church roof. This is a matter of considerable concern to me because our right to worship and access to the sacraments of the Church is a fundamental human right and is part of the essence of our parish system.

I will be doing all I can to encourage my fellow bishops to work together in holding the Government to account for their actions in restricting public

worship. This is not in any way unmindful of the responsibility we all share in protecting public health and well-being in these dangerous times.

The Archbishop of Southwark, the Most Reverend John Wilson, has written to the Roman Catholic community encouraging everyone to write to their Members of Parliament and civic representatives questioning these restrictions and I encourage you, my brothers and sisters, to do likewise, not least considering the impact they will have on mental health and well-being. The Church is not a branch of the leisure or hospitality industries with a tap that can be turned on and off by politicians at will. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in Magna Carta and it is of the very essence of our common life that the liberties and freedoms of the people of this land extend to public worship. The Church is in the business of healing and salvation - the light of Christ continues to shine brightly.

At the same time it is important to avoid a blame culture. It is important that we do not blame Government or other state agencies for what has been a global health pandemic which has engulfed so many nations. This has made abundantly clear to us all that our lives are interdependent and we need to work together for the common good and public health.

My brothers and sisters, as the challenges of recent months continue may I on behalf of my Episcopal colleagues assure you of our love, appreciation and prayers. Let us in these coming days and weeks continue to turn to God for the strength and courage we need to uphold one another and serve all the people of South London and East Surrey faithfully, infused by the love which compelled our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to suffer and die for us.



**The Rt Revd Christopher Chessun
Bishop of Southwark**