



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

Rt Hon Luke Pollard MP
House of Commons
By email

1st November 2020

As the local Catholic Bishop in this part of the country, I write on behalf of the Catholic community here, to express our dismay at the Government's decision requiring the cessation of acts of public communal worship, as indicated in its guidance on the *New National Restrictions from 5 November*.

Faith communities have played a vital role in sustaining personal, spiritual and mental health these past months, as well as encouraging vital charitable activities, which support millions of people in all sections of the community, and especially the most vulnerable. That critical service toward the common good of all, is created and sustained by communal worship and prayer. For Catholics, the Mass plays a central part in their lives. It is essential in sustaining personal, spiritual and mental health, as well as nurturing the energy and generosity needed to serve others.

I know that Catholic communities, and others, have done a great deal to make our churches safe places in which all have been able to gather in supervised and disciplined ways. It is deeply concerning that the Government has not shown any evidence that would make the banning of communal worship, with all its human costs, a productive part of combatting the virus.

I believe it is incumbent on the Government to be transparent and produce the evidence that fully justifies its decision to ban communal worship. The draft legislation that is before Parliament in these days, for debate and vote, provides an opportunity to ask the Government to publish the data that informed the decision to cease public worship in the proposed restrictions. If such evidence cannot be produced, then the decision to ban public worship in Catholic churches should be removed from the proposed legislation.

I would be grateful if you would kindly ensure that this matter is addressed in the debate, so that the Catholic community, and other faith groups, are treated fairly, and with a recognition of the legitimate rights to religious freedom and expression, so deeply held within our democracy. I thank you for your attention in this matter and assure you and your colleagues of remembrance in my prayers in these challenging days for all.

Yours devotedly

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth