

Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

My dear brothers and sisters,

The one piece of 'good news' in the advice issued by the Government, following the Prime Minister's address last night, was that people can still attend public Mass. This present 'lockdown' will, therefore, be different to what we experienced between March and June of last year. It is a blessing that people can still visit Church, and that we are able to continue to celebrate Mass publicly. We know this is not the case in some other places.

We are grateful to the Government for recognising the central place that places of worship have in the life of our country. They are vital for our spiritual and personal wellbeing, and our worship of God, in turn, is a source of strength and spiritual energy for our continued service of others. We know we must observe the protocols around 'Hands-Face-Space' with an increased vigilance, given the virulence of the latest strain of the virus.

I am, nevertheless, aware within myself - and I imagine within many of us - of a certain weariness. It does not help that we are in the depths of winter, and the normal familial, and friendship supports, are not easily accessible to us. It is also clear that life will not return to any kind of 'new normal' for several months yet. COVID will continue to exercise its power, limiting so many aspects of our lives.

I believe each of us must 'dig deep' within ourselves, and in our faith, in these months. Tomorrow we will celebrate the great Solemnity of the Epiphany, when we recall visit of the three wise men and the homage they came to pay to the Infant King. They brought the gift of Myrrh, used to anoint those who die, recognising that this child would participate fully in the reality of our human mortality. As we reflect on that 'painful gift'

let us continue to work with those close to death, to give them and their loved ones, hope in a time of darkness. The wise men brought Gold, a sign that Jesus is King; a reminder to us that we need to put our countries resources in these months, at the service of those most in need.

Their third gift was Frankincense – a reminder that this child they were greeting was also their God and deserving of their worship and prayer. We need to continue to pray deeply; to find silence to be with God, who makes sense of all our struggles. It is vital, in order to be in touch with the life of Jesus and His Holy Spirit which He has poured into our hearts.

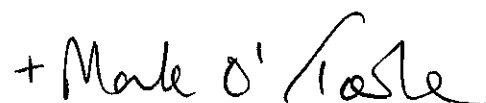
In that vein, I am reminded of a maxim of St John of the Cross which gives a direction, and to me, a certain consolation:

“Enter within yourself and work there in the presence of your Lord who is always there loving you.”

So often we do not see the fruits of our prayers or of our labours, and this seems acutely so in the time of COVID. Yet every faithful thing we undertake in this time, for the love of God and of our neighbour, will bear fruit in ways beyond our understanding, I am sure, even if the reality of that is ‘hidden with Christ in God’, at least to us. In these months, then, let us look to Him, who brings light to our eyes and strength to our weary limbs.

In this year of St Joseph, the great protector and defender of Jesus and Mary, in a time of crisis, it is to Him that I entrust us all, and I ask your prayer for me.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Mark O'Toole". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth