



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

Pastoral Message to the Diocese: "Let us be like Christ the Servant"

Dear friends,

You will recall when I wrote before Easter, that I described this period we are living through as "a long Good Friday". That is still so true, in so many ways. I have also been struck, over these past days, at how much each of us is having to live the Paschal Mystery, participating in a very real way in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today, I would like to share some thoughts with you on how we have been invited into sharing in the Lord's experience of His Last Supper with His disciples. At first, this may appear odd, since we are still unable to celebrate the Eucharist publicly, and we are not even able, yet, to visit our Churches to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. Hopefully, it will not be long before we are able to do so.

You know that on Maundy Thursday, alongside remembering the gifts of the Eucharist and the gift of the Priesthood, the Lord also gives us a very profound example of loving service. The Gospel for that night is from John 13, where Jesus humbles himself to wash His disciples' feet. We experience Him as *Christ the Servant* in a very beautiful way. Having washed their feet, he says, "I have given you an example for you to copy what I have done". We know that message is for us, too.

This Gospel, of the washing of the disciple's feet, is being fulfilled many times over, in these days. Again, and again we hear the stories of people caring for others. On a personal note, my brothers and I are extremely grateful for the loving care and treatment my mother received in hospital these past weeks whilst battling Covid19. I also wish to thank all of you for your concern and prayers. Mum was discharged to my brother's home earlier today. As she left the ward, all the hospital staff cheered and clapped, exclaiming, "Mary is going home". Every patient who returns home is celebrated in this touching manner. For me, it is a real experience of the power of prayer, as things looked very dark some days. She now requires ongoing support at home and a team of carers are assisting with that. I am conscious that it is doctors, nurses, cleaners, carers, the Catholic Chaplain, and support staff, who are presenting the face of Christ the Servant to our family in these days. I know it is the same for many of us.

I want to give thanks, too, for the many acts of loving service that are taking place in our Diocese, carried out by so many, in so many different situations. I would like to highlight the following as examples of the various ways in which priests and parishioners are modelling *Christ the Servant*.

Reaching out to the Isolated and most vulnerable

Caritas Plymouth has developed a short guide for parishes to support social action and offer some top tips for keeping volunteers and communities safe. Some of the very good things that they point to:

- Parishes have compiled lists of parishioners who may find isolation difficult to cope with and are linking them up with those willing to provide befriending.
- Parish volunteers, in some areas, have set up rotas to call vulnerable people on a regular basis, some providing shopping or other practical support for those who are self-isolating.
- Priests are actively encouraging parishioners who are not self-isolating to volunteer locally. Those who are isolating are being encouraged to offer phone support.
- Parishioners are being asked to remember others in their prayers, and to support other charities e.g. through donations to foodbanks, charities supporting the homeless, or seafarers.
- Some parishes have made their grounds available for families living without gardens, to provide a safe space to take their daily exercise.
- Some parish groups have sent cards to all Care Homes in the parish area, thanking them for what they are doing, and letting them know we are praying for them.
- First communion children have been invited to make rainbows, to be posted in windows or sent to local care homes.
- Direct support is provided to vulnerable groups (including seafarers, refugees, homeless and the elderly) through key partner charities including the SVP, the Catholic Children's Society (Plymouth), St Petroc's and Stella Maris.
- Our parishioners are taking action in their local communities. Many are key workers undertaking the vital roles that keep others safe and well, others are volunteering in their local communities to operate helplines, shop for others, deliver medicines or offer befriending services.

Any parishes wanting any further advice or support are invited to contact caritas@prcdtr.org.uk

Young people and schools

- Our Catholic schools continue to provide support for the children of Key Workers and/or vulnerable children and provide inspiration and encouragement.
- 32 Plymouth CAST schools are currently open across the Diocese. On Monday this week, over 300 children of key workers and vulnerable children were being cared for in our schools.
- Schools have created rainbow banners to thank the NHS, and those supporting the sick and dying.
- Some Catholic schools are organizing their own food collections and taking food to vulnerable families. School deliveries are being undertaken by teachers as part of the process of ensuring that children get the support they need at this time.
- Primary school children have written letters to older people who are self-isolating in a number of our parishes and have started to receive responses.
- Resources for the religious formation of our children and young adults are available online at the Diocesan website under the title “Spiritual Life...(then).... Sharing the Faith”.
- Young people are sharing messages of inspiration and encouragement via our Diocesan Facebook page, with short video messages and artwork as well as preparing children’s liturgies and sharing them online.

Proclaiming and Celebrating the Faith

- There has been an amazing growth in the use of social media to experience Mass online, and to pray through live streaming and YouTube. Thousands of people have been supported and encouraged through these messages of hope with more people attending ‘virtual’ masses than we anticipated. We must hold on to some of this presence in online platforms, after ‘lockdown’ has been lifted.
- Some parishes are using Zoom and Skype to ‘gather’ and share experience and to talk about their faith.
- Pastoral care continues and in some creative ways - including opportunities for the Sacrament of Penance (whilst respecting social distancing using the car park).
- Priests are ministering to the dying in hospitals, Care Homes and private houses, offering encounters in the sacraments and praying, for and on behalf of others.
- Priests are celebrating Masses every day in their parish church, without a congregation. Several of them have written to me about this experience, and how they are very much doing this for their parish, for the Church and for our world at this time. One wrote: *“When I open my arms to say “The Lord be with*

you" I find I am saying it to all my friends and relations near and far, to all the people for whom, as a priest, I have been ordained to pray. The fact there is no congregation present whom normally one is either speaking to directly or trying to draw into the communal prayer of the Mass, means that the dynamic becomes intensely personal. The Word of God is being spoken to me alone – what is it saying to me, here and now? The prayers of the Mass which I utter are my prayers which I must pray in faith, hope and love. Of course, this is also true in every celebration at which others are present, but when one is alone, there is no hiding away: one is metaphorically naked before God as Jesus was literally on the Cross – my words really have to be his words "This is my body...." It is helpful for me to know that the Church – through the Pope and the Bishops – is asking me to celebrate in these days on behalf of the people. "With you I am a Christian, for you I am a priest" as Augustine said. So, I am fulfilling one of my priestly ministries, not just for my own benefit, but for others – not least to pray for an ending to this plague and a return to the coming together of God's people around a communal altar.

- Each week parishioners are connected through email and letters from their parish priests
- Through social media, the Diocesan Evangelisation Team are helping people in their homes, to have some formation on how to connect and communicate with confidence, conversations about faith, with friends, family or in everyday encounters. More people can do so by registering their interest at the following link - info@genesismission.co.uk

I am sure that there are many other examples of loving service which you have experienced locally. Let us thank God for them all.

In this period, leading to the Feast of Pentecost, we recall the experience of Our Lady and the disciples waiting in the Upper Room for the gift of the Holy Spirit. It looks as though 'lockdown' will go on for us, for several weeks yet. May we unite ourselves to that experience of the Early Church, so that the Holy Spirit may be freshly poured out upon us all, leading us 'outwards' in the mission of the Lord. Let us each be like Christ the Servant.

Pray for me.

Yours devotedly

+ Mark O'Toole .

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Bishop of Plymouth