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To the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Southwark Concerning the Reopening of Churches for Individual Prayer

Dear brothers in Christ

I renew to you my thanks for all that you have been doing during this difficult time when our churches have been closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have now reached the point when, from Monday 15 June, it will be permissible to open places of worship again for individual prayer. This is surely a source of rejoicing; but it also presents challenges.

In reality, not every church will be able to put in place the necessary requirements by next Monday. It is imperative that any church which does open is fully compliant with the obligatory prerequisites. There can be no exceptions to this. The consequences of any church breaking the rules could have devastating consequences for the Catholic Church as a whole across England and Wales.

The threat posed by Covid-19 is still very much present and the lessening of restrictions must be undertaken in a measured and considered manner. Understandably, so many of our people want to return to church and pray. They want to receive the sacraments and we, in turn, long to minister to them. We are so blessed by our parishioners' strength of faith and their desire to re-establish normal church life. This must, however, be approached prudently, and can only be achieved gradually and with great care.

The first step of returning to some sort of normality is the opening of churches for private, individual prayer from 15 June. It is important to emphasise that **this is the date from which churches may open and not the date on which churches must open**. The limitations of particular church buildings, the availability of volunteers, and the requirements of the Risk Assessment, may all mean that some churches, perhaps a majority of our churches, may not be able to open immediately or in the short term. Some may even struggle to open at all until we are able to celebrate the liturgy as we did before the pandemic began.

I want to stress that there is absolutely no pressure upon any church to open. It is a local decision, to be proposed by the parish priest and confirmed by the Area Bishop/Episcopal Vicar. Each parish priest will need to make his decision based on the completion of the Risk Assessment. A parish that cannot fulfil all the requirements of the Risk Assessment cannot open. Of those churches that are able to open, the decisions about when they open, and for how long, must be made by the parish priest based on the ability to fulfil the requirements of the Risk Assessment.

I will be issuing a pastoral message this weekend to everyone in the Archdiocese explaining what may or may not be possible after 15 June, hopefully to help people manage their expectations, while also supporting them in their return to church to pray.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) has produced guidance on reopening churches for individual prayer. A copy is attached in the email with this letter. It has been updated with further points in relation to Safeguarding. **This guidance is mandatory in the Archdiocese of Southwark and the requirements it contains must be met; there can be no exceptions or dispensations.** If you cannot fulfil the Risk Assessment, you must not open your church.

I appreciate that the Risk Assessment may appear bureaucratic and onerous, and I am sorry this is the case. It is, however, essential. We have asked the Government to allow us to open our churches for individual prayer and this request has been granted. We must, therefore, ensure that the trust shown to us is honoured. We need to make certain that nothing we do, or fail to do, contributes to the spread of the virus. We do this for the health and wellbeing of every person who may visit one of our churches to pray, and for those they come into contact with, and to protect the reputation of the Church.

The attached Risk Assessment must be completed and sent to your Area Bishop/Episcopal Vicar for approval; and a copy should also be sent to the Archdiocesan property team.

You will see in the Risk Assessment that Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is permitted while a church is open for individual prayer. Where this happens, it must be, as it were, part of the opening schedule. There can be no timetabled or group events in the church, including meetings of prayer groups, communal rosary, or Benediction. Nothing which encourages people to gather at a particular time is allowed. The Blessed Sacrament may be exposed on the main altar for silent, personal prayer, as if one were paying a visit to pray before the Tabernacle. In this case, the Blessed Sacrament should be exposed before the church opens and must remain exposed until after the church is closed. A

decision must be made whether Exposition will be integral to the opening of the church or not.

A question has arisen about people who are subject to a Safeguarding Plan which specifies when someone may attend Mass and where, and the necessary supervision in place for this. Such arrangements relate to attendance at Mass and those subject to a Safeguarding Plan are not able to attend church for individual visits of prayer at this time. The individuals affected will be advised directly by the Safeguarding Office.

Also attached with the Risk Assessment and the copy of the CBCEW Guidance are details about the collection of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE.) There are also some example posters which may be of use.

I know there is a lot of information to take in here, and in the attachments. If you have any concerns or uncertainties about opening your church on Monday, then please wait until these can be addressed. There is no rush to open. I know that some churches are ready to open, and the Cathedral will be opening from Monday. This will be greatly appreciated by those who are able to visit. Whatever appropriate decision you take locally, will be supported by the Archdiocese.

Please contact your Area Bishop or Episcopal Vicar if you have any questions, or get in touch with Archbishop's House.

I remain immensely grateful for all you have done and are doing. This is the first step on the road back to restoring the full sacramental, pastoral, and liturgical life of the Church. Please pray that we can move forward safely.

With the assurance of my prayers

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a cross symbol followed by a stylized, cursive name that appears to be 'John Wilson'. The signature is written on a white background.

The Most Rev John Wilson
Archbishop of Southwark