

## **SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI**

### **RE-OPENING OF CHURCHES**

On the 7th June the Communities Secretary announced that churches could re-open for individual prayer from the 15th June. Community-led prayer/devotions/informal prayer meetings or Mass are not permitted. Places of worship, he said, still have discretion over when they consider it safe to open and may decide to remain closed or open at a slower pace. For those needing to open, the Diocese has circulated a checklist running to 11 pages of 48 items! It will be for the Bishop to decide (on the basis of an inspection by the Diocesan Property Manager) whether an individual Church can re-open.

Opening will not be wholesale. In our Deanery, provisionally, the Cathedral, Sacred Heart and St Mary, High Green, will be the first group.

There is a number of considerations before embarking on the exercise, which in our case would be limited to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel only.

First, in “normal” times, the number of people visiting amounts to about five or six. The regular ones are over 70 and/or have increased vulnerability to the virus.

Secondly, there is expense involved. Supplies of alcohol-based anti-viral hand gel, appropriate cleaning materials, disposable gloves and aprons, tapes to mark distances and close off areas, signs and notices.

Thirdly, prior to the initial opening, the chapel would have to be cleaned thoroughly with appropriate materials. Thereafter it would need to be cleaned at least once a day (presumably on the days it was open) with extra care to clean handles/switches etc., the cleaners being equipped with disposable gloves and aprons.

Fourthly, when the chapel is open “at least two” stewards must be present throughout the opening to ensure hand sanitation in and out, limiting numbers and excluding any with cold or flu symptoms. Face coverings are recommended. The priest can not undertake this job, nor can anyone over 70.

Fifthly, numbers will be limited by the space. The present checklist requires a gap of 2m clearance between seats/people. Even if the Government reduce

this, I suspect the Diocese will err on the side of caution. Five, possibly six chairs could be arranged in the chapel at 2m distances.

Sixthly, no other part of the building would be open, including the main church, the hall and the toilets there and in the narthex. No food or drink could be brought in.

My view, and it is shared by Fr Kevin, is that the whole thing is hopelessly impractical and we should save our efforts for re-opening at some time in the future when Masses return. (That may bring its own problems, of course, if numbers have to be limited by (anti)social distancing.) but that will be another day!

11th June, 2020.