



## Diocese of Down and Connor COVID-19 Guidance: 15 February 2022

The Minister for Health has announced significant easing of restrictions and regulations relating to Covid-19. This easing is effective from 15 February 2022<sup>1</sup>. While the obligation for Parishes to undertake risk assessments and to put in place reasonable measures to prevent transmission of the virus has been removed, the Diocese continues to strongly recommend a number of protective measures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all members of parish communities, especially those who are anxious or particularly vulnerable. These measures reflect the ongoing public health advice given to all members of the public.<sup>2</sup>

Parish priests should consult with their Covid Group or Parish Pastoral Council before implementing changes.

### ***Social Distancing***

Parishes may remove measures put in place to ensure social distancing, such as closed off pews. Parishes should now consider reopening smaller churches where social distancing requirements rendered their use impractical. Parishes should consider if the practice of booking places at Mass is still required.

### ***Face Coverings***

The Diocese strongly recommends that face coverings be worn at all times while in the church and throughout liturgical celebrations, even when seated.

### ***Cleaning routines & Hand Sanitizers***

The requirement for cleaning/sanitizing churches after every gathering is removed. Given the ongoing risk of transmission through high touch areas, it is essential that suitable hand sanitizers should continue to be provided at the entrances and other appropriate points in Churches and other parish buildings.

### ***Ventilation***

Good ventilation remains a key aspect of preventing transmission wherever people gather. If a person who has COVID-19 is present in a poorly ventilated space, the amount of virus in the air can build up, increasing the risk of spreading COVID-19. The more fresh air that moves through a space, the quicker any airborne virus will be removed. Churches should be well ventilated during and after any gathering, by opening windows and doors and using any mechanical ventilation system available (you should avoid using mechanical systems that simply recirculate air.)

### ***Holy Water Fonts, missalettes, newsletters etc.***

For the time being, holy water fonts should remain empty. Missalettes and newsletters/ bulletins should not be used *unless they are single use* and are retained by the user or disposed of after use.

### ***Contact Tracing (Track & Trace)***

It is no longer recommended that Parishes record contact details for those attending Mass or other liturgical events. All paper records should now be carefully destroyed by shredding. Digital records (eg Word/Excel files should be deleted, ensuring that it is also deleted from the PC desktop 'recycling bin'.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-swann-announces-easing-covid-regulations>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-how-stay-safe-and-help-prevent-spread>

## **The Celebration of the Sacraments (Including Weddings and Funerals)**

Parishes should continue to observe the principle of simplicity in the Liturgy for the time being, ensuring a dignified celebration, while at the same time ensuring that the length of the celebration is not unnecessarily prolonged.

The obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holydays remains suspended at this time.

### ***Liturgical Ministries***

Where it has not already happened, deacons, readers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion and altar servers may all resume their ministry. We continue to recommend the use of face coverings and good hand hygiene by all these groups.

Choirs, cantors, soloists and liturgical music groups should continue to observe the following advice:

- wear face coverings.
- sing at a reduced volume, using amplification if available.
- Ensure good ventilation whenever singing is part of the liturgy.
- In keeping with the principle of a simple liturgy, choose a repertoire that will not unnecessarily prolong the liturgy.

### ***Adaptations to the Liturgy***

- Congregational singing is permitted.
- Where readers etc. use a temporary lectern, they may return to the Ambo.
- Concelebration is permitted. Concelebrants and deacons should receive the precious blood from separate chalices or, if necessary, by intinction.
- The sign of peace remains suspended at this time.
- Those administering Holy Communion should continue to sanitize their hands before and after the distribution, and to wear face coverings. Communion in the hand should remain the norm. Where accommodation is made for those who object to receiving in the hand this should be made at the end of Communion time and hands should be sanitised immediately after each recipient.

### ***Weddings***

Nuptial Masses should be celebrated in accordance with the general guidance for Mass.

### ***Funerals***

Clergy should continue to liaise closely with Funeral Directors in the safe conduct of funeral rites.

All rites at the Church should be conducted in accordance with the general principles for liturgy above. When attending a wake house, we continue to recommend that clergy/pastoral workers/Bethany teams arrange with the family to visit at a quiet time when only family members are present. The practice of offering prayers outdoors, such as the rite of removal, is to be commended as appropriate for the time being.

### ***Baptisms***

It is no longer necessary to use cotton buds to administer the holy oils. If multiple Baptisms are occurring at the same ceremony, family and friends should be seated in groups around the church. Members of the congregation should be asked to remain in their seats for the duration of the ceremony.

### ***Sick-calls and First-Friday Visits***

There is no restriction on making emergency or routine pastoral visits. Priests and other ministers should continue to exercise caution when undertaking sick-calls and making visits to the sick and housebound. All mitigations, such as face coverings and good hand hygiene should continue to be observed as previously advised. It is no longer necessary to use a cotton bud to administer the Sacrament of the Sick.

### ***Sacrament of Reconciliation***

We continue to recommend that the sacrament be celebrated in a well-ventilated space. In planning communal celebrations (Penitential Services) the general practices outlined above should be considered.

### ***Confirmation, First Penance and First Holy Communion***

Conscious that most parishes have put in place arrangements for these celebrations and bearing in mind the continued relatively high rates of transmission in the school population, we recommend that parishes engage with the school(s) and parents before making any change to the arrangements in place.

It is no longer necessary to use a cotton bud when anointing during the Sacrament of Confirmation.

### ***Ash Wednesday***

Ashes may be distributed on Ash Wednesday.

### **Parish Halls/Centres**

Parish Halls and Centres may reopen fully. Users and organisers of activities must note and implement the ongoing public health guidance referenced above.

Where Parish Halls and Centres have not yet reopened, we recommend that parish priests engage with the Parish Pastoral Council and Finance Committee to assess the current and future pastoral needs of the parish and the financial implications of reopening.