

Baptism of the Lord

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

With all but essential shops, gyms, hairdressers/barbers and many other buildings, to which we are accustomed to having free access, closed due to the new lockdown, it comes as a surprise to many that Catholic churches are still open. They are not only open for private prayer but also for communal worship. There are many who question the wisdom of continuing to have Mass with a congregation, albeit one limited in accordance with the social distancing requirements, at a time when the new strain of the corona virus has our region in an increasingly tighter grip. And yet the permission to remain open comes from the Government which can only have taken this decision because of the role which it feels religious services play in the mental health and general wellbeing of people. It is important that the Church file away for future reference this Government endorsement of worship and of the corresponding liberty which is regarded as fundamental in all Western societies, i.e. the freedom of religion.

A second reason why we are still allowed to gather for Mass, and why our Catholic authorities have decided to avail of the freedom to worship granted her people, is the fact that since the end of the first lockdown and throughout the second no church is known to have been a place of infection. In other words the Health & Safety audits, the professional training of teams of stewards, the meticulous attention to detail displayed by our stewards and the general willingness of the punter in the pew to observe the regulations which they know to be essential in any concerted attempt to contain the virus, have all produced positive results.

And yet, I feel all would agree, the permission to stay open and to continue having communal worship is a concession by the Government, a reward for good behaviour. But, especially given that other churches, in particular the Church of England, have decided to remain closed despite the Government allowing them to remain open, there is a heavy onus on us to be even more meticulous in our attention to the regulations. This demands sacrifices of all of us: wearing our masks, staying in the pews assigned to us, keeping our distance from those ahead of us and behind us in the queue for Holy Communion and, perhaps most difficult of all, not lingering in either the narthex nor the esplanade outside the church to chat with our neighbours.

The freedom to stay open, the freedom to continue having Mass, comes at a price. And the common good is best served by our living by the Government rules and by the discipline our parish, with so many groups of parishioners working together (and at a social distance, organising much of their work of service to the community on Zoom), being observed at all times, Sundays and weekdays. Thankful that our churches are still open for Mass and that we can gather, our resolve to keep things that way by observing the discipline the pandemic has imposed on us to the letter must remain as firm as it has been up until now.

Father Patrick