



DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

Bishop's House, East Denton Hall, 800 West Road, Newcastle, NE5 2BJ

Tel: 0191 228 0003 | Fax: 0191 274 0432 | Email: bishop.robert@rcdhn.org.uk | Web: www.rcdhn.org.uk

Pastoral Letter of Bishop Robert Byrne CO **for distribution in Holy Week 2020**

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

I especially wanted to write to you as we begin Holy Week facing the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic. I want to assure you that all the clergy and faithful are uppermost in my thoughts and prayers. Without doubt we are living in challenging times but we should see this as an opportunity to have an ever-deeper faith and trust in the Lord. In these days of Holy Week, we unite ourselves more earnestly to the sufferings of the Lord on the Cross and wait with him for the glorious day of the Resurrection and new life.

At this time, we normally look forward to participating in the events of our Lord's death and resurrection through the liturgies of the Sacred Triduum. Sadly, this year we are unable to do so. Instead we unite ourselves spiritually with the whole Church in our homes. We can do this in several ways. I would encourage all those who are able to read the texts of the Holy Week liturgies and to pray the Liturgy of the Hours or the Holy Rosary. We can also make a Spiritual Communion which prayerfully expresses our faith in Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament. There are a number of spiritual resources on our diocesan website to help you do this. Thanks to modern technology we can also join with our Cathedral and other churches in the diocese and elsewhere which are live-streaming the ceremonies. In these ways we are able to deepen our unity with our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are suffering with us and sometimes in a worse situation.

A number of people have asked about the Sunday Mass obligation and the requirement to make our Easter duties of receiving Holy Communion and confessing our sins. By decree of the President of the Bishops' Conference of 18th March 2020, the Bishops of England and Wales have dispensed with the Sunday obligation to attend Mass for the time being and also, for this year, the requirement to receive Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Reconciliation at Easter or thereabouts. The Bishops have asked that all should make a Perfect Act of Contrition at this time. This requires us to be contrite of heart for what we have done, know and be overwhelmed by the love and mercy of God for his children, and to approach this grace with humility and resolution not to sin again.

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Many of us are bewildered by the situation in which we find ourselves. Normal life has ceased by the unprecedented measures which all of us have a duty to undertake in order to contain and stop this threat to life. Nonetheless our Catholic faith remains a vital comfort and support to us now and as we face the future. We can sustain our life of prayer by the reading of the Scriptures, praying the Rosary, novenas and litanies and using the social media to keep ourselves connected in the communion of faith.

I want to say a special word to those who are preparing to be baptized or received into full communion with the Church at the Easter Vigil. I had the pleasure of meeting many of you at the Rite of Election on the 1st Sunday of Lent. I witnessed then the excitement and enthusiasm that you had at taking this great step in your journey of faith. I am sorry that you are unable to continue this journey as you planned. I assure you that your baptism or reception will take place as soon as possible. In the meantime, please see the delay as an opportunity to deepen your love and trust in the Lord. His grace continues to work in our lives whatever the circumstances.

Let me take this opportunity to thank all those who are doing so much to support our local communities and parishes. I want to thank especially our NHS staff and all those who have care of the sick. You are doing a splendid job and we are all deeply grateful to you. Thanks also to our headteachers and staff of the numerous schools that have remained open - your work is an invaluable support to parents working in the NHS and others who are at the forefront of the battle against the Covid-19 virus.

I ask you all to remember the injunction of the Lord to love our neighbour, which has not been suspended! Please have a special care for those who are elderly or vulnerable and be ready to give them a helping hand. Please keep in your prayers those who suffer with the virus and those who care for them and for those who have died.

Although we are more physically separated at this time yet we are united through our faith and in the prayers of Our Lady and the saints. Let us find our hope in Christ who is with us in all the trials of our life.

Yours devotedly in Christ,



✠ Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

