



Over the past few months, we have experienced something unseen before in this land. Even during the dark days of martyrdom and persecution, Catholics have gathered in small groups to celebrate Holy Mass. After the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, such gatherings were no longer illegal. After the restoration of the Catholic Hierarchy in 1850, the Church began in earnest to build schools, then churches and religious houses. In truth, the Church's energy has been somewhat drained in recent decades. We all need to discover again the energy for mission which comes from a lively faith and a passion for the Church, which is the Body of Christ.

The coronavirus has achieved something which persecution and war has not done, the closure of our churches and the inability to gather together to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass. Let's be clear about this, the bishops and priests have not closed the churches. Neither have the UK government in a sense. A deadly and highly contagious virus has brought this about. And it has also brought to the fore a serious hunger in our communities. Many are missing the solace of sitting quietly in a church for a few moments before the Blessed Sacrament. Many are yearning to gather together and to celebrate Holy Mass and to receive the sacraments. A number have let these things lapse and would dearly like to rediscover them again.

Cardinal Vincent and the Bishops' Conference advisors are meeting with the UK government to seek a way forward, to respond to the deep thirst in many souls. Government regulations do not allow us to open the churches at the moment. This way forward will not be easy and will demand careful planning and preparation. Here in the Northampton Diocese, a small task force has met to put together a strategic plan. We need to ensure everyone is safe and this will mean it is not possible to open every church immediately. But I want to insist, the well of pastoral hunger in my heart, and that of all our clergy, is as deep as the spiritual need in your heart. As soon as we can safely open wide the doors of our churches, we will be standing ready to do so.

In the meantime, please write to your MP and tell him of your need. We all need to become an army of prayer, asking heaven to change hearts and minds and protect us from the taunts against our faith in our Lord and His Holy Church. Ask Our Lady of Walsingham to intercede for us, to keep our minds focused on the truth in charity and to deliver us of this terrible virus pandemic.

And finally, be assured of my daily remembrance of you and your needs in prayer. Thank you for the many kind words I have received in these weeks. Please pray for me and all our clergy at this time.

With my blessing and desire that you experience the strong embrace of the Good Shepherd.

✠ David