

Guidance for Communal Worship during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This Guidance is offered to the Dioceses of England and Wales to offer advice for safe communal worship in Catholic churches during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Government Guidance The government has updated its guidance for the safe use of places of worship. As of 9 December 2021, England will move to Plan B in response to the risks of the Omicron variant. Wales For Wales, you can read the guidance here. It also has updated guidance on face coverings. Bishops' Conference Guidance General Information Following the statement by the Prime Minister on Wednesday 9 December, there has been a Government directive that further restrictions to mitigate against viral transmission, especially in the light of the new Omicron variant, will be imposed. Summarising the Government directives:

From Friday 10 December, face coverings will be required by law in most indoor settings.

From Monday 13 December office workers who can work from home should do so.

From Wednesday 15 December, certain venues and events will be required by law to check that all visitors aged 18 years or over are fully vaccinated, have proof of a negative test in the last 48 hours, or have an exemption.

The requirements for NHS Covid passes will not apply to places of worship and the acts of worship associated with them. However, any social gatherings linked to events in churches will need to comply with new requirements but only when 500 or more people are involved. Face Coverings HM Government has made the wearing of face covering mandatory in Places of Worship from Friday 10th December 2021 (see here). However, there will be exemptions for those leading worship, public proclamation of scriptural readings or prayers, and those who are unable to wear face coverings and are exempt (the guidance for this can be found on the same page as above). Singing HM Government guidance states that "There is a reasonable excuse for someone to remove a face covering when it is reasonably necessary for them to sing, for example, if they are singing as part of a choir, or during a service, rehearsal or for a performance." The current Church guidance states that congregational singing should take place with face coverings in place and choirs and soloists may sing without such coverings. As the Church moves towards Christmas celebrations which often involves carol services and other singing events, it is strongly recommended that congregational singing within church buildings continues with the applied face coverings. Practical Guidance for Churches With respect to the current situation with the Omicron variant it is important to ensure the following points are followed in our churches:

That people displaying any symptoms of Covid-19 should stay at home and not travel to church or participate in person.

That hand sanitiser is available to those attending the Church.

Face coverings must be worn by those attending public acts of worship unless there is a genuine exemption or the person is leading worship or participating in a role that requires the mask to be removed for a period of time.

That there is good ventilation and air throughput in the building; in this case, because of climatic conditions, it would be important to remind people to wrap up well in church.

There is now very strong evidence to support that the main mode of this variant's viral transmission is through aerosols, and that the risk from surface and touch transmission is very small indeed. As such, the strict regimes of church cleaning that were recommended at the beginning of the opening of churches for public worship are no longer necessary. General church cleaning is sufficient.

That people who are engaged in a form of pastoral ministry which involves ministry to the housebound, sick and vulnerable, should take regular lateral flow tests to ensure they are safe to do so. These are free from the NHS.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas

General Secretary, CBCEW 10 December 2021