

This Christmas, our celebration will be different. Not all will be able to attend Christmas Eve or Christmas Day Mass due to necessary social distancing or due to health conditions and vulnerability. However, many will visit churches and cribs during the holiday season when things are quieter to look upon the image of the God made man. Let the image of Christ be a metaphor for our religious observance, something real, visible and tangible, not virtual, and let the words of the popular hymn, 'O come let us adore him' give us the courage and resolution to practice our faith as a community and receive the Sacraments once again.

The first Christmas, despite its political, social, and even housing difficulties, brought joy, hope, and the reassurance that scripture had been fulfilled and that God had intervened to save His people as He had promised. May our Christmas this year also bring that sense of joy, hope and the confidence that comes from faith in God's compassion and care. That is the cause of our Christmas joy.

As the birth of Christ brought hope and confidence, we too face the new year with hope and confidence and with gratitude to those who worked hard to protect health, save lives and develop vaccines. Somewhere, in the midst of that huge effort, in those who used their skills and talents, protected life and kept us safe, there is the presence of God. Perhaps like the first Christmas, there is, for us too, the challenge of recognition!

May your Christmas be holy and joyful and may the new year bring hope and happiness, a renewal of friendships and social contacts, and the freedom to worship joyfully and safely.

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Message from Most Rev. Tom Deenihan, Bishop of Meath to the faithful, religious and priests of the diocese of Meath Christmas 2020

The annual commemoration of the birth of Our Saviour occurs during the darkest days of December and at the end of the calendar year. In fact, many of the seasonal greetings used at this time combine wishes for both Christmas and the New Year: joy at the birth of Christ and an expression of hope for the year ahead.

Of all the celebrations in the calendar, Christmas is the one that people celebrate the most. It is the one for which we travel home and it is the one during which we reach out to others. The joyful prayer of Simeon at the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, 'for my eyes have seen the salvation that you have prepared for all nations' is the cause of our Christmas joy. Christ is our Saviour!

This year, that joyful Christmas celebration and that sense of light and hope is needed more than ever. Many will understandably feel that 2020 will be a year best forgotten and fewer will face the New Year with the apprehension they may usually have on New Year's Eve.

For me, the image from last March of Pope Francis praying alone in the vastness of an empty St. Peter's Square, enveloped by darkness and rain, was a powerful and striking image of a fearful and weeping world. In many ways, it typifies the past year. Those who lost family members to the virus and those who were bereaved during the pandemic have walked in that darkness and shed those tears this year. The consoling and supportive rituals that we are familiar with, both religious and social, were not possible and separation from family and social contacts caused distress, loneliness, and isolation.

The prospect of a vaccine is indeed encouraging news, allowing us to look forward to once again to being able to visit one another, renewing social contacts, restoring the possibility of visiting the sick and elderly both in hospitals and in nursing homes and offering some hope to those whose livelihoods have been adversely affected.

However, only faith can save us from the fear and sadness that can envelop our lives, and Christmas is a celebration of faith. Many of the popular Christmas carols teach us something about our faith. 'O come, let us adore Him' is a refrain with which we are all familiar. Similarly, John's Gospel tells us that '*the Word became flesh and lived amongst us*'. Christmas is the feast of Emmanuel, God with us, even in a time of pandemic.

At Christmas we celebrate the wonder of God becoming man, taking on human flesh and living amongst us. Christmas is about the Incarnation and it is about the real and physical presence of Christ among us. The hymn, *Adeste Fideles*, and its refrain, 'O come, let us adore Him' that we all sang last year with joy, gives us cause for reflection on our religious experience and worship during the past few months.

The emerging danger of the virus, public health advice, and subsequent regulations meant that our coming to adore Him has been very much restricted. Many of us were torn between trying to protect life and health and practicing our faith. Who would have thought this time last year that we would not have been able to attend Mass and the Sacraments for almost half the year and under severe restrictions for another four months?

But, of course, our faith can never be confined to a church building on a weekend. Our faith is something more. It forms us, influences us and it is something that we practice and display in several ways. During the past few months, a new focus on the family home as a 'Domestic Church' has emerged, where families pray together at home and where the faith is practiced and handed on from one generation to the next. Webcams and broadcast services became a lifeline and helped people to pray. But our faith is sacramental too! It needs the support and nourishment of the Sacraments. The current virtual manifestation and celebration of faith must be temporary.

Like the birth of Christ, our faith is something real, tangible, visible, physical and, of course, sacramental also. Christ was God made man, real, physical, and tangible like our faith. The birth of Christ that we celebrate at Christmas was not virtual. Similarly, the acts of kindness and charitable contributions that we make at this time cannot be virtual; they must be real and tangible. Virtual charity is no charity and virtual faith is no faith.

Like many others, I have struggled this year between protecting life and health, administering the Sacraments, particularly Confirmation, and celebrating the Eucharist safely while trying to understand some of the regulations that were imposed. The Church is pro-life and being pro-life must mean being pro-public health. Thank God we are now celebrating the Eucharist and the Sacraments again with a congregation. Long may it be so and there is a corresponding challenge for us to demonstrate that our churches are safe. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who volunteered throughout the diocese in terms of stewarding and cleaning their local churches. Thank you!

For priests too, the past year has been difficult. Since the beginning of the year, we bade farewell in faith to five priests who served the people of the Diocese faithfully for many years. The funerals of four of them were celebrated under restrictions, without the presence of some family as well as friends, parishioners, and brother priests. In the parishes throughout the Diocese, priests adapted to online ministry, worked hard to keep people connected to their faith and to provide the Sacraments as best they could within the restrictions.

In many parts of the Diocese, priests reached out to neighbouring parishes to ensure the celebration of funerals. Some priests too experienced isolation and appreciated the support of their parishioners. That is as it should be in a faith community. I express my thanks to the priests of the Diocese who ministered in difficult circumstances and who provided hospital and nursing home ministry and ministry to those who had the virus. The year had blessings too for the Diocese in terms of an Ordination to priesthood and two new students commencing studies for priesthood.