



Guidance for Churches – December 2021

General Information

Following the statement by the Prime Minister on Wednesday 9th 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 10th December, face coverings will be required by law in most indoor settings.
- From Monday 13th December office workers who can work from home should do so.
- From Wednesday 15th 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 a positive message encouraging people to get vaccinated and have the booster jab when able is delivered whenever possible (bearing in mind that the 40+ age group can apply for the booster vaccination, and that the period between 2nd dose and booster is reduced to 12 weeks).
- 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.

Clarification on the Sunday Obligation

The Bishops' Statement *Honouring Sunday* reflected the pastoral situation of public worship in the light of the pandemic situation at this time. The Bishops have asked for all Catholics to reflect on their personal circumstances with respect to their attendance at public worship. Questions have been raised regarding the status of the Sunday Obligation. The *Code of Canon Law* states that "Sunday... is the primordial holy day of obligation" (Can. 1246§1) and "the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass." (Can. 1247)

At the beginning of the pandemic, from Friday 20th March 2020, the Bishops of England and Wales recognised that the participation of the faithful in the Sunday Eucharistic Celebration was prevented due to grave cause because of the inception of the covid-19 pandemic and stated that the Sunday obligation could not be fulfilled due to the inherent danger of the faithful gathering in churches for the Eucharistic celebration. On Monday 23rd March 2020, HM Government mandated the closure of places of worship along with other locations.

The Bishops, now having reflected on the current situation in England and Wales, recognise that the causes and effects of the pandemic are still present to such a degree that the absolute duty for all to freely attend the Sunday Eucharistic Celebration cannot yet be fulfilled.

As such, they have asked that all Catholics now reflect on the centrality of the Eucharist to their own life of faith and take into consideration their personal circumstances and the reasons as to whether they can now attend the Sunday Eucharistic Celebration or otherwise. Should a person feel that grave cause honestly persists in their personal circumstances, there is no sin associated with their non-attendance at Mass, and they are encouraged to devote themselves to prayer at home. This may be achieved either through personal prayer or by participating with a live-streamed celebration of Mass from a Church.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas

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10th December 2021