
A different Christmas for British Catholics. Bishop Arnold: "Think about others, not just ourselves"

It will be a Christmas of renunciation, a reminder of the sacrifice of pregnant Mary riding on a donkey a few days before giving birth to Jesus. *This coming Christmas, the Catholic Church in England will ask the faithful to go to Mass only once and be extremely cautious because the virus is still circulating and is dangerous.* This Christmas will mark the end of a hard year, which has also yielded many fruits. Contacted by SIR, Bishop **John Arnold**, in charge of the [Diocese of Salford](#), comprising the city of Manchester, a large area of North West England and some three hundred thousand faithful, describes how five million English Catholics are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. "Going to church is safe given the limited access along with the fact that in many cases advance reservations are required. We keep a two-meter distance and we keep our hands sanitized". - said Bishop Arnold - "We invited churchgoers to attend only one Mass celebration, between Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, so as not to overwork priests and volunteers tasked with sanitizing the churches." According to the bishop in charge of the Diocese of Salford, the upcoming Christmas "will be different, a complicated one for many faithful who will not be able to celebrate it with their children or grandchildren as they do every year. *I encourage everyone to be generous and think about others, not just ourselves. Be aware that not only do we risk contracting the virus, but that we can infect other people simply by visiting them.* It's a matter of common sense, that common sense always claimed by the British people." "The story of that first Christmas and Mary giving birth to her son, more than a hundred kilometres from home, far from her family, reminds us that it was a difficult time for the Holy Family just as it is for us today."

This Christmas can bring us back to its original message.

God has given us his greatest treasure, the gift of his Son. In this 2020, we are given the opportunity to renew our understanding of what Christmas truly is. Reflecting on the past few months, the Bishop in charge of the diocese of Manchester sadly remembers the grief of so many faithful at the loss of their loved ones, the nurses and doctors in the front line of COVID-19 response, the challenges of celebrating funerals and weddings that were often postponed. "It took a heavy toll on many," he said. Yet there were some positive aspects. Numerous volunteers, dozens of them in every parish, offered their help in measuring temperatures, disinfecting churches, accompanying the faithful and making sure their hands were sanitized. "Reopening the churches was definitely not easy, but we succeeded," said Bishop Arnold, "Almost all of our churches have resumed services. I believe that these challenging months brought people closer to God, as so many reports show. *In the midst of insecurity, many people have rediscovered their religious sentiment. We successfully broadcast Masses online.* The Sunday Mass that I celebrate every week in Salford Cathedral is regularly attended by faithful from over one hundred nations, and thousands of people joined online for Easter services, many more than those who attended in person before the lockdown." For the bishop "this livestreamed initiative will continue, as it allows many elderly and sick people, who have difficulties in attending in person, to be part of the congregation. I also hope that more, younger people, will rediscover their sense of belonging to the Church and return to the parish." *Nevertheless, a digital community "will never replace the one in presence, as Pope Francis has said on many occasions."* "If this year, because of the ongoing pandemic, we will have to stop and think about others - the Bishop concluded -, about our brothers and sisters in distant countries, in far worse conditions than ours owing to poor public health, about the poverty in our midst, about the most vulnerable even among our neighbours, from the global perspective proposed by Pope Francis, then the upcoming one will be a true Christmas."

