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The Rt. Honourable Boris Johnson, MP
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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27 May 2020

Dear Prime Minister

May I, first of all, say how pleased I was by your recovery from Covid-19, and also congratulate you and your fiancé on the birth of your son.

I write as the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Southwark, a Diocese which covers all the Greater London Boroughs south of the River Thames, the County of Kent, and the Medway Unitary Authority. The Diocese comprises 175 parishes and 169 schools, both primary and secondary. Our most recent statistics indicate that over 80,000 people attend church for Mass each Sunday and our outreach into local communities is considerable.

Since the Government's decision, on 23 March 2020, to close places of worship our churches have remained shut. We accepted this as part of the important strategic effort to save lives and contain the spread of Covid-19. Important Christian festivals during Holy Week and Easter all took place behind closed doors, each priest celebrating alone without a congregation.

As restrictions have been lifted, there is growing frustration that churches remain closed for private, individual, visits of prayer. This comes when restrictions on access to other 'non-essential' facilities are being relaxed. For Catholics, access to church buildings is spiritually essential, something recognised by other Governments internationally.

Respectfully, I believe that it is now time for churches to be allowed to open for individual visits for private prayer. Supervision and hygiene regimes can be

put in place akin to those in supermarkets and any churches that cannot implement these would remain closed.

At stake here are two paramount principles. The first is freedom of religion and the second is basic equality and justice. Total church closure was justifiable in the initial weeks of the pandemic. However, to enable non-essential shops and services to open, while keeping churches closed for individual prayer, is an infringement of both religious freedom and equity.

I am not requesting special treatment for the Catholic Church. I appreciate that there is a Faith Task Force seeking to address the needs of religious groups and we are represented on this. There is, however, a growing sense of dissatisfaction. I ask that you please take seriously the needs of different religious traditions and, where their place of worship is necessary to their faith, you create parity of access consistent with that for retail outlets.

The long term mental health implications of Covid-19 are as yet unknown. Religious faith can help support people, both directly and indirectly, with respect to their wellbeing. Access to places of worship is integral to this.

I realise that you carry enormous responsibility at this time. I assure you of the desire of the Catholic Church to collaborate in ensuring our country recovers from Covid-19 in ways that are safe and secure. Respectfully, I ask, however, that you please act to enable those places of worship that desire to open, and are able to guarantee proper hygiene regimes, to be able to do so for individual visits for prayer. I receive letters and emails everyday asking for this, but the decision rests with you and I believe that it is now time to make this possible.

With the assurance of prayers

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Wilson', with a horizontal line underneath.

✠ John Wilson
Archbishop of Southwark