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**Rt Rev. Joseph Toal** STB KC\*HS  
**Bishop of Motherwell**

8<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I hope this finds you well and safe at this very difficult time. I offer my prayerful support for all who are ill, and for those adversely affected by the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our lives.

As we are well aware, the gravity of the threat posed by the more rapid spread of the virus in recent weeks led to the Scottish Government introducing a law telling us all to stay at home unless we have an essential reason for leaving our homes. My understanding of the need for such a law is the severity of the situation we are in and the resulting need to limit moments of physical social contact with one another as much as possible. Presented with this reality, it is right to assess whether we should gather together for services of public worship and my judgement as a Catholic Bishop is that we should not gather for Mass or other public services while we are required by law to stay at home for our own safety and that of other people. I recognise though that there will be critical moments during this extraordinary period for some people to leave their houses and gather in a church for an essential reason, most notably, but perhaps not exclusively, for the Funeral Mass of a loved one.

The Scottish Government, as well as requiring us to stay at home, has mandated that places of worship be closed, apart from services for the celebration of marriages and funerals. It is argued by some that the Government should not have imposed this regulation on religious bodies, and the Scottish Catholic Bishops have expressed this view, and it does feel that the Churches and others could have made this decision ourselves in a spirit of cooperation and understanding with the Government in the face of the difficulties we face. Although some do object, I think the majority of Catholics in the Diocese of Motherwell, both lay faithful and clergy, agree that we would accept the closure of our churches for our regular acts of worship as a necessary consequence of being required to stay at home. There is a sacrifice in this, and a loss of the spiritual benefit and consolation we experience particularly in the Celebration of the Eucharist, but it has to be recognised that the previous limits in numbers at our services have restricted attendance and some have not felt able to return to church despite the precautions in place. The present closure of our churches means we all share in the gravity of our present vulnerability and have to rely on our personal and family resources of faith, which are often deeper than we realise, and the enhanced offering of on-line and audio services which our parishes have learned to facilitate in recent times. We can still receive much spiritual sustenance, and our prayer-life and our communion with the Lord, and with one another in his Body, should continue and perhaps grow in depths as we seek the Lord's help and the intercession of Mary and the Saints in our present need.

I and the clergy of the Diocese offer our prayers and support to you through our continued celebration of Mass, which we have the great privilege of offering daily. We hope and pray that the present physical separation may not be prolonged, and that we may return in due course to the normal liturgical, sacramental and social life in our parishes with renewed spiritual vigour and hope in the Lord's goodness, and in our compassion for one another and those most in need.

With my prayers and best wishes,

Yours in Christ,

**+ Joseph Toal**