Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Scotland
On the Season of Christmas
and the Restoration of the Mass Obligation in the Dioceses of Scotland

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Christ is born for us, come let us adore him.

Christmas is approaching. It is an occasion to renew our family life, to reach out to the lonely and to celebrate the core of our faith: Emmanuel, God with us.

We have all experienced the negative impact the pandemic has had on our common liturgical celebrations and our access to the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Now that more people are attending church, the Bishops of Scotland want to encourage all the Catholic faithful to renew their covenant with the Church and her worship. Christmas seems the right time to do this. We remember how the shepherds said to each other: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Lk 2:15). The Child in the manger calls to us to go with them.

Christmas Day this year falls on a Saturday. It will be followed immediately by the feast of the Holy Family on the Sunday. We therefore strongly encourage you to take advantage of the celebrations of that weekend by attending Mass on both days, or at least once.

We have often been asked about reinstating the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holydays of obligation. In our fluid situation, this is not an easy judgment to make. Thanks, however, to the effort and good sense of so many, our churches have proven to be safe places. So, saving any serious worsening of the situation, we believe that Christmastide provides an opportune moment to restore the obligation.

The obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holydays of Obligation will therefore be reinstated from Sunday 2nd January, the first of the new year. That Sunday coincides with the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. It will be an occasion for us to join the wise men in offering worship to the Infant Jesus.

In accordance with the common teaching of the Church this obligation does not bind those in ill health or those otherwise impeded from attending Mass. Nor, in the context of Covid, does it bind those showing symptoms of the virus or with underlying health conditions, or those with responsibilities for people in need of special care.

The obligation to keep the Lord's Day holy by attending Mass should not be seen as a burden. It is a summons addressed to our human freedom and to the heart of every baptised member of the Church. "There is within me", said St Ignatius of Antioch, "a murmur of living water which says, 'Come to the Father'". The obligation calls us to *come to the Father* together with our fellow-believers, to "listen to the word of God and to take part in the Eucharist, calling to mind the passion, resurrection and glory of the Lord Jesus, and giving thanks to God who 'has begotten [us] to a living hope, through the resurrection of Christ from the dead'" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 106; 1 Pt 1:3). Sunday Mass can reinvigorate and refresh our Christian faith, our sense of community and our desire to live as missionary disciples in the world. This is why the Church takes this obligation seriously.

It has been good to have access to the Sacred Liturgy online, and we encourage those unable to attend Mass on Sundays and Holydays to continue making use of this. Of itself, though, online participation does not fulfil the obligation. Nothing can adequately replace actual presence. At the heart of our Christian life is the event of the Word becoming flesh and our incorporation through the Sacraments into his Body. It's to experience this that we come to church. Our current reflection on synodality points us in the same direction: we are a people who meet together because we journey together.

Let us therefore use the coming Christian season to return, with purified hearts and fresh fervour, to our sacramental and liturgical life. During Advent and beyond, there will be opportunities to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And Christmas itself is more than a Day. It is a Season. Beyond Christmas Day, it includes the beautiful feasts of the Holy Family, of Mary, Mother of God, of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord. In the northern hemisphere, this season falls at a dark and low time of the year. This is not by chance. It's precisely at this time, made darker still by so many current uncertainties, that we are offered divine energy and the joy of the human birth of a divine child. Christ's birth means the forgiveness of our sins and our rebirth as children of God. We sense how Mary's motherhood embraces us as well and, at the Epiphany, the star of faith lights up our hearts. As the Lord is immersed in the River Jordan the waters of our own baptism can flow in our lives with new force. We are given light and strength to live a new year in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In his Letter of the 9th of November to the Catholics of Scotland, written in the midst of CoP26, the Holy Father said, “In these challenging times, may all Christ’s followers in Scotland renew their commitment to be convincing witnesses to the joy of the Gospel and its power to bring light and hope to every effort to build a future of justice, fraternity and prosperity, both material and spiritual.”

We echo these words as we seek together to follow God’s ways and open our hearts to the gift of his Son.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Hugh Gilbert
Bishop of Aberdeen, President of the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland

+ Leo Cushley
Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh

+ Joseph Toal
Bishop of Motherwell

+ Stephen Robson
Bishop of Dunkeld

+ John Keenan
Bishop of Paisley

+ William Nolan
Bishop of Galloway

+ Brian McGee
Bishop of Argyll and the Isles

Monsignor Hugh Canon Bradley
Diocesan Administrator, Archdiocese of Glasgow