News

People maintain social distancing while attending Mass in the Church of Our Lady of Grace &

People maintain social distancing while attending Mass in the Church of Our Lady of Grace & St. Edward in London Dec. 13, 2020. (CNS photo/Marcin Mazur, courtesy Bishops' Conference of England and Wales)

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MANCHESTER, ENGLAND — Catholic officials in England and Wales are scrapping restrictions to halt the spread of COVID-19.

Beginning Jan. 27, wearing of masks inside churches will be optional rather than compulsory, and there will be no social distancing. Parishes may begin using hymnals, the sign of peace will be resumed and holy water fonts filled for the first time in nearly two years.

On Ash Wednesday, which falls March 2, priests will be able to administer ashes with their thumbs instead of a cotton bud, which also will no longer be used for anointing during the sacrament of the sick.

The relaxation of restrictions corresponds with the Jan. 26 end of "Plan B" government restrictions introduced in response to the arrival of the omicron strain of the coronavirus.

With the majority of British adults vaccinated against COVID-19, the death rate from the disease is now low, and there is little pressure on health services.

Father Christopher Thomas, general secretary of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, said in a statement circulated among churches and the media that the time had come for people to live with the virus.

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"The scientific consensus is that society is moving toward the stage where the virus is transitioning from the pandemic phase to the endemic phase, but ... there is still a risk associated with gathering for sustained periods in enclosed spaces and, therefore, there needs to be continued caution by all against infection," he said in the Jan. 26 statement.

"This, however, has to be balanced against the need to move forward safely toward a normal lifestyle, and these two positions will always be held in tension," he said. "This holding in tension is the key to living safely with COVID-19, namely keeping infections from a virus that cannot be eliminated to levels which minimize disruption to people's lives."

He added that while the reduction of restrictions "brings about a more normal way of living, the COVID-19 virus is still in circulation, and this should be in the mind of those participating in the life of the church as time goes forward, holding in balance the need for personal safety and taking responsibility for that safety."

Father Thomas said the English and Welsh bishops supported vaccination and encourage people to be vaccinated as the first line of defense against contracting the virus, and he said anyone with any infectious illness should stay at home.

He also advised that churches "should continue to ensure there is good ventilation, balancing this against the need for church heating, especially at this time."

Other precautions include eucharistic ministers continuing to sanitize their hands and the regular replacement of holy water used by people for blessing themselves when they enter and leave churches.

At present, priests are being advised to administer Holy Communion only in the form of consecrated hosts rather than in both forms.