



**A pastoral message from Archbishop Eamon and Bishop Michael:  
“Keep Christ at the Centre of Christmas”**

Dear brothers and sisters in the Archdiocese of Armagh,

Preparations are now well under way across the Archdiocese for the celebration of Christmas – albeit in a very different context this year. We extend our sincere gratitude to priests, parish teams and helpers who are planning to ensure that our churches are as safe as possible for people to confidently assemble for worship. We appeal to you all to cooperate fully with them.

We strongly encourage you to *keep Christ at the centre* of Christmas this year. Clearly it will be impossible for our usual large congregations to assemble for Mass on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and we remind everyone that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days remains suspended during the pandemic. But Christmas is about more than just one day. Families are welcome to attend Mass at some point during the twelve days from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. Christmas Masses will also be widely available over webcam and we strongly encourage families to “tune in” from the “domestic churches” of their living rooms and join with those who are gathering in their local churches in welcoming the birth of the Christ-child.

It is possible to experience the spiritual richness of this special season in many ways. Our homes can become “little churches” where we invite the Christ-child in. The age-old tradition of having a Christmas crib in the home and gathering there as a family to pray or to sing a carol will be especially meaningful this year. We also invite families or “household bubbles” to pay a visit to their local church at some time during the twelve days to offer a Christmas prayer at the crib and pray together for their families and for those particularly impacted by the pandemic.

The hope of Advent and the joy of Christmas inspire us to reach out to those in greatest need. *Keep Christ at the centre this Christmas* by bringing the hope and joy of his birth to people who are sick, isolated, lonely or poor. A simple act of kindness can make such a difference. Charities, including the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Trócaire and World Missions Ireland will welcome much needed contributions as they have been unable to raise funds in the normal way during the pandemic.

In your prayers this Christmas please remember those whose livelihoods have been seriously threatened by the pandemic. We think especially of people coping with bereavement, families that cannot be together, and those in care homes who can only have limited visits from their loved ones. We think also of those who cannot travel home for Christmas this year.

In some ways the Covid-19 restrictions open up greater opportunities for prayer and for reflection, for family time and space to enter into the true meaning of Christmas. This is also a good time to turn back to God. Although it may not be possible for all who wish to go to Confession to safely avail of the sacrament at this time, we encourage you to take a moment to place your trust in God’s mercy through an Act of Perfect Contrition.

We thank you once more for the solidarity you have shown with our health workers and other carers by strictly observing public health advice. Please continue to do so over the Christmas season. Stay Safe and Pray Safe so that the New Year 2021 will see an end to the pandemic.

With every blessing to you and your loved ones this Christmas and into the New Year.

+ Eamon Martin

Archbishop Eamon Martin

+ Michael Router

Bishop Michael Router