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## Card. Nichols: “Let us learn to pray also online.” English Catholics facing the Coronavirus

“Now is the time to close our churches or else people will be tempted to gather therein. We must learn that prayer is rooted in our hearts and make use of the internet and other means. Why not finish our phone calls with friends and relatives with a moment of prayer?” With these words Cardinal **Vincent Nichols**, Catholic Primate of England and Wales, a few days ago accepted the invitation of the British government to close the doors of churches and cathedrals. His messages to the Catholic community of almost five million people in the country, in these days of coronavirus crisis, have been frequent and heartwarming. Interviewed by SIR, His Eminence shared his feelings and explained how the life of his Church is being brought forth, along with new forms of spirituality. **Cardinal Nichols, what are your feelings during this difficult crisis?** Like most British citizens, I feel deeply disoriented by the way we are forced to live and the fears we are facing. As a priest and bishop, I am heartbroken by the fact that we must completely change our life of prayer and pastoral ministry. However *I also feel encouraged by the fact that the new way of celebrating Holy Mass "at a distance" - via streaming - is bearing fruit* and also that the desperate and challenging situation in which we find ourselves has fostered the generosity of many, eager to help those who are in worse conditions. 

To adapt our life of prayer and liturgy, while finding renewed depth to overcome the distances we are forced to observe whilst unable to come together as a community. Last Sunday, when for the first time in England and Wales the faithful were unable to attend Mass in church, a family told me that their children, who are normally altar boys, wore their cassocks and made the gestures of serving at the altar, as if they were in church. Other families experienced a liturgy for the children while reading the Scriptures. Elderly people wrote me that they followed the Mass online in tears, partly for missing the live celebration, partly for a feeling of gratitude towards the possibility of being able to continue, nonetheless, to be close to the Lord. We are also trying to strengthen the tradition of spiritual communion whereby we unite with the priest when he receives holy communion alone. The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, like others around the world, decided that the sacraments should be suspended or celebrated with strong limitations. Was it particularly difficult to comply with these guidelines? I am hopeful that our population is made of law-abiding citizens and that Catholics are good citizens who follow all these restrictions. They are not intended to be against Catholics but against the virus, and by following them we can stop the contagion and help the national health service. For this reason it is important that everyone accepts these limitations of their personal freedom.



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There are opportunities even in this difficult situation and I hope they will become more pronounced during the Holy Week. We will realize that even though we cannot be together physically, we will remain very close to each other spiritually. Millions of people will join the Holy Father as he kneels in an empty St. Peter's Square. This shows that prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit can unite us in ways that extend beyond our physical closeness. *It makes us realize that we are never truly alone, always on the palm of the hands of our merciful God.* This is important when we find ourselves alone in the evening, when we are sick, when we approach death, in all moments of isolation that happen in the course of a lifetime. If we learn this lesson now, deep down, it will help us in the future. **Do you think this period is an opportunity for families to spend more time together?** I think it gives families plenty of time together, as they can't leave the house. I also think it is an opportunity to learn how to live this situation creatively from the great monastic traditions of those who have voluntarily chosen isolation. An important teaching is to keep a certain routine that everyone observes with moments of silence and reflection to dedicate, for example, to the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. As our world grows smaller, our heart grows larger, allowing us to reach God and every other person who is physically far away.

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