
400 priests have died from Covid-19: "Stories of heroes that helped everyone keep hope alive"

The Catholic Churches in Europe suffered serious losses as a result of the pandemic: 400 priests and elderly religious died during the darkest months of the Coronavirus outbreak in Europe, sowing sickness and death. The estimated death toll is contained in a comprehensive Report compiled by the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE), providing an overview of the Church's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. From the Scandinavian countries to Greece, from England to Russia: the Report is a result of the forms compiled by 38 Bishops' Conferences across the continent. The countries with the highest death toll of clergy members include the Netherlands with 181 dead (elderly religious), Italy with 121 and Spain with 70 victims. In Poland 10 priests died, in Belgium 5, in Ukraine 5, in Ireland 3, in Austria 4, one in Lithuania. The start and end dates of the restrictions regarding liturgical celebrations differed from one country to the next. Yet, according to the CCEE, all the individual Bishops' Conferences in Europe have in common continuous dialogue and close collaboration between the Churches and their respective governments and competent authorities. The closure of religious buildings during the lockdown was seen as "an act of charitable service aimed first and foremost at safeguarding the citizens' health." *Planned measures - including the use of masks, distancing, access to benches and the distribution of Holy Communion - ensure that "Churches throughout Europe today are safe and sanitized places."* **The bishops discussed in detail the consequences of the pandemic in the life of their Churches.** "Given that this crisis is still far from over," **notes the Irish Bishops' Conference**, "it will take some time before a proper assessment can be made of the full impact of the pandemic on the Church and society at large. However, the crisis clearly highlighted societal challenges and tensions." The serious economic impact of the pandemic is of major concern. The Churches have been at the forefront in helping the weakest population brackets through Caritas and charitable associations throughout. Notably, the **Spanish Church** provided relief to the elderly, lonely people, single mothers with children in need of medicine and food. It has and continues offering assistance in hospitals, prisons, to help those who became unemployed to find a job. "We learned how to take care of others," reads the report from Spain. "We witnessed human frailty. We became aware of the need to cooperate with all institutions for the common good." The **Italian Bishops' Conference** wrote in its contribution: *"We have learned, to some degree at least, to be alert to the things that happen to us. There have been countless gestures of generosity, many small stories of "heroes" that have helped us keep our hopes alive."* **The Churches look to the future and reflect on the challenges that lie ahead.** "In the past few months we discussed extensively. Many dioceses with the bishops, priests and laity reflected on the consequences of the coronavirus", write the Italian bishops. "One of the issues will certainly be a new way of proclaiming the Gospel and a new way of being present in the streets of the world today." This is a shared concern, voiced by the **Bishops' Conference of England and Wales**, which in its Country report mentions a "slow return of the faithful to their churches" after all public Masses had been suspended. *"A widespread feeling of social standstill is perceived not only in churches, but in all sectors of society. It will take time before people resume practicing the faith and we must be ready to welcome them as they do, creating a safe environment for this to happen."* In his closing remarks, Father **Pavel Ambros**, from the Theological Faculty of Olomouc in the Czech Republic, said: "Once the drastic restrictions had been lifted, many people started to say that they didn't feel the need to attend Mass" and asked that the Holy Mass be broadcast live, "not only as an exception but as good practice." However, "if people get used to home delivery, they will psychologically adjust this model to religious "services" to meet their needs. It's like buying a pizza and taking it home, right out of the box. It could easily happen that people will want a priest to consecrate the Host for their home use. This internal disposition in itself is inauspicious and must be stopped in time."

