

THE RT HON SIR EDWARD LEIGH MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP
Bute House
6 Charlotte Square
Edinburgh EH2 4DR

4 January 2021

Dear First Minister,

These continue to be difficult days for people in all four nations of the United Kingdom in our struggle against coronavirus.

People across the British Isles have shown remarkable resolve, and made enormous sacrifices, in our efforts to control the virus, protect the NHS, and save lives. Catholic churches and charities have been on the frontline in responding to those most in need during this pandemic, and personal faith for many people is helping them through these difficult times.

We are extremely concerned that the Scottish Government has once again moved to close places of worship in Scotland. This is a second time in less than a year that people in Scotland have been banned from attending places of worship. In March last year, Catholics tolerated the closure of their churches in response to a new and unknown virus. We now know significantly more about this virus and how to control it.

Since places of worship were allowed to open again in Scotland, Catholic parishes and individual volunteers have gone to great lengths and given up many hours to make churches safe. The decision to limit capacity in places of worship rather than close them at the start of this second wave of infections was something that was greatly appreciated by Catholics in Scotland. It is a great shame that this provision has been removed under these new measures.

I hope that in closing places of worship, you will be presenting evidence for this decision to the Scottish Parliament in order for people to understand the public health requirement for this action. Freedom to worship in accordance with religious belief is one of the most fundamental and most precious freedoms we enjoy. Interference or suspension with this right should not be done lightly.

As you know, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights prohibits governments interfering with religious practice, except where the restriction is "necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

To be lawful, therefore, the Scottish Government must have conducted a specific ECHR compliant proportionality exercise to show that churches are a significant source of spread of the virus. Publishing the evidence base for this decision will help understanding the reason for churches being forced to close and in helping the Catholic community to keep churches open again in future.

As we continue to battle this devastating virus, it's vital all governments within the United Kingdom seeks to maintain public confidence in its measures. This includes proper consideration of the views and interests of the Catholic community in Scotland.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward Leigh".

Rt Hon Sir Edward Leigh MP
President, the Catholic Union of Great Britain