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To all Pilgrims and Members of the Diocese of Leeds, Lourdes Hospitalité.

Leeds Pilgrimage to Lourdes 2020 is postponed until 2021.

Dear Pilgrims,

This is the concurrent notification from the Lourdes Sanctuary: 'In accordance with the decree of the French Minister of Solidarity and Health of March 14 2020 and in the current state of sanitary requirements linked to the COVID-19 epidemic, organised pilgrimages are currently impossible at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, until the situation allows them again'. Many pilgrimages have been cancelled or postponed up to date.

It is with a heavy heart that I am announcing that the Diocese of Leeds Pilgrimage to Lourdes in July has been postponed until 2021. I took the decision these last few days after the upsurge of the seriousness of the Covid-19 Coronavirus throughout Europe which has spread rapidly leading to many countries reducing movement across international borders. Also, the risk of infection is very high and is easily spread through close contact. This state of affairs is unprecedented and has regrettably impacted on our ability to guarantee the safety of our supported pilgrims, youth, helpers, pilgrims and clergy.

The conclusions were reached with the consultation of the Pilgrimage Planning Committee and Joe Walsh Tours who look after our pilgrimage arrangements, along the following criteria:

1. The current Risk Assessment using information and evidence from the British Lourdes Medical Association (BLMA) which shows the outright risk of taking the pilgrimage in July giv-

en the Coronavirus.

2. The members of the hospitality team who are frontline NHS staff, and in the care profession, are needed to care for the most vulnerable in our hospitals and care homes.
3. The shrine is currently closed and will be for some time.
4. With the current regulations in place, both in the UK and Europe which has advised against school international travel.
5. The ban on the gathering of people in a public setting.
6. The cancellation of flights world-wide.
7. Schools are currently closed for many pupils. This will have a knock-on effect when they return. Schools will not be able to prioritise the pilgrimage.

I took the findings to Bishop Marcus, our pilgrimage leader. He was in total agreement. I began to formally initiate the strategy for postponement which Joe Walsh Tours and I had devised in preparation for this outcome. I acknowledged to Joe Walsh Tours that they had difficulties in cancelling the pilgrimage at this stage. I formally requested that they reschedule the pilgrimage for July 2021 and they agreed to this. They will transfer all monies paid to date to the new rescheduled date and have confirmed that all monies are financially secure under their bond. I have been in regular contact with Joe Walsh Tours throughout this period, monitoring the development of the situation as it has occurred. I have worked in partnership with the Diocese of Leeds, CEO, Mr Ian Burrell, to discuss how best we can support pilgrims in any way. Finally, I have written to the Lourdes Sanctuary to inform them that we will not be coming in July.

This will come as a deep disappointment and sadness to all of you; but not unexpected. I know that the pilgrimage provides us with such a wonderful lift of faith, renewal and healing as we gather as a diocesan family. I, and those who have helped in this consultation, did not come to this conclusion with any enthusiasm. We all shared the same sense of sadness about the evidenced conclusions.

In the meantime, we must do all we can to show our faith and good works to our neighbour which we have stored up. As we hear in Jesus' parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25: 31-46), we are exhorted to see in our poorest and most vulnerable, the Lord Jesus himself.

This is a real test of our Catholic faith. I feel that we are being asked to walk the *High Stations of the Cross* with our Blessed Lord at this time. We ask for the prayerful aid of the Saints and Angels, especially of St Bernadette of Lourdes. Most especially for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother, and the health of the sick, who accompanied her Son Jesus on the Via Dolorosa.

Yours in Faith,

Rev. Fr Phillip Hall - Director of the Lourdes Pilgrimage.

Given on 23 March 2020.

Below is a simple question and answer format about this postponement. It will answer all your questions hopefully.

Why has the pilgrimage been postponed?

- A large number of travel bans/restrictions have already been imposed throughout Europe and these bans may be extended further, or new restrictions introduced.
- The UK Government has advised to limit 'group contact' wherever possible.
- Advice from the Government suggests that the situation will remain challenging for several months.
- Our medical helpers are currently on the front line of the response to the Coronavirus outbreak. They are needed in our hospitals, GPs surgeries and care homes.
- Many of our assisted pilgrims, helpers, and hotel pilgrims may be in higher "risk" groups.

What about the Schools that accompany us?

Currently there is an outright ban on school trips. The school closures in March were also a major deciding factor. Logistically, if the schools returned after Easter, they will have other and higher priorities and therefore will not be able to prepare for the pilgrimage in time. Parents will also be very anxious, naturally, and may well decide to withdraw their children.

Will there be something planned to celebrate later instead of the pilgrimage?

There could well be something. At this stage a few ideas have been floated but nothing definite as we need to be able to gather when it is safe to do so.

What about my deposit that I have paid?

Joe Walsh Tours have confirmed that the deposit is guaranteed for the pilgrimage in 2021 and that all monies paid to date are financially secure. So, you do not have to do anything at this stage. Joe Walsh Tours are not in a position to refund monies as they have agreed to transfer deposits to 2021.

If you have any difficulties with this due to personal or family circumstances, I may be prepared to help on behalf of the Diocese of Leeds and would ask you to contact me on a confidential basis to discuss the situation.

Are we be going to Lourdes next year?

I have already provisionally booked our stay in Lourdes in July 2021, which is the normal process for booking at this time. Currently, we are going in 2021therefore.

Is the Lourdes Sanctuary closed?

Currently the Sanctuary is closed to the public. However, the international chaplains are onsite leading prayers - especially novena prayers – and speaking to us from the Sanctuary. You can log into the Lourdes website to see in full what the faith response is. <https://www.lourdes-france.org/>