



Third Pastoral Letter to the Clergy and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Sydney

regarding the latest restrictions in response to the COVID19 pandemic

30 March 2020

Dear brothers in ministry and brothers and sisters in Christ

All Australians are experiencing hardship at this time as we seek to limit the spread of the Coronavirus. Many people are being asked to make great sacrifices: our health professionals working long hours and risking their own health; those who have lost their jobs; businesses that have had to close; parents struggling to care for their children while ‘working from home’; and so on. As Catholics, our greatest sacrifice is being unable to gather to celebrate the sacraments or even to spend time praying in a church. We make this sacrifice in solidarity with all our fellow citizens.

I’ve been asked about the implications of the latest “gatherings limited to two people” rule for our already very restricted ministries. Here are some thoughts for you.

We’ve been here before

In my homily on Sunday I talked about the **five** times that Mass has been forbidden in Australian history: for 15 years from 1788 when the colonists arrived; from 1804 after a brief period in which convict priest Fr James Dixon was permitted to celebrate Mass publicly; from 1818 after Fr Jeremiah O’Flynn had been briefly unimpeded in offering Mass in the colony; during the Spanish flu epidemic in 1919; and now during the COVID19 pandemic. It is interesting to reflect upon how the Catholic community coped each time: see <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/homilies/2020/homily-for-mass-for-5th-sunday-of-lent-a/> We can learn from such past experience – and I think it gives us cause for hope.

For inspiration at this time, I recommend Pope Francis’ blessing for the city and the world last Friday in which he prayed: “Lord, You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others.” <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/urbi-et-orbi-pope-coronavirus-prayer-blessing.html>

Church closures etc.

At this stage, the directions in my pastoral letter of 23 March continue to apply regarding church closures, no public gatherings for Mass and other services, Sunday observance, annual duties, Baptisms, Anointing, pastoral visits and clergy availability.

Live-streaming of Holy Week services

So far the Cathedral and 10 parishes are live-streaming Masses. There was no suggestion in the Prime Minister's latest announcement or in the NSW application of this decision that this affects indoor live-streamed services. The PM and some other civic leaders have previously praised religious groups for live-streaming in these circumstances and acknowledged the importance for people of religious services in times like these.

I think we should keep the numbers involved in live-streamed Holy Week services to an absolute upper limit of ten (as in funerals) including camera operator, cantor, server, any concelebrating clergy; the fewer the better from a safety and public perception point of view. Current advice on distancing, hygiene etc. should be followed meticulously and be seen to be followed. Some camera angles make people look more numerous or closer to each other than they actually are and should be avoided.

Simplification of Holy Week services

Cathedral services are necessarily more elaborate than parish services and Holy Week services more elaborate than in the rest of the year. But even cathedral liturgies must be shortened if we are to minimise risks and maintain the interest of online viewers. Rome has already authorised significantly slimmed down ceremonies (e.g. no palm procession, no washing of the feet, no kissing the cross except by the celebrant, no Easter fire). Local advice has already been issued by the Liturgy Office.

Other commonsense simplifications include using a portable lectern rather than having a server hold the book; reduced use of pontificals and doing things like hand-washing for ourselves; a cantor or recorded music; using fixed camera(s) and moving the “action” within the scope of the camera rather than requiring a cameraman.

I note that the cathedral or parish church is the workplace for clergy (and staff such as choir and servers) and that attending workplaces is still permitted where necessary. Obviously, we will minimise attendance even by ‘employees’. But cathedral clergy concelebrating at the cathedral, parish clergy in their parish, and religious communities in their convents, especially in Holy Week are, I believe, doing ‘essential’ work in their ‘workplace’. At such celebrations, we should be able to demonstrate that we are no greater risk to each other than we are in our presbyteries and religious houses where the very same people already live in the one ‘household’ together.

Previous directives regarding the church being closed, distancing (4sqm per person), hygiene, no pax, need to intinct at concelebrations etc. continue to apply here. While any Liturgy is being live-streamed, the church building must remain closed and the faithful may not

congregate outside, nor may the clergy come out of the church to distribute palms or Holy Communion (as this would encourage illegal gatherings).

Confessions

Because First Rite Confessions are by definition a meeting of two people these are unaffected. However, they cannot be conducted in churches or in a way that encourages groups of people to gather in one place. Some are trying outdoors confessions; others in the presbytery or people's homes. Current advice on distancing, hygiene etc. should be followed. But please advise your parishioners of the continued availability of Confession via appointment and of the logistics of how they can book this.

Weddings

There was no suggestion in the Prime Minister's announcement that this affected indoor weddings. But as previously announced, these are now restricted to the couple, the celebrant and the two witnesses. Weddings are best postponed.

Funerals

There was no suggestion in the Prime Minister's announcement that this affected indoor funerals. But as previously announced these are reduced to 10 people maximum in attendance. A memorial Mass might be promised to the extended family, friends and parishioners once this becomes possible.

Novel viruses provoke novel pastoral practices in the Archdiocese

Here are some examples of things being offered by the Archdiocese in response to current needs and restrictions:

- archdiocesan coronavirus webpage includes links to live-streamed and on-demand liturgies, readings, current health and liturgical directives, prayers, reflections, stories of saints in plagues etc.: <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/coronavirus-updates/>
- daily live-streaming of Masses from St Mary's Cathedral: <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/live-masses/>
- the *Catholic Weekly* is fully available on-line and offers regular news updates: <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/> the full digital edition of the paper can also be accessed: <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/catholic-weekly-newspaper-online/>
- regular pastoral letters from the Archbishop: <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/coronavirus-updates/>
- regular updates from the ACBC, the Vicar-General and the Liturgy Office on directions for celebrating the sacraments etc.
- daily on-line lectio divina: <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/coronavirus-updates/prayer-resources-for-the-coronavirus-pandemic/#lectio>
- on-line devotions, podcast lectures and reflections etc. and links to useful resources from around Australia and the world

- WhatsApp groups for each deanery and for younger clergy to share [pastoral ideas and experiences.

Creative pastoral practices in the parishes

Here are some examples of things being offered by the parishes in response to current needs and restrictions:

- so far around 15 parishes are live-streaming Mass. The quality are of a very high calibre with good clear vision and sound and had a combined views of more than 10,000: <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/live-masses/>
- churches with street-facing entrances and glass doors are leaving their lights on, as a source of comfort to people driving by
- parish websites and e-bulletins are carrying latest announcements, links to helpful resources, advice on CatholicCare, SVdP and other local support services, consoling messages etc.
- various new Facebook accounts, Skype/Zoom gatherings, WhatsApp groups and Google Hangouts have been set up in parishes to allow on-line prayer groups, discussion groups, youth groups and catechesis (advice on the how and why of these will soon be coming from the Archdiocese)
- some priests are trying to ring all their parishioners (or at least those who are isolated) to wish them a happy Easter and to ascertain their needs
- priests are bringing sacraments to people at home or in nursing homes where permitted, are enabling Confessions for those who seek them, and continue to conduct funerals and other essential spiritual services as far as possible
- priests, religious and pastoral teams are reassuring those who are anxious or must postpone celebrations
- particular priests are being trained, equipped and made available to attend those with the virus
- five times a day ringing of parish bells with public prayer intentions for each
- a “Say hello virtual foyer” for gathering by Zoom after Mass
- parish volunteers delivering groceries, medications, prayer cards, Easter eggs to the doors of those who are isolated
- parishes, religious houses, the ‘domestic church’ of family homes and many individuals are interceding for the Church and the world at this time.

Responses from across the Church

Here are some examples of initiatives being undertaken across the Church in response to current needs and restrictions:

- Sydney Catholic Schools are ensuring on-line education for all our children is available from home (which special provision for those without computer access at home) and supervision (with online ed) for the small numbers still coming to school
- fee relief will be offered to all families struggling financially and other provision
- CatholicCare, the St Vincent de Paul Society and other Catholic agencies are acting with courage and care to implement changes to their practices to ensure that services

to the vulnerable and needy are maintained and grown at this time of need; this includes, of course, services for the homeless, who are particularly at risk in the current situation

- CatholicCare's "CCareline" is ensuring practical support, counselling and other services are provided by local communities or on-line as needed, especially for those who are isolated, anxious or financially insecure; CCareline can be contacted on 13 18 19 by/for anyone needing assistance during the current emergency
- CatholicCare is also helping coordinate parish provision of material care to isolated and older parishioners; so far ten parishes have joined this programme.

Archdiocesan and parish staff

Currently the vast majority Archdiocesan staff are working from home in keeping with Government directives. The Polding Centre remains open for deliveries of mail, couriers and urgent transactions. Visitors have been restricted to those essential and all meetings are being carried out by videoconferencing or teleconference. Emergency functions such as IT, CDF payments and payroll transactions are being done from the Polding Centre and this is likely to continue even if a lockdown is mandated by the Government. An email went to all Parish Priests and Administrators on Friday regarding operating parish offices with churches now closed: in particular, Parish Priests were asked to reduce secretary days/hours in response to the reduced workload. We have also cut staff / staff hours at Cathedral House. Further actions to reduce costs may be required depending upon how long churches remain closed and parishes with little income, but we will do everything possible to avoid losing our excellent staff and to avoid adding to their financial and emotional burdens.

Support of the clergy

I restate my closeness and gratitude to our pastors for persevering in these strange circumstances and for reflecting upon, implementing and sharing with each other imaginative and prudent new ways to care for our people. The Vicars for Clergy, Regional Vicars and Deans will try to keep in regular contact to see how you are going and how we might help. I will also be hosting Zoom video meetings to which all clergy are invited so that we can reflect together on how we are responding to the current challenges.

I thank the Board of the Clergy Remuneration System for taking the initiative of reducing clergy stipends and living expenses at this time, not least in solidarity with our people. These same reductions will apply to the archbishop, auxiliary bishops and clergy paid out of the Chancery.

Conclusion

The steps being taken by our governments and health authorities, though seemingly very austere, are based on the best available advice on what is necessary to keep people safe. They are therefore measures of concern and compassion with which the Church is happy to co-operate, challenging as it is for us, as we seek to maintain our life of prayer and worship, or teaching and consolation, while actually increasing our pastoral and other practical care for people.

The pattern of birth, death and rebirth is what Christians expect for God's favourites like Israel, for Jesus' friends like Lazarus, and for the Church herself. She's been through this many times. Each of us, also, goes through various beginnings, ends and revivals, various conversions, diversions and reversions. Yet as Jesus declared with regard to Lazarus in last Sunday's Gospel, so too for us, the story "will not end in death but in God's glory". My love to and continuing prayers for you all.

Yours sincerely in Christ

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Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP

Archbishop of Sydney