



Thursday 19 March 2020

**Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle
Confronting COVID-19 Pandemic Event**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In my Letter to the Diocese of 5 March 2020, I directed that certain provisions should be observed within the Diocese as part of the Church's contribution to arresting the continuing spread of the COVID-19 virus in the community and especially amongst those who are most vulnerable to such a virus.

I would like to thank the members of the Church across the Diocese who have so willingly embraced the changes asked for in that letter. I am most grateful for the ways in which these measures have been observed, as our contribution to the common good.

As we are all well aware, the spread of the COVID-19 virus continues across Australia and the time has arrived where our Government and health authorities have asked for a more stringent approach to slow the spread of the virus across our community. Co-operating with our Government authorities will unfortunately have a drastic impact on the life of the Church, forcing us to forego many things that are precious and integral to our worship and common life.

On 18 March 2020, the NSW Minister for Health and Medical Research made an Order under section 7 of the *Public Health Act 2010*. The *Public Health (COVID-19 Mass Gatherings) Order 2020* ('the Order') took effect from 5pm on 18 March 2020 and will remain in effect until midnight on 16 June 2020 unless repealed earlier.

The effect of the Order is to prohibit any gathering of more than 500 persons in a single undivided outdoor space or of more than 100 persons in a single undivided indoor space.

There is no exception under the Order for religious events, and so the Order and its prohibitions apply to the liturgical life of the Church, particularly the celebration of Sunday Masses and other major liturgical events in the immediately foreseeable future.

Section 10 of the *Public Health Act 2010* makes it an offence to not comply with a direction contained in an Order made by the Minister and significant penalties apply.

As we wish to take all reasonable and proportionate precautions to ensure the good health of all concerned, and taking account of the directives of the Government authorities, I advise that the following provisions are to be observed within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle **with immediate effect**, and until otherwise notified. Note that this affects arrangements for this weekend, a fact that we will attempt to make known widely in the media.

Public Celebration of Mass:

1. The public celebration of Mass is suspended until further notice. This suspension applies to both Sunday Mass and Weekday Mass, and includes Sunday Celebrations of the Word (with Communion) and weekday Liturgies of the Word (with Communion).
2. All members of the faithful, other than priests, are dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. Members of the faithful should observe the holiness of Sunday by observing one of the options listed in the Appendix.
3. Priests of the Diocese will continue to celebrate Mass on Sundays using the provisions of the Roman Missal for "Mass With One Minister", offering it on behalf of those who cannot attend and for the whole nation.
4. While there will not be a public celebration, I or my Vicar General will celebrate Sunday Mass in the Cathedral each week. The Diocese is currently investigating arrangements for livestreaming the Cathedral Mass. Further details to follow when they are available.

Celebration of Holy Week and the Sacred Paschal Triduum

1. The public celebration of the ceremonies of Holy Week and the Sacred Paschal Triduum is cancelled.
2. The public celebration of the Chrism Mass is cancelled; the Chrism Mass will be celebrated privately in the Cathedral in a modified form; further details will be forthcoming shortly.
3. The Sacred Paschal Triduum will be celebrated in the Cathedral in a modified form; this will not be a public celebration.
4. The celebration of Christian Initiation usually associated with Easter is postponed until the current pandemic event resolves itself. Arrangements will be made to facilitate the initiation of our Elect at that time.
5. The Diocese is currently investigating the possibility of televising or livestreaming the Cathedral celebrations of the Chrism Mass and Sacred Paschal Triduum; further details will be forthcoming shortly.

Celebration of Sacraments of Initiation for Children

1. Baptisms may continue to be celebrated, under the following conditions:
 - a. Only those required should be present, e.g. the minister, parents, godparents, grandparents, and significant immediate family.
 - b. Baptism should only be celebrated by pouring of water; baptism by immersion should not be celebrated in the current circumstances.
 - c. Under no circumstances, should those gathering to celebrate Baptism number more than 100 persons.
2. Baptisms may legitimately be delayed in the current circumstances.
3. Parish Sacramental Preparation Programs are to be cancelled for the duration of 2020.
4. The celebrations of Confirmation and First Communion are cancelled for 2020; we shall observe a 'fallow year' with time to reflect on current practice, and return to the sacramental journeys for our children in 2021.

The Celebration of Penance and Reconciliation

1. Communal celebrations of the Sacrament of Penance, i.e. the Second and Third Rites of Reconciliation, should not take place.
2. Celebrations of the First Rite of Reconciliation should be celebrated with appropriate care and precautions, especially respecting the call for 'social distancing'.
3. Accordingly, it is highly recommended that confessionals not be used in the current circumstances; rather, use flexible seating in an appropriate part of the church.
4. Priests will still honour any reasonable request to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance.

The Pastoral Care of the Sick: Anointing and Viaticum

1. Communal celebrations of the Anointing of the Sick are not to take place, either in parishes or other places, e.g. aged care facilities.
2. The celebration of the Anointing of the Sick with individuals should continue, with appropriate care and precautions being observed.
3. In the celebration of the Anointing of the Sick, priests are given permission to:
 - a. Lay on hands by holding them above rather than upon the head.
 - b. Anointing with a cotton wool, or using a protective glove, that can be disposed of appropriately after a single use.
 - c. Anointing on the head alone.
4. Pastoral care of the sick, including visits, prayer and communion, should continue, with appropriate care and precautions being observed.
5. Pastoral care of the dying, including visits, prayers and Viaticum, must continue, with appropriate care and precautions being observed.

The Celebration of Funerals

1. Funerals may continue to be celebrated in church buildings, under the following conditions:
 - a. Attendance should be limited to those immediately associated with the deceased, especially immediate and close family members.
 - b. Under no circumstances, should those gathering to celebrate a Funeral in a church building number more than 100 persons.
2. Graveside services, i.e. The Final Commendation and Rite of Committal, may be celebrated in cemeteries with up to 500 persons present; ministers are asked to accommodate any reasonable request to celebrate a funeral in such a manner.
3. Any service requested in a crematorium or funeral home chapel must observe the limitations on the numbers attending.
4. Those arranging funerals should be reminded that it is possible to hold a private funeral service and committal immediately, and then have a Memorial Mass once the current pandemic resolves itself.
5. Pastors will, of course, exercise good pastoral care of the bereaved in the current circumstances, and accommodate genuine and reasonable requests as far as possible within the current limitations.

The Celebration of Weddings

1. Weddings may continue to be celebrated in church or other buildings, under the following conditions:
 - a. Attendance should be limited to those required (minister and witnesses) and to close family members, so that appropriate precautions can be observed.
 - b. Under no circumstances, should those gathering to celebrate the Wedding in a church building number more than 100 persons.
2. Weddings with up to 500 people may be celebrated outdoors in accord with the provisions of Church law and after the necessary permissions have been obtained.
3. Ministers are will exercise on-going pastoral care of couples preparing for marriage, especially where the couple request a Wedding be postponed to another date.

Celebration of Other Liturgical Actions and Public Devotions

1. The public celebration of devotions, e.g. such as the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Stations of the Cross, etc., which regularly attract numbers in excess of the limits prohibited by the Order should be suspended.
2. Great care should be exercised in the celebration of other public acts of devotion to ensure that the provisions of the Order are not breached, and that appropriate precautions as recommended by the health authorities are observed.

3. Pastors are reminded of their responsibilities in managing and ensuring compliance with the provisions of the Order in buildings under their oversight.

Other Provisions

1. As far as possible, church buildings should remain open to allow for private prayer.
2. Prayers of intercession for an end to the pandemic and for the safety of all should be included in all private Masses, the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office), and in private prayers.
3. All ministers should follow precautions recommended by health authorities when visiting people's homes, aged care facilities, hospitals, or other places where many people live.
4. Pastors are asked to ensure that they are contactable in the case of emergencies.
5. Parishes should devise ways of maintain communication with parishioners, perhaps by a form of parish bulletin distributed online or by email or some other method.
6. Parishes should review any regularly scheduled meetings or events to ensure that the provisions of the Order are not breached; consideration should be given to the suspension of non-essential gatherings of any kind.

These provisions may appear, at first glance, to be an extreme response to the crisis facing our nation. They are certainly a painful sacrifice of sacred practices that are at the heart of Catholic life. They are accepted, however, as something which we can do in the interests of the common good and our neighbours' health and safety. We look forward to the time when they will not be required, when we can once again celebrate the very heart of who we are as Church, the 'source and summit' of the Christian life that is Eucharist.

This time of crisis an opportunity for all members of the Church to come together in prayer for our world, for our nation, and for each other. The solidarity of praying together – even when physically separated – is a reminder of the common baptismal priesthood that we all share, and which we are called to exercise in the current situation. Coming together in solidarity of prayer is one concrete way in which we, the Church, can contribute to an increase in healing, compassion, and love across our fragile world.

I ask every member of the Church of Maitland-Newcastle to embrace this opportunity to pray together in solidarity with others around the world who will be doing the same.

I also strongly urge all members of the Diocese to take appropriate measures to protect themselves, their loved ones, and other members of the community. We should be considerate of others' needs by not hoarding things for our own use and by checking on neighbours who may be less able to care for themselves.

Regular updates to the situation surrounding COVID-19 can be found by accessing the [NSW Health](#) website and the Australian Government's [Department of Health](#) website.

Information about the continuing response of the Diocese, and of particular agencies of the Diocese, will be regularly updated and posted on the home page of the [Diocesan website](#); any important updates will be communicated as broadly as possible.

Once again, I thank you for your support in implementing the temporary measures necessary to ensure the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in the Church, as well as our fellow citizens in the broader community.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'William Wright' in a cursive script.

Most Reverend William Wright
Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle