

1 October 2021

**Pastoral Letter**  
**to the People of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle**  
**Concerning the Reopening of Churches**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The advent of the Delta variant of COVID-19 has undoubtedly taken a toll on the people of New South Wales and our Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. The past three months have seen the gradual return of restrictions on our community life, which has affected many people. For people of faith, the inability to gather together for worship in recent months has been a heavy burden to carry. We have no doubt been waiting eagerly for that time when we can gather together once again.

That time is rapidly approaching as we have heard from our state's Premier only at the beginning of this week. In Monday's press conference, the 'roadmap to reopening' was explained in more detail. COVID will likely remain a reality in the community for the foreseeable future, and we will need to adapt our lives to what is being described as "the new normal". However, the announced plan for reopening is welcome and long-anticipated.

There are essentially **three phases** to the NSW Government's roadmap, and the reopening of churches in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle will be staged to match those phases. The reopening is linked to achieving double vaccination milestones across the state, which raises dilemmas for the churches and other faith groups within NSW. The details of each of those phases *as we currently understand them* are outlined below. We await further information to be released closer to reaching each milestone, and this will be made available and communicated to the Diocese when received.

**PHASE ONE: When 70% are fully vaccinated (estimated date of 11 October)**

The first stage of reopening commences when 70% of eligible people are fully vaccinated. It is estimated that this milestone shall be reached by 11 October.

We would be entitled to reopen our churches at this point *but only to those who are fully vaccinated*. To reopen, we would need to exclude people: those who haven't completed the vaccination

process, those who may be medically compromised, or those who have chosen for whatever reason not to be vaccinated as yet.

For that reason, it has been decided **not** to reopen at 70%, but to await the next milestone before we reopen our churches to the public and for the celebration of public Masses and other liturgies.

**NB:** Some of our parishes are not currently closed though we are unsure what may be required when new public health orders come into force. If these parishes can remain open, the intention will be to keep them open, subject to any requirements being met, without imposing a heavier burden on parish personnel and parishioners.

Arrangements for these parishes will be negotiated on a case by case basis and will apply only for as long as their local government areas remain free from 'stay at home' orders. The situation in these parishes will be monitored closely in conjunction with local leadership.

### **PHASE TWO: When 80% are fully vaccinated (estimated date of 25 October)**

The state expects to reach 80% fully vaccinated around 25 October. We will reopen our churches and public liturgies to "mixed congregations" (i.e. to the fully vaccinated, the partially vaccinated, and the as yet unvaccinated) at this point.

It is widely expected that many of the restrictions we are currently familiar with will continue. It is believed that the 4sqm rule will be applicable, and the wearing of masks indoors will be required. There will be a need to observe physical distancing, practice hand sanitising, and provide good ventilation in our churches. It is also expected that congregational singing will not be possible, though the current small group arrangements will likely continue.

We will not be required to check the vaccination status of people attending our churches.

Those who are especially vulnerable, or who are vaccinated but anxious about mixing with the unvaccinated, or who are unvaccinated and do not want to risk contact with others, will be free to remain at home; live-streaming of Masses from Sacred Heart Cathedral and other parishes will continue. We will take all reasonable steps to protect those who choose to gather in our churches.

### **PHASE THREE: When 90% are fully vaccinated (estimated date of 1 December) – "The New Normal"**

The NSW Government has advised that from 1 December, there will be no difference between COVID safety requirements for all NSW citizens, whether fully vaccinated, partially vaccinated or unvaccinated.

It is expected that at this milestone, the 2sqm rule will apply to all indoor religious gatherings, and there will be no limit on the numbers at outdoor events (though COVIDSafe plans will be required for outdoor events with more than 1,000 people attending). It is expected that masks will no longer be mandatory inside a church, though some people may wear masks for added protection if they choose.

### **The Importance of Getting Vaccinated**

The Catholic Bishops of Australia, amongst many others, have highlighted the importance of being vaccinated against COVID. Their information can be readily accessible by visiting the Catholic Bishops' website ([www.catholic.org.au/coronavirus](http://www.catholic.org.au/coronavirus)). Good information must be available to those who have concerns about or are anxious about receiving a vaccination. The Bishops' statement is an excellent place to start for those undecided about receiving a vaccination.

When considering receiving a vaccination or not, people of good faith should ensure that they consider the good of the broader community when making their decision. It is not simply a question of the individual but of the whole community. As Pope Francis has said, it is an act of love to receive a vaccination in the face of a pandemic.

The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle wishes to encourage all members of the diocesan community to be vaccinated and will endeavour to provide them with good information to inform their choice. We will offer them particular care since they, and certain vulnerable others, will be most at risk. We will also provide specific care to those who, though fully vaccinated, are anxious about gathering with a "mixed congregation".

Further details and clarifications of arrangements, restrictions and any necessary measures will be developed in due course and communicated as quickly as possible. We look forward to being once again able to gather for Mass and other liturgies. Yet, we remain committed to ensuring that our actions are responsible and attentive to the need to contribute to the efforts to protect everyone who lives in the community, especially those who are the most vulnerable in the face of COVID.

Yours sincerely in Christ,



Rev Andrew Doohan VG  
VICAR GENERAL, DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE