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# **DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE: CONTINUING LIFE DURING COVID-19**

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**Instructions and Advice  
'The New Normal' Edition**

**Edition 1  
Dated 15 December 2021**

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## **Introduction**

The continuing presence of COVID-19 in the Australian community is not something we can ignore. The recent experiences of Victoria are ample evidence of the need to remain vigilant even if there have been no reported cases in our own area.

While vigilance is still necessary, it is also possible to review some of the measures the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle has had in place since the outbreak of the pandemic event.

This document adopts a new format, highlighting the difference between formal instructions that must be observed, and some general advice that is provided for local communities to consider in responding to the pandemic event in their own settings.

As always, this document will be reviewed and updated as circumstances dictate, and it is hoped that further easings of restrictions might be possible as the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out continues and the public health advice permits. Until then, your cooperation in ensuring we do all that is possible to protect our parishioners and the broader community.

I thank you for your ongoing efforts to adapt to the COVID-19 situation and hope that this present document makes your task easier.

## Instruction

On Requirements to be Observed in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle During the Continuing COVID-19 Pandemic Event

1/2021

### The Need for an Instruction

The continuing presence of COVID-19 within the broader Australian community requires the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle to make adjustments to its pastoral and liturgical life. These measures, while temporary, are prompted by a desire to ensure that the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle is contributing to the communal efforts to control the spread and impact of COVID-19.

The overall aim of both NSW's regulatory regime and the general advice from public health authorities has been, and remains, the safety of all residents of the State of New South Wales. This is also the overall aim of the instructions and 'best practice' advice of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

### The Instruction

In response to the need to provide clear instructions and 'best practice advice' to the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, the document entitled **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19** has been prepared to provide a single source of information to the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and clarity around any required adaptations to established practices.

The document is prepared in three parts:

- Part I contains formal instructions for requirements that must be adhered to in light of the regulatory regime currently in force within New South Wales;
- Part II contains formal instructions for requirements that must be adhered to concerning the celebration of liturgy within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle; and
- Part III contains general advice for consideration by parishes in light of the best advice available from the civil authorities responsible for public health.

To avoid confusion, pastors, other parish leaders, and parishes in general will:

- comply with any requirements that result from the making of an Order under the *Public Health Act 2010* (NSW), and as indicated in Part I of **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19**;
- comply with any requirement contained in the document entitled **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19** found in Part I and II; and

- consider the contents of the document entitled **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19** found in Part III and make 'best practice' decisions for the local community.

#### Exhortation

The risk posed to the Australian community by COVID-19 presents the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle with a set of unusual circumstances. Called to play our part in the broader communal efforts to eliminate, mitigate, or otherwise control the spread of COVID-19 across the community, the Diocese is required to temporarily amend and adapt its pastoral and liturgical life to do so.

The temporary adaptations and changes required by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic event requires a generous response on the part of believers. In addition to our continued prayers for all those who have been affected by COVID-19, I commend this Instruction to you.

This Instruction has an effective date of 15 December 2021 notwithstanding to the contrary withstanding and abrogates all previous instructions.

Given at Hamilton, NSW, on 15 December 2021.

Fr Greg Barker  
Diocesan Administrator

## **PART I: Instructions**

**NB:** Compliance with any requirements found in this section is mandatory for parishes within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

The Public Health Order currently in force is the *Public Health (COVID-19 General) Order (No 2) 2021* ('the Order'), dated 13 December 2021 and coming into effect from the beginning of 15 December 2021.

A copy of the current Order can be downloaded from the NSW Legislation website ([legislation.nsw.gov.au/information/covid19-legislation/general](http://legislation.nsw.gov.au/information/covid19-legislation/general)).

### **A. Opening of Churches**

Church buildings are able to be opened for the public celebration of the liturgy and for private prayer and meditation.

### **B. Capacity in Church Buildings**

With effect from 15 December 2021, there is no capacity limit applicable to our church buildings. This applies to all religious services that take place in our church buildings, including funerals/memorial services and weddings.

### **C. Outdoor Celebrations**

The Order makes no distinction between capacity in outdoor settings and indoor settings. Therefore, there is no limit on the number of persons who may participate in a religious service held in an outdoor setting.

'Mixed' events, i.e. where there is a combination of persons inside and outside a church building, are once again possible under the Order.

### **D. COVID-19 Safety Plans**

COVID-19 Safety Plans are no longer mandatory under the Order.

Within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, Parishes are strongly advised to maintain a current COVID-19 Safety Plan to assist in ensuring the safety of parishioners and visitors.

The current COVID-19 Safety Plan templates applicable to a church building are:

- **Places of worship:** for general usage by church buildings or religious services celebrated outside – available online at [www.nsw.gov.au/form/covid-safety-plan/places-of-worship](http://www.nsw.gov.au/form/covid-safety-plan/places-of-worship). (effective **29 March** 2021)
- **Significant events:** for use for funerals/memorial services and weddings, etc. – available online at [www.nsw.gov.au/form-master-page/covid-safety-plan/significant-events-covid-19-safety-plan](http://www.nsw.gov.au/form-master-page/covid-safety-plan/significant-events-covid-19-safety-plan). (effective **12 April** 2021)

### **E. Collection and Management of Contact Details**

The collection of contact information for all persons attending a place of worship is still required under the current Public Health Order.

Any person entering a place of worship is required to provide the following information to the 'occupier of the premises'<sup>1</sup>:

- The person's name, and
- Their telephone number or email address, and
- The time the person entered the church building.

The required information must be collected and recorded for each individual person who attends, including children and infants. Entry to a church building is not possible if the information is not provided.

The same information must be collected and recorded for any outdoor Mass or religious service.

The reason for a person being in a church building is not to be recorded under any circumstances.

The current Public Health Order expresses a preference for the use of the Service NSW App to collect contact information required by the Order.

It is **strongly** recommended that parishes make use of the Service NSW QR Code system.

It remains possible, however, to collect the specified information via paper-based methods direct to the 'occupier of the premises'. It is highly recommended that any paper records be scanned and stored electronically if at all possible.

When contact information is collected via paper forms, they are to be kept for a period of 4 weeks, after which they must be destroyed in a suitable manner, i.e. by shredding or similar methods.

If requested by the NSW Chief Health Officer (or another authorised person), the contact information collected in paper form must be provided to the NSW Chief Health Officer (or another authorised person).

The contact details collected in paper form are solely for the purpose of facilitating contact tracing in the event of a COVID-19 case being identified. The information is not to be used for any other purposes with the individual consent of the person involved.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of church buildings, the 'occupier of the premises' is the Parish. Information must be provided to the Parish via the authorised representative. The authorised representative for parish churches is the Parish Priest, their equivalent, or their delegate. No other person or party has a lawful reason under the Public Health Order to collect the information. This applies to weddings and funerals as well.

## ***F. Cleaning and Hygiene in Churches***

Although COVID-19 Safety Plans are no longer mandated under the Order, the need to be attentive to the cleaning and hygiene of church buildings remains.

The decision around how often your church building needs to be cleaned, and to what level it must be cleaned in a specific circumstance, is left to local leadership.

## ***G. Public Health Advice***

NSW Health continues to provide advice to the public about general precautions for living with the endemic nature of COVID-19.

The current advice is available on the NSW Government website (visit <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/stay-safe>).

The regular promotion of this advice to parishioners is strongly recommended by the means you have available.

## ***H. Singing***

Singing is permitted in all circumstances within places of public worship (including outdoor religious celebrations) without limitation.

## ***I. Masks***

The wearing of masks in indoor settings is not mandatory in most circumstances including within places of public worship. Where maintaining physical distancing indoors is particularly challenging, the wearing of masks is strongly encouraged but not mandatory.

The wearing of masks is not to be required or mandated in our churches contrary to the Order, though some parishioners or visitors may continue to wear them if they wish or feel the need to do so.



## **PART II: Liturgical Directives**

**NB:** This section only contains those things that remain instructions. Other considerations for local discernment are contained in Part III: General Considerations.

### **A. Sunday Obligation**

The general dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass previously given to the lay members of the Diocese by the Bishop is withdrawn.

### **B. Anointing and Viaticum**

Communal celebrations of the Anointing of the Sick are not to take place, either in parishes or other places, e.g., aged care facilities.

### **C. Distribution of Communion**

The distribution of Communion during Mass continue to present a high risk at the present time. Therefore:

- Holy Communion from the Chalice is restricted to the Presider, who is to be the only one to drink from the chalice. Concelebrating priests are to intinct from a second chalice.
- Holy Communion is not to be given on the tongue.

This instruction will be reviewed prior to Easter 2022 or as required by changes to public health orders.

### **D. Baptism**

Baptism is only to be celebrated by the pouring of water; baptism by immersion is not to be celebrated in the current circumstances.

The water is to be used once only. Multiple baptisms during the same liturgy will require preparation in advance to avoid using the same water on multiple candidates (e.g., by having the water in a large pitcher from which it can be poured).

### **E. Confessions**

The current pandemic event does not meet the pastoral requirement for the celebration of the 'Third Rite' of Reconciliation (the "Rite of Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution". The 'Third Rite' is therefore not permitted according to the universal law of the Church.

### **F. Holy Water**

The presence of Holy Water in door stoups is presently not permitted as this continues to present a high risk to parishioners and visitors.

Care should be taken when making Holy Water available in church buildings to ensure it can be safely accessed without risk.

## **PART III: General Advice**

While NSW is moving to ‘the new normal’ of living with the COVID-19, the risk of communal transmission remains even at a lower level. Parish communities are encouraged to consider the following advice and discern the best liturgical response given the circumstances and needs of the local community.

Overall, where touch is integral to the liturgical sign and is limited (i.e. where a minister is touching a person), as long as ministers engage in thorough handwashing and/or sanitising, and participants are comfortable, ministers may resume using physical touch in those liturgies.

### **A. Adaptations to Mass**

Some of the adaptations and modifications to liturgical celebrations are only temporary; others might provide parishes with an opportunity for a more prayerful experience even after COVID-19.

The following advice and suggestions about ritual adaptations are offered:

- Apart from Communion Ministers, it is possible for parishes to use a ‘fuller complement’ of liturgical ministers during the celebration of Mass.
- Care should be taken to ensure that liturgical ministers are not placed at risk because of the manner in which they carry out their ministry, with adaptations being used wherever necessary.
- It is possible for the Book of the Gospel (where used) to be included in the entrance procession. Otherwise, it could be placed on the altar before Mass commences.
- The Procession of Gifts presents particular challenges, especially around multiple handling of containers. The following is suggested as a possible solution:
  - Have those carrying the items (bowls, carafes, etc.) sanitise their hands before bringing them forward in procession.
  - If more than one person is presenting the gifts, have them process in single file.
  - The procession moves into the sanctuary and stand to the side of the Presider while observing physical distancing. In the case of two people processing the gifts, have them stand either side of the Presider to ensure physical distancing.
  - The Presider first takes the bread, prays, and then places it on the altar.
  - The Presider then takes the wine, pours it into the chalice, adds water, prays, and then places it on the altar.
  - Those who presented the gifts can then return to their seats.

This proposal respects the intention of the *General Instruction* that the gifts are not placed on the altar before the prayers are prayed over them.

- The Sign of Peace may be given without physical contact, e.g., by a bow of the head or a wave, except between those residing in the same household.
- The distribution of Communion is addressed elsewhere in this document.

The following advice is offered about other considerations associated with the celebration of Mass and other liturgies:

- The handing of hymnals, bulletins, orders of service, and other items from one person to another is not prudent and instead should be placed in such a way as to invite people to collect them.
- If items are used that are recyclable, e.g., hymnals, care should be taken with hygiene and cleaning requirements. It is strongly recommended that non-recyclable items, e.g., bulletins, orders of service, etc., be taken home wherever possible by those who pick them up.
- The use of collection plates remains problematic at the present moment because of the need to pass them from hand to hand. The alternate methods already adopted should remain in place for the time being.

The adaptations and modifications suggested above should be considered in any other liturgy to which they apply.

### **B. Anointing and Viaticum**

Pastoral Care of the Sick and Dying, including visits and the celebration of Anointing and Viaticum, continues with appropriate care and precautions.

Where the sick and the dying, and their families, are not comfortable with physical touch, or where medical advice recommends against it, priests may continue to:

- Lay hands by holding them above rather than on the head of the person being anointed.
- Use cotton wool for the Anointing, which can then be disposed of appropriately after a single-use.
- Anoint with the Oil of the Sick on the head alone.

### **C. Baptisms**

With regard to the preparation for and celebration of Baptism, pastors should remain attentive to the concerns of families and respond accordingly.

Where members of the faithful are not comfortable with touch:

- Care to be taken to minimise any physical contact with the one being baptised.

- The anointings with the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of Chrism could be accomplished using cotton wool where necessary, with the cotton wool be disposed of appropriately after a single use (preferably by burning) **OR**
- A small amount of the Oil could be applied by the Presider who then invites one of the parents to rub the Oil into the child's skin.

Parish-based Baptism Preparation programs should be carried out in ways that are in keeping with general COVID safety protocols that are in place.

#### **D. Confessions**

With regard to the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, the following advice is offered:

- The First Rite of Reconciliation ("Reconciliation of Individual Penitents") is possible with appropriate care around maintaining the safety of the confessor and the penitent.
- The use of confessionals may be problematic and it is highly recommended that the use of flexible seating in an appropriate part of the church building may be more prudent at present.
- The celebration of the Second Rite of Reconciliation ("Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution") and Penitential Services may take place with due attention to the general COVID-19 safety requirements that apply to any communal liturgical celebration.
- Individual confessions during a Second Rite of Reconciliation should be celebrated in a way that maximises both the safety of those participating and the need to privacy that comes with the act of confession.

#### **E. Distribution of Communion**

The distribution of Communion during Mass remains a high risk activity. The following advice is offered:

- It is recommended that only the number of Communion ministers absolutely needed be used to distribute Communion, subject to the following general requirements:
  - Appropriate physical distancing be observed between those distributing Communion.
  - The Communion procession take place in such a way as to allow participants to keep the appropriate physical distancing (which may require an adjustment to your traditional processional practice).
  - Generally speaking, it is thought that a maximum of **two** ministers (including the Presider) would be adequate in most settings.
- While not required, Ministers of Communion (ordinary and extraordinary) could wear a mask for the distribution of Communion if this was thought necessary or prudent.

- Communion ministers who are unvaccinated are particularly at risk while exercising this ministry, and it may be prudent for them to be directed to wear masks while doing so.
- Those distributing Communion are encouraged to practice good hand hygiene, including thoroughly washing hands before Mass and, if thought necessary, sanitising hands discreetly before the distribution of Communion. The latter should take place at the credence table and not at the altar.
- In keeping with good liturgical practice, the use of disposable gloves during Communion and the presence of hand sanitiser on the altar is not appropriate and should be avoided.

## **F. Funerals**

The celebration of funeral Masses and liturgies may resume without restrictions with effect from 15 December 2021.

The following advice and observations are provided:

- A funeral Mass should be adapted as for any other Mass, as noted elsewhere in this document.
- The placing of Christian symbols, where this is celebrated, can provide a particular challenge to maintaining physical distancing and minimising physical contact between ministers and those placing symbols. It is suggested that symbols be placed in a location from which they can easily be retrieved by those who are placing them.
- Even with the easing of restrictions, families may continue to request a funeral Mass or liturgy to be live-streamed. Pastors are asked to be generous in answering such requests.

## **G. Initiation of Children**

Although the celebration of Christian initiation of children has largely already taken place for 2021, parishes are reminded that preparations for celebrations in 2022 should continue to consider the need for the safety of all participants.

Further advice for the celebration of Christian initiation of children during 2022 will be made available early in the new year to assist parishes in the planning and preparation.

## **H. Use of Technology**

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the availability of live-streaming technology as a means of maintaining some sense of connection was embraced widely. It was one means among many of staying in touch with members of the Church community in the midst of lockdowns and curtailed gatherings.

It needs to be recognised, however, that the nature of the Church's liturgy – in all its forms – is something that is embodied rather than watched, something that requires

physical presence rather than virtual connection. With the removal of capacity limits from our church buildings, it is now time for the appropriateness of the regular live-streaming of Parish Masses to be reviewed.

While an argument can be made for some live-streaming to remain, e.g., as a service to those in hospitals or the house-bound, for funerals and weddings, etc., the only remaining reason for continuing the live-streaming of Parish Masses is one of pastoral necessity (e.g. where the physical capacity of a church building is limited, to facilitate contact with the sick and housebound, etc.)

Accordingly, the following advice is offered:

- Live-streamed Masses (and other liturgies) are not to be proliferated beyond the normal schedule of Parish Masses (including funerals and weddings) and they are to be reduced over time as pastoral necessity lessens.
- The use of live-streamed Masses (and other liturgies) be reviewed in Parish life, and reduced wherever possible in favour of in-person attendance.
- Technological possibility is not a prudent reason to upend the Church's theological understanding and praxis of its liturgy; "just because we can, doesn't mean we should."

### **I. Weddings**

The celebration of Nuptial Masses and wedding liturgies may resume without restrictions with effect from 15 December 2021.

The following advice and observations are provided:

- A Nuptial Mass should be adapted as for any other Mass, as noted elsewhere in this document.
- Even with the easing of restrictions, couples may continue to request a Nuptial Mass or wedding liturgy to be live-streamed. Pastors are asked to be generous in answering such requests.