

Memorandum

TO: All Clergy, Parish Leaders, Leadership Teams, Parish Staff

CC:

FROM: Fr Andrew Doohan VG

DATE: 15/05/2020

ATTACHMENTS: 1

SUBJECT: Easing of COVID-19 Restrictions – Step One – 15 May 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Today marks the commencement of Step One in the easing of COVID-19 related restrictions. There has been much speculation about what the lifting of restrictions might look like – now we know! The purpose of today's communication, therefore, is to assist you in navigating the current state of play in New South Wales and decisions made by the Bishop for the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

We need to remember, however, that COVID-19 remains present in the community and is highly infectious. In Australia, the numbers remain very small, particularly when compared with other parts of the world. With the relaxation of some restrictions we can reasonably expect an increase in the number of cases, particularly as we are also entering winter. It is essential that we observe the latest public health advice and take all reasonable precautions to protect the health of everyone. General precautions regarding hygiene and physical distancing must be observed as part of our ongoing vigilance.

Late last night, the NSW Minister for Health and Medical Research gazetted the *Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order (No 2) 2020* ('the Order') to give legal effect to the easing of restrictions. The Order remains in force until 14 August 2020 unless revoked before that date. A copy of the amended Order can be found on the NSW Legislation website (www.legislation.nsw.gov.au). If you have any difficulty obtaining a copy of the Order, I am more than happy to email a copy to you directly.

The amended Order now makes the following provisions with effect from today, 15 May 2020. Where necessary, decisions made by the Bishop for the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle are noted.

Gatherings

Clause 6(1) of the Order increases the number of people who can participate in a gathering in a public place to ten (10) persons. A reminder that under NSW legislation, all our church buildings constitute a public place.

Clauses 6(2) and 6(3) provide for certain exceptions to the general limit of ten persons. Of relevance to parish life, clause 6(2)(b) permits a gathering of persons for the purposes of work. This may have some import for a slow return to meetings of councils and committees, though this should be done with an abundance of caution and with appropriate consideration for the general principles of good hygiene and physical distancing.

Clause 6(3) provides exceptions to the general limit of ten persons for the celebration of weddings, funerals, and other religious services, viz:

Clause 6(3)(a) allows wedding services to have up to 10 wedding guests, which number excludes the persons being married, the celebrant, others necessary persons to assist the service, and one photographer, one videographer, or both.

Clause 6(3)(b) allows funeral or memorial services held indoors to have up to 20 persons present, which number excludes those persons necessary for the conduct of the service, such as the celebrant and funeral directors.

Clause 6(3)(c) allows funeral or memorial services held outdoors to have up to 30 persons present, which number excludes those persons necessary for the conduct of the service, such as the celebrant and funeral directors.

Clause 6(3)(d) allows for a religious service to have up to 10 persons present, which number excludes those persons necessary for the conduct of the service.

Believing it to be the more prudent course of action, the Bishop has determined that given the limitations on the number of people who could attend them, the public celebration of Mass will remain suspended under Step One and will be reviewed when we move to Step Two. The previously communicated dispensation of the faithful of the Diocese from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass remains in place.

Under the provisions of the Order, it is now possible for baptisms to take place in our churches, though the Bishop has determined that this decision should be left to the decision of the minister in consultation with the family, always providing the limit of 10 persons is able to be observed. Outside the danger of death, it remains possible for baptism to be deferred until a fuller celebration is possible.

Under the provisions of the Order, it is now possible for the Sacrament of Penance to be celebrated in the First Rite in our churches at advertised times (a religious service), though the limit of 10 persons present in the church building at any one time must be strictly observed. The previous advice of not using confessionals remains in place, and the need for appropriate physical distancing must be observed. Spontaneous requests for the Sacrament of Penance can and should be met wherever it is possible.

Nothing in the Order precludes the continuation of live streaming of Masses, and the continuation of this practice is encouraged wherever possible wherever it is possible. Only those who are necessary to produce such a live streamed Mass should be present in the church building.

Clauses 6(4) and 6(5) requires that contact details (name, telephone number, and email) of any person participating in a wedding, funeral/memorial service or religious service must be provided to the Parish Priest or delegate who must record and keep them for a period of four weeks (see clause 10(a)). This is a mandatory requirement of the Order and must be observed in all circumstances. The reason for a person being in a church building should not be recorded under any circumstances.

To assist with the keeping of such information, you may wish to consider using the services of the website www.MassRegister.com.au. This provides a solution where members of the public can register just once, provide their contact details, and the parishes they usually visit. Should it become necessary following news of a COVID-

19 case, every person registered for a parish can be contacted easily. Please note, it is not mandatory to use this website; it is offered as one option for you to consider.

Closure of Certain Premises

Clause 7(1)(g) directs that places of worship must not be open to members of the public except for the purposes of conducting weddings, funerals/memorial services or religious services (as indicated above) or for private worship where no more than 10 persons are present at any one time.

To facilitate the reopening of church buildings for private worship, the following conditions must be strictly observed:

- Clear notice of the regulations associated with the use of the church should be clearly posted near church doors and on the parish website
- Churches should only be open if the Parish Priest or delegate can be present to monitor numbers, physical distancing, and hygiene requirements. It may be prudent to advise hours of opening in advance, and to proceed cautiously from minimal hours to greater hours over the course of time. Under no circumstances should churches be open if it is not possible to have a designated person present as the 'monitor'
- Those who make use of the church for private worship are required to provide their contact details (as above) and the parish is required to hold those records for up to four weeks (clause 10(a))
- Commonly touched surfaces (doorknobs, pews, etc.) must be regularly disinfected – see the attached Health Department guidelines
- Hand sanitiser should be provided at the doors of churches
- Physical distancing should always be observed, including when waiting to enter the church or waiting for confession, etc.
- Physical acts of devotion that involve touching religious item are to be avoided

The timing of re-opening our church buildings is left to the discretion of the local leadership but should only take place when all the above provisions are able to be met. As always, an abundance of caution and prudence should be exercised when considering the appropriate point when your church building can or should be re-opened for private prayer.

Obligations of Owners and Occupiers of Premises

The Order continues the previous restrictions on owners and occupiers of premises (other than a place of residence) from permitting persons to enter or stay on those premises if the size of the premises does not permit 4 square metres of space for each person on the premises.

If we observe the limits outlined in the Order, most of our church buildings will not breach this part of the Order.

As I mentioned earlier, we cannot pretend that the relaxation of restrictions means we can return to the *status quo ante*. COVID-19 remains part of our present reality and will do so for some time to come. We must be ever vigilant for the health and safety of each other and the broader community for the foreseeable future, particularly as we continue to look forward to additional relaxations.

The re-opening of churches for private worship, and the greater number of people who can now attend weddings, funerals and other religious services comes with strict conditions. Please give due attention to the advice from public health authorities, particularly as we move to a less restricted mode of life. Each of us must play our part individually, and all of us must play our part corporately to assist in the control of COVID-19 in our nation. In addition, I would ask you to consider downloading the COVIDSafe app.

It remains important that those who are particularly at risk – the very elderly, those with compromised immune systems, and those exhibiting symptoms – to remain at home wherever possible to ensure the spread of COVID-19 is controlled as much as possible. While no longer strictly required by the Order, there remains a strong moral case for unnecessary excursions from your place of residence to be restricted to only those that are truly necessary.

Further communications will be made during the coming weeks and months as they become necessary to communicate any changes to the current circumstances. I will remain available to local leadership via my mobile if you need to talk through the implications of anything contained above or wish to seek clarification.

Thank you for your continued commitment to your ministry during this time of pandemic.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Doohan', written in a cursive style.

(Fr) Andrew Doohan VG