

Memorandum

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

CC:

FROM: Fr Andrew Doohan VG

DATE: 24/07/2020

ATTACHMENTS: 3

SUBJECT: Tightening of COVID-19 Related Restrictions – 24 July 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As previously announced, the NSW Government has moved to tighten COVID-19 related restrictions considering the uptick in reported cases in New South Wales. As we now know, there have been a number of cases, or the possibility of cases, in our own local area. While concerning, and while the tightened restrictions will create an additional administrative burden on parishes, we need to take a clear and disciplined approach to the situation now facing the residents of New South Wales.

Last night, the NSW Minister for Health and Medical Research gazetted amendments to the *Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order (No 4) 2020* ('the Order') to give legal effect to the previously announced tightening of restrictions. As always, a copy of the Order in its current form 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 gazetted amendments will require your attention to a few tasks **today** to ensure that you and your parishes are compliant with the new restrictions. I strongly urge you to give them your early attention so that you can seek additional assistance if that becomes necessary.

Unless otherwise indicated, the new requirements of the Order take effect from Friday 24 July 2020. Previous decisions made by the Bishop for the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle remain in effect unless noted otherwise, i.e. they remain in effect unless the contents of this memo change them.

Restrictions on Gatherings and Use of Premises

The amended Order now requires that each church building will require a series of COVID-19 Safety Plans to be developed and complied with. Copies of each of these plans must be kept in the church building. The required Plans are:

- (a) A general 'places of worship' Safety Plan (*Clause 7*),
- (b) A 'funerals, memorial services and wakes' Safety Plan (*Clause 14B*), and
- (c) A 'wedding ceremonies and receptions' Safety Plan (*Clause 14B*).

Each required COVID-19 Safety Plan **must be** the version with an approval date of 23 July 2020, i.e. your current Safety Plan is no longer valid and must be renewed. (*Schedule 1*)

The updated NSW Health templates can be accessed from the relevant NSW Government website (www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/industry-guidelines/places-of-worship). I have attached copies of these templates to this communication. You are not obliged to use the government-developed form, but you must address all the concerns in the government-developed form if you choose to develop your own plan. (*Clause 7*)

Please Note: Please do not forget to lodge a copy of your new Plans with the Bishop's Office by email.

There is a change in the number of people who can be present in our church buildings. With effect from 24 July 2020, the maximum number of people who can be in our church buildings is to be the lesser of:

- (a) The number of persons that is equivalent to one person per 4 square metres of space in the building, or
- (b) 100 persons. (*Clause 9*)

The updated limits apply to all services conducted in our church buildings, including having them open for private prayer. (*Clause 9*)

In calculating the space available on any premises, the Order specifies that the area to be included in such calculations include:

- (a) if the size of the premises is not more than 200 square metres of floor space, the entire premises,
- (b) if the size of the premises is more than 200 square metres of floor space, only those areas that are open to the public. (*Clause 4*)

As previously communicated, please be aware of the spatial limitations of your church buildings and determine the local limit on the number of persons who can be in your church building at any one time. It continues to be prudent to communicate this limit to all regular users – including funeral directors – to avoid last minute disappointment.

Anyone in a church building for the purposes of engaging in work at the request of, and on behalf of, the Parish is excluded from this number. (*Clause 4*)

Please note: There would appear to be some confusion in various documentation around the number of persons who are able to attend a wedding. The amended Order makes it clear that the maximum number of persons who can attend a wedding in a place of worship remains the lesser of one person per 4 square metres of available space or 100 persons (*Clause 14A(6)*). This overrides the limit specified elsewhere in *Clause 14B* applicable to wedding services or gatherings following a wedding service.

At the time of writing, there is no longer an exception to this general rule for funerals and memorial services. The maximum number of persons who can be in your church building for funerals or memorial services remains as per the general calculation above.

The Order now requires that all places of public worship, i.e. our church buildings, must register with the NSW Government as a COVID-19 Safe business. This process can be completed via the NSW Government website after you have completed your updated COVID-19 Safety Plan (<https://www.nsw.gov.au/register-your-business-as-covid-safe>).

Liturgical Celebrations in Our Church Buildings

Previous advice on the way in which various liturgical celebrations can take place in our church buildings remain relevant and 'in force'. The overriding concern must be the health and safety of both parishioners and the broader community. I urge you to consider carefully what communal celebrations you might wish to schedule and avoid any that have a high degree of risk around their celebration.

Given the tighter restrictions, there will still be some who will be unable to attend Sunday Mass, or for whom attending Sunday Mass might remain unadvisable. In those circumstances, members of the Church of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, except priests, continue to be dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass.

Those who are unable to attend Sunday Mass are encouraged to keep Sunday holy through the use of the resources previously made available (and which are still available on the Diocese website – <https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/church-mission/catholic-life/liturgy/prayer-and-formation-community-resources/>). I would encourage you to make these resources known once again via whatever channels of communication you might have access to.

Collection of Contact Details

The Order requires the collection of contact details of any person attending a service (wedding, funeral, memorial or a religious service) in a place of public worship, including attending a gathering immediately after such an event that takes place at the same location. As previously communicated, there are some adaptations to this that might make life easier for parishes.

If a 'discrete group', e.g. a family, husband and wife, people from the same household, etc., attends a religious service together, only one (adult) member of the group is required to provide their contact details to the parish. *(Clause 22)*

The contact details required to be obtained under the amended Order are now defined as:

- (a) the person's name, and
- (b) their telephone number or email address, and
- (c) the time the person entered the church building. *(Clause 22)*

For the purposes of any event taking place in or around a church building, the 'relevant person' required to obtain this information is the owner of premises, represented by the Parish Priest, their equivalent, or a delegate thereof. No other party has a lawful reason under the Order to collect this information.

The contact details are to be kept for a period of 4 weeks and be provided to the NSW Chief Health Officer if requested or directed. The contact details are collected solely for the purpose of facilitating contact tracing in the event of a COVID-19 case being identified; the information should not be used for any other purpose without the individual consent of the person involved.

The providing of contact details and their collection by the Parish is a mandatory requirement and must be observed in all circumstances. It is not possible for someone to enter a church building to attend a service if they refuse to provide the information required.

The Order does not require the collection of contact details of those attending the church building for the purposes of private prayer.

The reason for a person being in a church building should not be recorded under any circumstances; date, location, and time, if necessary, is sufficient. This is particularly the case when it comes to the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance.

Conclusion

Sadly, the tightening in COVID-19 related restrictions reflects a situation in the broader community where there is a distinct uptick in the prevalence of the illness in New South Wales. The continuing threat from COVID-19 remains real, and as a result we have a moral and legal obligation to be vigilant and disciplined in our approach to the health and safety of each other and the broader community. The experiences within the State of Victoria are ample evidence of what can happen if we are not.

I urge you to give your attention to the latest requirements and to the advice from public health authorities.

Further communications will be made as they become necessary because of further changes to requirements. I will be available to local leadership via my mobile phone 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', is written over a light blue rectangular background.

(Fr) Andrew Doohan VG