

Memorandum

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

CC:

FROM: Fr Andrew Doohan VG

DATE: 01/07/2020

ATTACHMENTS: 0

SUBJECT: Easing of COVID-19 Restrictions – Step Three – 1 July 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A further easing of COVID-19 related restrictions was announced some time ago with an effective beginning date of 1 July 2020. There was much speculation about what impact this might have on our churches and the ability to publicly celebrate the liturgical life of our Church.

Last night, the NSW Minister for Health and Medical Research gazetted a new Public Health Order – the *Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order (No 4) 2020* ('the Order') – to give legal effect to the previously announced easing 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.

As always, we need to remember the context in which the Order is made. COVID-19 remains present in the community and is highly infectious. While the numbers in Australia have been and remain very small, particularly when compared with other parts of the world, it is essential that we observe the latest public health advice and take all reasonable precautions to protect the health of everyone.

The continuing trend towards an easing of COVID-19 related restrictions, particularly on the cusp of winter, may result in an increase in a number of diagnosed COVID-19 cases. General precautions regarding hygiene and physical distancing, therefore, are important as part of our ongoing vigilance.

The new Order makes the following provisions with effect from Wednesday 1 July 2020, or as otherwise noted. Where necessary, decisions made by the Bishop for the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle are noted.

Restrictions on Gatherings and Use of Premises

The Order now specifies that all church buildings are required to develop and observe a COVID-19 safety plan and keep a copy of that plan in the church building. NSW Health has developed a COVID-19 Safety Plan template for

places of worship along with other resources, including downloadable posters. These can be accessed from the relevant NSW Government website (www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/industry-guidelines/places-of-worship). 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: *The COVID-19 Safety Plan form has been updated to reflect the new arrangements. You will be required to compile a new version of your Safety Plan. Please do not forget to lodge a copy of your new Plan with the Bishop's Office by email.*

The number of people who can be present in our church buildings is now solely determined on the basis that there must be 4 square metres available per person on the premises. There is no arbitrary upper limit imposed by the Order; the only limitation is the size of your church building and the availability of the requisite amount of space per person. The new limits apply to all services conducted in our church buildings, including having them open for private prayer. *(Clause 8)*

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 is excluded from this number. *(Clause 4)*

There is an exception to this general rule for funerals and memorial services. If your church building does not have sufficient space to allow 50 persons to be present for a funeral or memorial service, you can lawfully allow up to 50 persons to attend a funeral or memorial service in that church building. **NB:** the limit of 50 persons for a funeral or memorial service in these circumstances also applies to gatherings immediately after a funeral or memorial service. *(Clause 9)*

Liturgical Celebrations in Our Church Buildings

While a broader range of liturgical celebrations can now resume in our church buildings, the previous advice on the way these celebrations should be conducted remains relevant and in place and should be observed out of a sense of concern for health and safety of both parishioners and visitors to our church buildings.

Although the liturgical life of our parishes will slowly return to what it might have been – at least in terms of schedules and options – there will still be some who will be unable to attend Sunday Mass, or for whom attending Sunday Mass might remain inadvisable. 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/>).

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. There are, however, some adaptations to this that might make life easier for parishes. (Clause 22)

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 to be obtained are defined as the person's name, their telephone number, and/or their email address. (Clause 22)

For the purposes of any event taking place in or around a church building, the relevant person is the owner of the 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 to facilitate contact tracing in the event of a COVID-19 case being identified.

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.

Conclusion

The continuing easing of COVID-19 related restrictions is something that many may have looked forward to, and something that should be soberly celebrated. We cannot forget, however, that COVID-19 remains, and will remain, a part of our reality until a vaccine is developed and made available. We have a moral obligation, well apart from legal requirements, to be vigilant for 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.

The latest easing of restrictions from 1 July 2020, while very welcome, still comes with conditions attached. I urge you to give due attention to them 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,



(Fr) Andrew Doohan VG