

Memorandum

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

CC:

FROM: Fr Andrew Doohan VG

DATE: 15/06/2020

ATTACHMENTS: 0

SUBJECT: Easing of COVID-19 Restrictions – Step Two Update – 15 June 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the end of last week, further changes to the current COVID-19 related restrictions were announced by the NSW Government. This has resulted in amendments to the *Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order (No 3) 2020* ('the Order') being gazetted on Friday evening to take effect from Saturday 13 June.

Subsequently – and just as I was ready to send out the updated information – the NSW Government made further announcements yesterday effectively determining the limit on persons attending funerals is to be determined solely on the capacity of the church building to meet the '4 square metre' rule (see relevant section below). At the moment no amendment to the Order has been gazetted to give effect to this; I will circulate an email confirming this amendment once it is available.

As with previous Public Health Orders, 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 the 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 Saturday 13 June 2020, or as otherwise noted. Where necessary, decisions made by the Bishop for the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle are noted.

Restricted Use of Certain Premises

The general requirement for church buildings to be closed is no longer required by the Order. It has been replaced by the imposition of limits on the number of persons who can be in the building at any one time.

The limit on the number of people who can be in the church building for a wedding, funeral, memorial or other religious service is outlined in the section on 'Gatherings' below.

For other purposes, i.e. for private prayer, the limit on the number of persons who can be in a church building for the purposes of private prayer is to be **the lesser** of

- the total number of persons calculated by allowing 4 square metres of space for each person on the premises, or
- 50 persons.

This requirement is the generally referred to '4 square metre' rule. Obviously, the capacity of each church building in the diocese will be different.

Anyone in a church building for the purposes of engaging in work are excluded from this number.

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).

The development and observance of a COVID-19 safety plan is now mandated by the Order, and if you do not have one you must close your church building until you have done so.

If you have not already done so, it would be appreciated if you could provide a copy of your COVID-19 Safety Plan, and any updates as they become necessary, to the Bishop's Office by email.

Gatherings

The Order now permits public gatherings in public places of up to twenty persons. Our church buildings are considered public places under the relevant NSW legislation.

There are several exceptions to this general restriction made by the Order of specific interest to us:

- there is no limit on the number of persons who can gather if they are engaged in work – as previously advised, this may permit a slow and gradual return to meetings of councils and committees with appropriate consideration for the general principles of good hygiene and physical distancing;
- the use of church buildings for private prayer as indicated above; and
- for weddings, funerals, memorial or other religious services, as outlined in the section on 'Weddings, Funerals and other Religious Services' below.

Weddings, Funerals, Memorial or Religious Services

The Order has been amended to include a general requirement that the number of persons who can be present in a church building for a wedding, funeral or memorial service, or other religious service is to be determined on the basis of the '4 square metre' rule, i.e. the maximum number of persons is those that can be accommodated by allowing 4 square metres per person within the building.

As previously mentioned above, the capacity of each church building in the diocese will be different.

This general limit is further regulated by providing a maximum number of persons who can attend these celebrations, as follows:

- **Weddings** – up to **20 persons**, excluding:
 - the persons being married,
 - the celebrant and others required to facilitate the wedding service,
 - one photographer, and
 - one videographer.
- **Funerals** – no upper limit, excluding
 - the celebrant and others required to facilitate the funeral, including funeral directors.
- **Memorial Services** – up to **50 persons**, excluding:
 - those necessary to conduct the service.
- **Religious Services** – up to **50 persons**, excluding:
 - those necessary to conduct the service.

These changes may require the number of people who can attend a wedding, funeral, memorial or other religious service in your church building to be determined on a building by building basis, and that number may be less than the limits generally understood to be applicable.

Being aware of the spatial limitations of your church buildings and determining the maximum number of persons who can be present at any one time in those buildings is now even more urgent. It would be wise to communicate these updated limits to regular users – including funeral directors – to avoid last minute disappointment.

This category of 'Religious Services' includes the celebration of Baptisms, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in the First Rite at advertised times, and the public celebration of Mass. Previous advice on the way these celebrations should be conducted remain 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.

Because of the limit in the number of people who may be able to attend any particular Mass, all 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/>).

The possibility of live-streaming Masses remains available under the Order, though consideration should be given to what should now be live-streamed. This is particularly the case for weekday Mass, where the number of persons able to attend would normally be well below the limits contained in the Order. As a general principle, if it does not need to be live-streamed, then perhaps it should not be live-streamed.

For the sake of clarity, those persons who are required to be in the church to enable the production of a live stream would generally not be included in the number of attendees permitted to be in the church building.

Collection of Contact Details

The Order continues to require the collection of contact details of any person attending a wedding, funeral, memorial or religious service – and this requirement extends to a gathering immediately after such an event that takes place at the same location.

The contact details to be obtained are defined as the person's name, their telephone number, and/or their email address.

For the purposes of any event taking place in or around a church building, the relevant person 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 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 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 occasional easing of COVID-19 related restrictions cannot simply be an opportunity to go back to the way things used to be. 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 further easing of restrictions that take effect from 13 June 2020 still come with conditions attached. I urge you to give due attention to them and to the advice from public health authorities.

The NSW Government has indicated that there will be a further easing of restrictions from 1 July. At the moment, we only have the media announcements of what these will be, and there will be further advice closer to 1 July once details are known. Until the details are known more fully, please adopt a cautious approach to future planning.

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', written in a cursive style.

(Fr) Andrew Doohan VG