



COVID-19 PANDEMIC EVENT

ADVICE, GUIDANCE AND INSTRUCTIONS TO PARISHES

**Version 1
Dated 24 August 2020**

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Introduction

The advent of COVID-19 is recognised both in Australia and around the world as a risk to public health, the virus being highly contagious and also potentially fatal. There have now been a number of cases of individuals with COVID-19 confirmed in the State of New South Wales, as well as other Australian states and territories, including by means of community transmission.

The NSW Government has issued a series of Orders under Section 7 of the *Public Health Act 2010* (NSW) beginning 15 March 2020 to address the public health emergency caused by COVID-19. These Orders have been updated and amended to respond to the changing risk scenario in New South Wales and to make provision for courses of action deemed necessary to mitigate or eliminate the risk associated with COVID-19.

The courses of action prompted or required by the Public Health Orders have had a significant effect on the life of the Church of Maitland-Newcastle, as it has had on the life of the broader community of New South Wales, Australia, and the world. The Church has been forced, by legal prescription and moral obligation, to adapt its life to address the reality of living in a context where COVID-19 is present and represents a risk to the life of the Church's members and community.

It should be recognised that some of these changes, particularly early in the current pandemic event when church buildings were closed, and the Church's liturgical and sacramental life was abruptly curtailed, caused a great deal of grief and angst among the Church's members. Such feelings of grief and angst are understandable and to be regretted. Yet, we need also to remember that our current circumstances are outside the normative life of both our community and our Church.

The Church is required to contribute to the overall effectiveness of the community's attempts to control and mitigate the risks associated with COVID-19. The sacrifices that are required by members of the Church in the current circumstances should not be diminished, yet they should also not be beyond the reach of those who claim the name of Jesus Christ. While embracing the necessary changes is difficult, we embrace them nevertheless because of our concern for our brothers and sisters in the Church and the community in which the Church lives and ministers.

In addition to temporarily changing our own internal practices, we, as Church, continue to pray for a speedy end to the COVID-19 pandemic event, for the health and safety of those who are on the frontline of the efforts to mitigate the virus, for those who have been infected and are recovering, for those who died, and those who mourn them. We commit ourselves to continue witnessing to the Gospel in the face of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety.

The purpose of this document, which will be updated regularly and as required, is to compile in one document the contents of the memos and other communications

that have been made available to parishes since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic event. It is hoped that it will prove helpful to the life of parishes.

Every effort is to be made to ensure that the Church adheres to good practice that mitigates the risk of community transmission of the COVID-19 virus. One of the premier means of doing this is through good, clear communication of requirements. As such, regular reminders of those things now required may prove both useful and beneficial for all members of the diocese. The use of bulletins, websites, and verbal announcements prior to Mass and other liturgical celebrations have proven helpful in some parts of the diocese, and similar options are commended to your attention.

Fr Andrew Doohan VG
Vicar General

Instruction

On Actions and Precautions to be Observed in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle During the COVID-19 Pandemic Event

1/2020

The Need for an Instruction

The arrival of COVID-19, also known as Novel Coronavirus 2019, in the community of Australia has been recognised by secular authorities as presenting a continuing danger to public health. Efforts are continuing to eliminate, mitigate, or otherwise control the spread of COVID-19 within the Australian community, and these efforts have required the enactment of regulatory requirements in all of the civil jurisdictions within the Commonwealth of Australia. In the State of New South Wales these regulatory requirements are contained in Orders made under the *Public Health Act 2010* (NSW).

Civil authorities within the State of New South Wales responsible for the promotion of public health have issued general advice and information to assist members of the community in protecting themselves and the broader community from the dangers presented by COVID-19.

Aspects of these regulatory requirements and general advice have a direct impact on the pastoral and liturgical life of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. It is likely these impacts will exist for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic event, and accordingly require temporary changes to established and customary practices be put in place to protect both members of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and the broader community.

The overall aim of both the regulatory requirements and the general advice from public health authorities has been, and remains, the safety of all residents of the State of New South Wales.

The Instruction

In response to the need to provide clear instruction and advice to the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, the document entitled 'COVID-19 Pandemic Event: Advice, Guidance and Instructions to Parishes' 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.

For the avoidance of confusion:

- Pastors and parishes will comply with any requirement that results from the making of an Order under the *Public Health Act 2010* (NSW);

- Pastors and parishes will comply with any requirement contained in the document entitled 'COVID-19 Pandemic Event: Advice, Guidance and Instructions to Parishes' using language that is prescriptive, e.g. 'will', 'must', 'is to', etc.
- Pastors and parishes will consider any requirement contained in the document entitled 'COVID-19 Pandemic Event: Advice, Guidance and Instructions to Parishes' using language that is permissive, e.g. 'should', 'may', 'consider', etc., and make determinations for the local community that is in keeping with the overall aim of ensuring the safety of parishioners and the broader community.

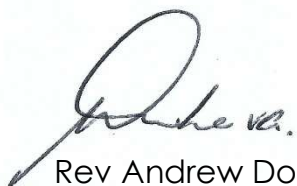
Exhortation

The advent of COVID-19 in the Australian community places the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle in unusual circumstances. Called to play our part in the broader efforts to eliminate, mitigate or otherwise control the spread of COVID-19 across the community, the Diocese is required to amend and adapt its pastoral and liturgical life in order to do so.

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

This Instruction has an effective date of 24 August 2020 nothing the contrary withstanding, and abrogates all previous instructions.

Given at Hamilton, NSW, on the 24th day of August 2020.



Rev Andrew Doohan VG

Vicar General

Anointing and Viaticum

Pastoral Care of the Sick and Dying should continue with appropriate care and precautions being observed. Visits to the sick and dying, and the celebration of Viaticum, are possible and permissible provided any necessary health and hygiene guidelines are followed.

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

In the celebration of the Anointing of the Sick, priests are given permission for:

- a. The Laying on of hands can take place by holding them above rather than upon the head of the person being anointed.
- b. Anointing with cotton wool, or using a protective glove, that can be disposed of appropriately after a single use.
- c. Anointing with the Oil of the Sick on the head alone.

Pastors are exhorted to accommodate any genuine and reasonable request for the celebration of the Anointing of the Sick or Viaticum as far as is possible under the current limitations and restrictions.

Baptisms

The celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism is possible under the current Public Health Order, though liturgical adaptations are required as indicated below:

- 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 to be used for baptism is to be used once only. Multiple baptisms during the same liturgy require the changing of water between each baptism or the preparation of separate vessels of water for each person being baptised.
- Care is to be taken to minimise physical contact between the celebrant of baptism and the one being baptised.
- The anointings with the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of Chrism can be accomplished with cotton wool or using a protective glove, which can be disposed of appropriately after a single use.
- The anointing with the Oil of Catechumens can be legitimately omitted in the current circumstances.
- It is acceptable in the current circumstances for the celebrant's hands to be near the ears and lips of the one being baptised during the Ephpheta rite.

Parish Baptism Preparation programs are suspended for the duration of the current circumstances. Pastors are strongly urged to be pastorally supportive of those

members of the faithful who are seeking to celebrate Baptism and to accommodate the genuine concerns of parents as far as possible.

Baptisms may legitimately be delayed or deferred in the current circumstances.

Churches, Capacity in

Effective 24 July 2020, the Public Health Order has set the number of persons who can be present in our church buildings at any one time 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.

These limits apply to all services conducted in our church buildings and include having them open for private prayer.

In calculating the space available in any premises, the Public Health Order specifies that the area to be included in such calculations is:

- 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.

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 the limit.

Churches, Cleaning and Hygiene in

The COVID-19 Safety Plan template described elsewhere in this document outlines the general requirements around hygiene and cleaning for our church buildings in the current circumstances.

Parishes are reminded that the development of, and compliance with, your COVID-19 Safety Plan is a requirement under the current Public Health Order for your church building to be used for the celebration of the Church's liturgy or for it to be open for private prayer.

Ensuring the cleanliness and hygiene of our physical spaces is only one part, albeit a very significant part, of the actions we are obliged to take to ensure that those who use our church buildings, parishioners and visitors alike, remain safe. When combined with other advice provided by NSW Health, the cleanliness and hygiene of our church buildings plays a significant role in mitigating the risk of the COVID-19 virus spreading through the community.

The frequency of cleaning required in each church building in the diocese is dependent on the frequency of use and the general availability for private prayer.

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, and this decision should be reflected in your COVID-19 Safety Plan.

Churches, Opening of

Under the current Public Health Order, our church buildings are able to be opened for both the public celebration of the liturgy and for private prayer and meditation.

The opening of our church buildings is dependant on the availability of a COVID-19 Safety Plan for the building, and the registration of the church as a COVID-19 Safe business.

Communion, Distribution of

The distribution of Communion is a part of the celebration of Mass that is of particular high-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic event. As a means of minimising the risks associated with this part of Mass, please observe the following until further notice:

- Holy Communion from the Chalice is restricted to the presider, who is to be the only one to drink from the chalice, and concelebrating priests, who are to intinct.
- Because of the increased infection risk, Holy Communion is not to be given on the tongue, with those attached to this pious practice being asked to adjust their usual practice for the sake of the fellow parishioners.
- Communion is only to be distributed by the presider.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are not to be used.
- Presiders are encouraged to wear a mask for the distribution of Communion.
- Care you should be taken to ensure that appropriate physical distancing is maintained during the Communion procession. This may involve modifying the usual practice around the Communion procession. Parishioners should be reminded regularly of this particular requirement.

Confession

The celebration of the Sacrament of Penance remains possible under the current Public Health Order, subject to the general requirements around physical distancing, the capacity of church buildings, and the provisions of the COVID-19 Safety Plan for your church building.

Celebrations of the First Rite of Reconciliation should take place with appropriate care and precautions. It is highly recommended that confessionals not be used in the current circumstances; the use of flexible seating in an appropriate part of the church may be more suitable.

The communal celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, i.e. the Second and Third Rites of Reconciliation, should not take place for the time being.

Priests are exhorted to honour any reasonable request to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance.

Contact Details, Collection of

The Public Health Order requires the collection of contact details of any person attending a service (wedding, funeral, memorial or a religious service) in one of our churches.

The details required to be collected are:

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

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

For the purpose 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 is not to be recorded under any circumstances; the recording of date, location, and time, if necessary, is sufficient. This requirement is particularly the case when it comes to the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance.

With effect from 6 August 2020, the collection of contact details can be undertaken either via paper forms or via electronic means.

COVID-19 Safety Plans

The Public Health Order requires that all places of worship must have a COVID-19 Safety Plan. The Safety Plan must be based on the template developed by NSW Health, which can be accessed via the NSW Government website (www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/industry-guidelines/places-of-worship).

The most current template is dated 23 July 2020.

Specific versions of the COVID-10 Safety Plan template are also available for weddings and funerals; parishes may need to prepare separate plans for these events in their church buildings. These are available on the NSW Government website (www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/industry-guidelines); the current templates are dated 23 July 2020.

A copy of each COVID-19 Safety Plan is required under the Public Health Order to be kept in each church. A copy of your COVID-19 Safety Plan is to be lodged with the Bishop's Office in the event that authorities contact the diocese directly seeking information about a specific building within the diocese.

COVID Safe Organisation Registration

The current Public Health Order requires that all places of public worship be registered as a COVID Safe organisation.

This process, which is only required once, can be achieved by visiting the relevant NSW Government website (www.nsw.gov.au/register-your-business-as-covid-safe). Please note that you must prepare your COVID-19 Safety Plan prior to registering as a COVID Safe organisation.

Funerals

The celebration of funerals remains possible under the current Public Health Order, subject to the general requirements around physical distancing, the capacity of church buildings, and the provisions of the COVID-19 Safety Plans, both general and funeral specific, for your church building.

In particular, please note the following liturgical adaptations that are required in the current circumstances:

- Funeral Masses are subject to the adaptations required for all Masses as specified elsewhere in this document.
- Singing during funerals is subject to the same restrictions as specified elsewhere in this document.
- The placing of Christian symbols where used is to be undertaken in such a way as to minimise the contact between ministers and those placing the symbols. The symbols are not to be handed to those placing them; the

symbols should be in a location from which they can be easily retrieved by those who will be placing them.

- The limits on the number of people who are able to be in your church for a funeral must be closely policed.
- Any reasonable request to permit live-streaming of funerals should be accommodated wherever possible.
- The gathering of large crowds outside a church building following a funeral is strongly discouraged; it may be necessary to enlist the assistance of funeral directors and their staff to manage this occurrence.

Pastors are exhorted to exercise good pastoral care of the bereaved in the current circumstances and to accommodate genuine and reasonable requests as far as possible within the current limitations.

Initiation of Children

Apart from the Sacrament of Baptism, the celebration of Christian Initiation is cancelled for 2020.

Parish Sacramental Preparation programs and the celebration of Confirmation and First Communion will not take place during 2020; we shall observe a 'fallow year' with time to reflect on current practice in preparation for a return to the sacramental journey for our children in the future.

The Diocesan Liturgy Council has prepared a resource for this 'fallow year' time for use by parishes. This resource can be accessed via the diocesan website (www.mn.catholic.org.au/church-mission/catholic-life/liturgy/sacraments/)

Masks

On 2 August 2020, the NSW Chief Health Officer made public comments including a strong recommendation that persons who attend places of worship should wear a mask.

While wearing a mask inside a church is not mandatory, it is highly recommended especially in areas where there have been cases of community transmission. Wearing masks should not be seen as a substitute for observing physical distancing but it may reduce risks.

The recommendation was reinforced by the NSW Chief Health Officer on 14 August in communication to religious leaders with a request for the promotion of mask-wearing to be increased.

On Friday 7 August, the Bishop provided the following commentary regarding the wearing of masks in churches and during Mass (and other liturgies):

“As you are aware, this week the government has ‘strongly recommended’ the wearing of masks in places of public worship. Obviously, some people who come to mass this weekend will feel the need to wear a mask. This is a personal choice. It would not be appropriate, however, to reach beyond the government’s strong recommendation and insist people wear masks at the public celebration of the liturgy. We need to remember as well that the wearing of masks is but one recommendation among many; maintaining physical distancing remains just as important as it always has.

“With regard to presiders, some may feel it is necessary to wear a mask for the distribution of communion. Beyond this however I do not consider there is a need for presiders to wear masks when at the chair, altar, ambo or elsewhere in the sanctuary. When presiding we are already well distanced from others. The wearing of masks at these times will impact on the lay faithful’s ability to hear and understand the prayers, readings, homily, and dialogue exchanges.”

It would be appreciated, therefore, if the wearing of masks could be promoted and encouraged in parishes by your available means. It is hoped that this will ensure the mandatory imposition of mask-wearing does not take place or is delayed for the time being.

The general advice to wear masks when physical distancing is not possible means clergy are asked to consider this in circumstances such as hearing Confessions and speaking with parishioners ‘close up’.

Mass, Adaptations to

The advent of the COVID-19 virus requires adaptations to the way we celebrate Mass and other liturgical acts to mitigate the risk of unintentionally contributing to the community transmission of the virus. The request of NSW Health to adapt our liturgical celebrations has been a consistent one from the beginning, and it was reinforced by the NSW Chief Health Officer in a recent communication to Religious Leaders dated 14 August 2020.

In terms of specific adaptations that are required:

- Hymnals, bulletins, orders of service, collection plates, and other objects are not to be handed from one person to another. Where needed, parishioners can pick up a bulletin or order of service that has been made available, but they must not be handed out under any circumstances.
- Alternative methods for taking up the usual collections are to be put in place.
- The number of ministers used within the celebration of Mass (readers, servers, etc.) is to be the minimum number required in light of the adaptations needed in the current circumstances.

- The procession of the Book of the Gospels during the entrance procession is not to take place. Where there is a desire to continue using the Book of the Gospels during Mass, it may be placed on the altar before Mass commences.
- The Procession of Gifts is not to take place during the current circumstances. The Preparation of the Gifts should be carried out in such a way as to minimise physical contact between presider and minister, and to minimise contact with the communion elements.
- When exchanging the Sign of Peace, members of the assembly are to avoid shaking hands or kissing, opting instead for simply saying 'Peace be with you', and smiling, offering a wave, or nodding. Physical contact between those residing in the same household is, of course, permitted, though not recommended, lest the wrong message be signalled to the broader assembly.
- The distribution of Communion is subject to the restrictions explained elsewhere in this document. The use of a mask by the presider when distributing Communion, and the observance of appropriate hand hygiene beforehand, is strongly recommended.
- Singing during the celebration of Mass is subject to the restrictions explained elsewhere in this document.

The adaptations listed above are also to be observed in other liturgical celebrations to which they might apply.

Mass, Celebration of

The celebration of Mass is currently permitted within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, subject to the requirements of COVID-19 Safety Plans and the ability to comply with the other requirements for the use of the church buildings.

Except for the priests of the diocese, the Bishop has dispensed the faithful of the diocese from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass where they are not able to do so because of the limits on the number of persons able to be in a church building, or where to do so is problematic in the current circumstances. This dispensation remains in place until further notice.

Public Health Advice

NSW Health has consistently provided advice to the public about general precautions to be observed in the community to assist in restraining the spread of COVID-19. This advice is updated as and when necessary.

Currently promoted advice includes:

- Those who fall into a particularly vulnerable group – the elderly, those with pre-existing conditions, those with compromised immune systems, etc. – are encouraged to consider their need to avoid large gatherings.
- Those who are sick should self-isolate, and if necessary be tested for COVID-19.
- Physical distancing of 1.5 metres should be observed wherever possible.
- Good hand hygiene – hand washing with soap and water for 20 seconds or alcohol-based hand rubs – should be practiced regularly across the course of the day.
- All members of the public are encouraged to practice cough etiquette.
- The downloading and use of the COVIDSafe phone app.
- The wearing of a face mask is strongly recommended
 - where it is hard to maintain physical distancing requirements,
 - in places of public worship,
 - and in indoor venues with a higher risk of transmission.

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

Public Health Order

The Public Health Order currently in force is the *Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order (No 4) 2020* dated 30 June 2020, and amended on 16 July 2020, 23 July 2020, and 31 July 2020.

A copy of the current Order can be downloaded from the NSW Legislation website (www.legislation.nsw.gov.au).

Schools, Ministry in

On Monday 17 August 2020, the NSW Government announced changes to practices within public schools designed to ensure school communities remain safe inside and outside the school gate. The changes took effect on Wednesday 19 August 2020.

It was subsequently announced that Catholic Schools in New South Wales, including those of our diocese, would adopt the same changes at the same time.

While not enforced by changes to the current Public Health Order, there is a concern that non-compliance would result in regulatory changes to enforce them.

Some of announced changes may have a direct impact on parish-school interaction. Our diocesan schools have received advice on these changes from the Catholic Schools Office, and pastors are encouraged to enter into dialogue with the principal of schools within their parish about what is possible and feasible under the new arrangements.

The overriding concern must be for the safety of students and the school community, yet there may be some possibility of ministry in schools under the new arrangements. Such ministerial possibilities may not be the same as they were beforehand, and pastors are to refrain from making unreasonable requests of schools in the current circumstances, particularly requests that may be contrary to the arrangements currently in place.

When engaging in ministry in our schools, pastors are to take every precaution to ensure they do not unintentionally contribute to 'cross contamination' through participating in multiple activities in multiple locations with multiple groups of people on the same day. The generally accepted advice would appear to be that when ministering in schools an individual should go from their home to the school and then return home.

Singing

Singing during the celebration of Mass or other liturgies remains a high-risk activity, particularly when undertaken as a group or a community. For this reason, communal singing should not take place in the current circumstances, and great care should be exercised when determining what, if any, singing should take place during Mass.

In a communication to Religious Leaders dated 14 August 2020, the NSW Chief Health Officer provides the following information regarding singing:

"Singing in groups (whether by choirs or by congregants) or chanting is a particularly high-risk activity and must not take place at this time, irrespective of whether singers or chanters are wearing masks. The only COVID-Safe singing that is permitted is a solo singer distanced at least five metres away from other people and not directly above the audience."

In light of the Chief Health Officer's advice, communal and choir singing should not take place in the current circumstances, and great care should be taken when considering the possibility of a solo singer.

Presiders should also be aware that singing during the entrance and exit processions is very risky for the assembly, particularly when undertaken with great gusto. Presiders are urged to refrain from singing in this context, both to minimise the risk to parishioners and to provide an example to parishioners about the appropriateness of not engaging in communal singing.

The requirement to avoid communal and choir singing also applies to the celebration of funerals, weddings, and other liturgical celebrations.

The possibility of instrumental music to accompany the processions during Mass – entrance, communion, and exit – is highly recommended. It would also be most appropriate for the assembly to pray the Missal's Entrance Antiphon when the

presider reaches the chair, and Communion Antiphons immediately after the presider receives Communion.

Weddings

The celebration of weddings remains possible under the current Public Health Order, subject to the general requirements around physical distancing, the capacity of church buildings, and the provisions of the COVID-19 Safety Plan, both general and wedding specific, for your church building.

In particular, please note the following liturgical adaptations that are required in the current circumstances:

- Nuptial Masses are subject to the adaptations required for all Masses as specified elsewhere in this document.
- Singing during weddings is subject to the same restrictions as specified elsewhere in this document.
- The limits on the number of people who are able to be in your church for a wedding must be closely policed.
- Any reasonable request to permit live-streaming of weddings should be accommodated wherever possible.
- The gathering of large crowds outside a church building following a wedding is strongly discouraged; it may be necessary to enlist the assistance of the bride and groom to manage this occurrence.

Ministers are exhorted to exercise good ongoing pastoral care of couples preparing for marriage, especially where the couple request a wedding be postponed to another date.