



COVID-19 PANDEMIC EVENT

ADVICE, GUIDANCE, AND INSTRUCTIONS TO PARISHES

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Introduction

When the people of Australia embarked on the year that was 2020, our immediate attention was on the impact of widespread bushfires across our nation. The virus we now know as COVID-19 was something we might have vaguely been aware of, but it had not yet had a significant impact on our daily lives.

As we begin 2021, we know a lot more about COVID-19 than we did this time last year. We are also in a different place. While vaccinations have begun, until the Public Health Officials indicate otherwise, we must remain vigilant.

The NSW Government response continues to be regulated under a series of Orders made under Section 7 of the *Public Health Act 2010* (NSW) beginning 15 March 2020 and updated and amended since then as circumstances have changed.

These Public Health Orders continue to impact on the life of the Church of Maitland-Newcastle, though not as much as they did in 2020.

Our changed circumstances may still be a source of grief and angst for members of our Church community, particularly when the impact is on our liturgical and sacramental life. While some changes remain necessary, it is now possible for a further relaxation of previous changes to the liturgical expression of our identity as the Church of Maitland-Newcastle.

The purpose of this revised document is to place before the members of the Church of Maitland-Newcastle those things which they should be aware of considering the presence of COVID-19 in the broader community. It will continue to be updated as required in the hope that it provides a ready source of support for the life of parishes and other Church agencies.

Clear communication of requirements including the use of bulletins, websites, and verbal announcements prior to Mass and other liturgies have proven helpful in some parts of the Diocese, and similar options are commended to your attention.

The Church continues to contribute to the community's efforts to mitigate the risks associated with COVID-19. While this remains a challenge, we do so 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.

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.

As we begin 2021 and the work of revising all those liturgies we were unable to celebrate in 2020 to be COVID safe, I recommend to you a pastoral document prepared by the Diocesan Liturgy Council: "Shaping Liturgy 2021 in the Church of Maitland-Newcastle: A liturgical bridge from 2020 to 2022", which can be accessed on the Diocesan website via www.mn.catholic.org.au/church-mission/catholic-life/liturgy/diocesan-liturgical-guidelines/.

Thank you for your continuing efforts to adapt to the COVID-19 situation, and to protect yourselves and the broader community through the necessary changes.

Fr Andrew Doohan VG
Vicar General

1 March 2021

Instruction

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

2/2020

The Need for an Instruction

The arrival of COVID-19, also known as Novel Coronavirus 2019, in the community of Australia was 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 continuously 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 unlikely the impact of regulatory requirements will diminish in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, 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. This is also the overall aim of the instructions, guidance, and advice of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

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, other parish leaders, and parishes in general will:

- comply with any requirement that results from the making of an Order under the *Public Health Act 2010* (NSW).
- comply with any requirement contained in the document entitled 'COVID-19 Pandemic Event: Advice, Guidance and Instructions to Parishes' that uses language that is prescriptive, e.g., 'will', 'must', 'is to', etc.
- give due consideration to any requirement contained in the document entitled 'COVID-19 Pandemic Event: Advice, Guidance and Instructions to Parishes' that uses 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 continuing presence of COVID-19 in the Australian community presents the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle with a set of 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 by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic event requires 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 1 December 2020 nothing to the contrary withstanding and abrogates all previous instructions.

Given at Hamilton, NSW, on 1 December 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 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.

Given the current lack of communal transmission of COVID-19 in NSW, as long as ministers engage in thorough handwashing or sanitising, and participants are comfortable, ministers may resume using physical touch in these liturgies.

If participants are not comfortable priests may continue to:

- Lay hands by holding them above rather than upon the head of the person being anointed.
- The use of cotton wool for the Anointing that can be disposed of appropriately after a single use.
- Anointing with the Oil of the Sick on the head alone.

Baptisms

Given the current lack of communal transmission of COVID-19 in NSW, as long as ministers engage in thorough handwashing or sanitising, and participants are comfortable, ministers may resume using physical touch for the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism.

The following liturgical adaptations continue to be required:

- 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 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.
- When necessary the anointings with the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of Chrism can be accomplished with cotton wool which can be disposed of appropriately after a single use (preferably by burning).
- Alternatively, the Oil can be applied by the Presider who invites one of the parents to rub the Oil into the child's skin.

Parish Baptism Preparation programs may resume in a COVID Safe way. Pastors should remain attentive to the concerns of families and respond accordingly.

Churches, Capacity in

The current Public Health Order has set the number of persons who can be present in our church buildings at any one time to be calculated based on one person per two square metres (the 'two-square-metre rule').

You are able to have 25 persons in non-residential premises before there is a need to apply the 'two-square-metre rule' to those premises.

The 'two-square-metre rule' applies to all religious services that take place in our church buildings, including funerals/memorial services and weddings.

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. Also excluded are those who need to be in the church building in the case of an emergency.

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.

The frequency of cleaning required in each church building 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 on two conditions:

- a COVID-19 Safety Plan for the building has been developed, and
- the church has been registered as a COVID-19 Safe business.

Communion, Distribution of

The distribution of Communion during Mass is of particular high-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic event. We are, however, in a position to relax some of the previous restrictions.

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. Concelebrating priests are to intinct.
- Because of the increased infection risk, Holy Communion is not to be given on the tongue.

- It remains preferable for Communion to be distributed by the Presider only. Where numbers warrant, one additional minister (ordinary or extraordinary) may assist, subject to appropriate physical distancing being observed:
 - Between those distributing Communion,
 - During the Communion procession(s). This may require a rethink of your traditional processional practice.
- Ministers of Communion (ordinary and extraordinary) who feel a need may wear a mask for the distribution of Communion.
- The wearing of disposable gloves during Communion is not appropriate and is not to take place.
- Those distributing Communion are encouraged to practice good hand hygiene including thoroughly washing hands before Mass begins and, if necessary, sanitising hands discreetly before the distribution of Communion. The latter is to be carried out at the credence or side table and not at the altar.
- There is no need for those receiving Communion to sanitise their hands. The onus for sanitising hands is on the one distributing Communion.
- The presence of hand sanitiser on the altar is not appropriate. Its use is practical and not liturgical.

Confession

The celebration of the Sacrament of Penance is 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 are not used in the current circumstances; the use of flexible seating in an appropriate part of the church is more suitable.

The celebration of the Second Rite of Reconciliation and Penitential Services may resume subject to the same COVID-19 Safe restrictions that apply to any liturgy.

The Third Rite of Reconciliation is not permitted.

Contact Details, Collection of

The Public Health Order requires any person entering a place of public worship to provide specified information to the “occupier of the premises”, i.e., to the Parish via their authorised representative. The authorised representative for parish churches is the Parish Priest, their equivalent, or their delegate. No other person or party has a lawful reason under the Order to collect the information.

The Order requires the “occupier of the premises” must ensure that there is a person who is responsible for ensuring the specified information is collected. This may require someone to be ‘on duty’ at the church door to ensure compliance with the provision of the specified information.

The required information must be collected and recorded for each individual person who attends, including children and infants. Entry to a church building is not possible if the information is not provided.

The information required includes:

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

The same information must be collected and recorded for any outdoor Mass or religious service.

The reason for a person being in a church building is not to be recorded under any circumstances.

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

Collection Details, Management of

The Public Health Order expresses a clear preference for the required contact information to be collected via an electronic method, e.g.

- Using the Service NSW App and the QR Code associated with your church’s COVID-19 Safe Organisation registration, or
- Some third-party app that uses either a QR Code or some other method to gather the specified information.

It is **strongly** recommended that parishes make use of the Service NSW QR Code.

It remains possible, however, to collect the specified information paper-based methods direct to the “occupier of the premises”. It is highly recommended that any paper records be scanned and stored electronically if at all possible.

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 is not to be used for any other purpose without the individual consent of the person involved.

COVID-19 Safety Plans

The Public Health Order requires that all places of worship must *develop and comply with* a COVID-19 Safety Plan. This requirement is also extended to 'religious services held on premises other than a place of public worship' (e.g., for an outdoor Mass, etc.).

The Safety Plan must use or be based on the template developed by NSW Health.

The most current COVID-19 Safety Plan templates are:

- **General:** 26 February 2021 – available online at www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/industry-guidelines/places-of-worship.
- **Funeral:** 26 February 2021 – available online at www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/industry-guidelines/funerals-memorial-services-and-wakes.
- **Weddings:** 26 February 2021 – available online <https://www.nsw.gov.au/form/covid-safety-plan/wedding-ceremonies-and-receptions>.

The **general** template also applies to religious services that take place outside a place of public worship.

You are able to complete the form online and then print it immediately or email a copy of the completed Plan to your chosen email address.

Where a location makes use of the provisions for separate areas on the same premises, a separate COVID-19 Safety Plan is required to be developed and complied with for each separate area used.

A copy of each COVID-19 Safety Plan is required to be kept in each church or separate area being used.

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 is 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.

The current Public Health Order directs the number of persons who may attend a funeral in a church building or an outdoor space is determined based on capacity alone (see section on **Churches, Capacity in**).

Please note the following liturgical adaptations that are required:

- 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 should minimise the contact between ministers and those placing them. The symbols should be in a location from which they can be easily retrieved by those placing them.
- The limits on the number of people who are able to be in your church for a funeral must be closely adhered to.
- Requests 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.

Initiation of Children

The celebration of Christian Initiation for children will recommence in 2021. Parishes will need to give appropriate consideration to ensuring the safety of children, parents, and other participants during the time of preparation and during the celebrations themselves.

In preparing for both celebrations of Christian Initiation, thought will need to be given to:

- The number of celebrations needed to accommodate candidates and their families.
- The appropriate manner of observing physical distancing requirements in your liturgical space.

With specific regard to Confirmation, the Bishop or his delegate will anoint candidates in the traditional way unless families make a specific request.

There are two resources prepared by the Diocesan Liturgy Council which will assist parishes in reimagining Sacraments of Initiation for children:

- the 'Fallow Year' resource.
- 'Shaping Liturgy 2021: a Liturgical bridge from 2020- 2021'.

Both of these documents can be found via www.mn.catholic.org.au/church-mission/catholic-life/liturgy/diocesan-liturgical-guidelines/.

Masks

The wearing of face masks is only mandatory in a limited range of circumstances, none of which directly apply to church buildings.

Therefore, the wearing of masks is not to be required in our churches.

The current advice regarding face masks can be found on the NSW Government website (visit www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/face-masks).

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

Mass, Adaptations to

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic event requires adaptations to the way we celebrate Mass and other liturgies.

At this point the following adaptations remain in place:

- Hymnals, bulletins, orders of service, collection plates, and other objects are not to be handed from one person to another.
- Alternative methods for taking up the 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.
- The procession of the Book of the Gospels during the entrance procession is not to take place. The Book of the Gospels may be placed on the altar before Mass commences if necessary.
- For those parishes where the use of multiple readers is the custom, consideration should be given to returning to this practice.
- The Procession of Gifts may take place where it is possible to observe appropriate precautions regarding multiple handling of containers.

The following suggestions are made:

- Consider placing the bread and wine on a tray or trays that are carried forward.
- Alternatively, have those carrying the items (bowls, carafes, etc) sanitise their hands before bringing them forward in procession.
- If more than one person is presenting the gifts, they are to process in single file.
- The procession should move into the sanctuary and stand to the side of the Presider, while maintaining physical distance.
- The Presider first takes the bread, prays, and then places it on the altar.
- The Presider then takes the wine, pours it into the chalice, adds water, prays, and then places it on the altar.
- Those presenting the gifts then withdraw.

This proposal respects the intention of the *General Instruction* that the gifts are not placed on the altar before the prayers are prayer over them.

- The Sign of Peace must avoid any form of physical contact except between those residing in the same household.
- The distribution of Communion is subject to the restrictions explained elsewhere in this document.

The adaptations listed above are also to be observed in other liturgies to which they apply.

Mass, Celebration of

The celebration of Mass is currently permitted within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle subject to appropriate precautions.

The Bishop's dispensation to the lay faithful from their obligation to attend Sunday Mass remains in effect.

Outdoors, Celebration of Mass or Other Liturgies

The current Public Health Order directs the number of persons who can attend the celebration of Mass or other liturgy in an outdoors area is to be calculated according to the 'two-square-metre-rule' (see the section on **Churches, Capacity in**).

Only the publicly accessible space is to be included in the calculation.

The Order defines an 'indoor space' as

An area in a building or other structure, whether or not temporary, which has a roof, ceiling or other top covering, but does not include an area with at least 2 sides open to the weather.

Any outdoor Mass or liturgical celebration requires a specific COVID-19 Safety Plan to be developed for the event. Other general requirements outlined elsewhere in this document also need to be observed.

The celebration of Mass or other liturgy in an outdoor setting is also subject the following qualifications or restrictions:

- The area to be used for those attending the event should be clearly delineated to ensure the capacity is calculated correctly.
- Those attending the event are to remain seated at all times, with the exception of the Communion Procession.
- Physical distancing is to be closely observed by all those attending and must be closely monitored by those responsible.
- Great care is to be taken at the end of any outdoor Mass or other liturgy so that physical distancing between those is maintained.

Public Health Advice

NSW Health continues to provide advice to the public about general precautions for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current advice is available on the NSW Government website (visit www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/how-to-protect-yourself-and-others).

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 2021* dated 25 February 2021 and taking effect from the beginning of 26 February 2021.

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

Schools, Ministry in

The latest set of guidelines from Catholic Schools NSW was circulated to the Principals of our schools on Wednesday 20 January 2021. These are initial guidelines for Term One, 2021, and will be updated as needed in light of regulatory changes, or the general COVID-19 situation.

Any ministry in our schools, including the celebration of liturgy, must be undertaken in accord with what is contained in the guidelines then in place. The overarching concern is the safety of all participants.

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.

Pastors and parishes are reminded of the need to engage in dialogue with the principal of schools located within their boundaries, or to which they have some pastoral connection, to determine what is possible and most appropriate under the updated arrangements.

Pastors and parishes are to refrain from making unreasonable requests of schools in the current circumstances, particularly any request that is contrary to the advice currently in place.

Where the celebration of liturgy is determined to be appropriate it is ideal that this takes place within the school premises until further notice. This is for two reasons: firstly, because many parishioners are in the 'vulnerable' age bracket, and secondly,

because of the additional burden this would place on parish communities regarding cleaning.

Pastors are not to insist that schools come to church buildings.

The COVID-19 Pandemic event is the perfect opportunity for conversation and dialogue around the nature of parish ministry with schools. Pastors, parishes, and schools are encouraged to reimagine the parish-school relationship through a missionary lens. Rather than be a source of disconnection between parishes and schools, COVID provides the perfect opportunity to invert this relationship so that schools become a focus of the parish's missionary outreach.

During 2021, liturgy updates for schools will be included in the regular COVID-19 communication from the Director of Schools.

Singing

Singing during the celebration of Mass or other liturgies remains a high-risk activity, particularly when undertaken as a group or a community. Care should be exercised when determining what, if any, singing should occur during Mass.

The current Public Health Order permits a choir of up to 30 persons during Mass and other liturgies. The COVID-19 Safety Plan template requires the choir to observe the following conditions:

- All singers must face forward and not towards each other.
- Physical distancing of 1.5 metres between each singer and any other musicians.
- The group must be at least 5 metres from all other people in the church (where practical).

For indoor religious services, members of the congregation should not participate in singing unless:

- The capacity of the church is determined based on one person per 4 square metres (the 'four-square-metre rule').
- Anyone 12 years and older wears a mask unless exempt.

It is therefore **strongly** recommended that assemblies not return to congregational singing at this point in time.

Presiders are members of the Assembly. If the Assembly cannot sing it is pastorally and liturgically appropriate that as a sign of this unity, the presider also refrain from singing. Refraining from singing during the entrance and exit processions will ensure that the Assembly feels safe.

For Masses and other liturgies celebrated outdoors, there is no upper limit on the number of members who can make up a choir, though the other requirements remain the same.

The requirements outlined above also apply to the celebration of funerals/memorial services and weddings.

Where singing is not possible, instrumental music may accompany the processions during Mass – entrance, communion, and exit. 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.

Technology, Use of

Live-streamed Masses are not to be proliferated beyond the normal schedule of Parish Masses, which includes funerals and weddings. This means that schools are not to live-stream Mass under any circumstances.

As the numbers allowed in our churches increases, it is hoped those parishes who continue to live-stream Sunday Mass will cease to do so when it is no longer pastorally necessary.

At this stage, the need to live-stream weekday Mass has passed. Any parish continuing with this practice is encouraged to review it.

Usable Space, Calculation of

The current Public Health Order directs that only those areas open to the public are to be included in calculating the space available in any premises.

Weddings

The celebration of weddings is 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.

The current Public Health Order directs the number of persons who may attend a wedding in a church building or an outdoor space is determined based on capacity alone (see section on **Churches, Capacity in**).

These limits also apply to gatherings immediately before or immediately after the wedding itself.

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 can be in the church for a wedding must be closely monitored.
- Requests 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.