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# **DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE: CONTINUING LIFE DURING COVID-19**

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**Instructions and Advice**

**Edition 1  
Dated 2 June 2021**

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## **Introduction**

The continuing presence of COVID-19 in the Australian community is not something we can ignore. The recent experiences of Victoria are ample evidence of the need to remain vigilant even if there have been no reported cases in our own area.

While vigilance is still necessary, it is also possible to review some of the measures the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle has had in place since the outbreak of the pandemic event.

This document adopts a new format, highlighting the difference between formal instructions that must be observed, and some general advice that is provided for local communities to consider in responding to the pandemic event in their own settings.

As always, this document will be reviewed and updated as circumstances dictate, and it is hoped that further easings of restrictions might be possible as the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out continues and the public health advice permits. Until then, your cooperation in ensuring we do all that is possible to protect our parishioners and the broader community.

Once again I thank you for your ongoing efforts to adapt to the COVID-19 situation and hope that this present document makes your task easier.

Fr Andrew Doohan VG  
Vicar General

## Instruction

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

1/2021

### The Need for an Instruction

The continuing presence of COVID-19 within the broader Australian community requires the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle to make adjustments to its pastoral and liturgical life. These measures, while temporary, are prompted by a desire to ensure that the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle is contributing to the communal efforts to control the spread and impact of COVID-19.

The overall aim of both NSW's regulatory regime 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 and 'best practice' advice of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

### The Instruction

In response to the need to provide clear instructions and 'best practice advice' to the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, the document entitled **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19** 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.

The document is prepared in three parts:

- Part I contains formal instructions for requirements that must be adhered to in light of the regulatory regime current in force within New South Wales;
- Part II contains formal instructions for requirements that must be adhered to concerning the celebration of liturgy within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle; and
- Part III contains general advice for consideration by parishes in light of the best advice available from the civil authorities responsible for public health.

To avoid confusion, pastors, other parish leaders, and parishes in general will:

- comply with any requirements that result from the making of an Order under the *Public Health Act 2010* (NSW), and as indicated in Part I of **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19**;
- comply with any requirement contained in the document entitled **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19** found in Part I and II; and

- consider the contents of the document entitled **Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle: Continuing Life During COVID-19** found in Part III and make 'best practice' decisions for the local community.

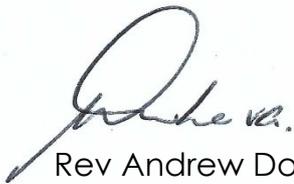
#### Exhortation

The risk posed to the Australian community by COVID-19 presents the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle with a set of unusual circumstances. Called to play our part in the broader communal efforts to eliminate, mitigate, or otherwise control the spread of COVID-19 across the community, the Diocese is required to temporarily amend and adapt its pastoral and liturgical life 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 COVID-19, I commend this Instruction to you.

This Instruction has an effective date of 2 June 2021 nothing to the contrary withstanding and abrogates all previous instructions.

Given at Hamilton, NSW, on 2 June 2021.



Rev Andrew Doohan VG  
Vicar General

## **PART I: Instructions**

**NB:** Compliance with any requirements found in this section is mandatory for parishes within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

The Public Health Order currently in force is the *Public Health (COVID-19 Gathering Restrictions) Order (No 2) 2021* dated 1 June 2021 and taking effect from the beginning of 2 June 2021.

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

The following instructions assume the following conditions required by the Public Health Order have been met:

- each church within the parish has registered as a COVID-19 Safe business (see [www.nsw.gov.au/register-your-business-as-covid-safe](http://www.nsw.gov.au/register-your-business-as-covid-safe)).
- each church within the parish has developed and complies with a current COVID-19 Safety Plan (see **COVID-19 Safety Plan** below) based on the NSW Health template.

### **A. Opening of Churches**

Church buildings are able to be opened for the public celebration of the liturgy and for private prayer and meditation.

### **B. Capacity in Church Buildings**

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

You can have 25 persons in non-residential premises (e.g. churches) 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.

There is a difference between capacity (the number of persons you can have in a church building) and the need for appropriate physical spacing for those persons inside the church building. The former is based on the 'two-square-metre rule' outlined above; the latter is a requirement for those in the church to maintain a spacing of 1.5m from others in the church (unless part of the same household).

### **C. Calculation of Usable Space**

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.

#### **D. Outdoor Celebrations**

The number of persons who can attend the celebration of Mass or other liturgy in an outdoor area is to be calculated according to the 'two-square-metre rule' (see the section on **Capacity in Church Buildings**).

Any outdoor Mass or liturgical celebration requires a specific COVID-19 Safety Plan to be developed and complied with for each event.

It is important to note that an outdoor Mass or other liturgy is exactly that, an occasion when the entire event takes place outdoors.

'Mixed' events, i.e. where there is a combination of persons inside and outside a church building, require particular care and management. As a general rule of thumb, the two areas are to be treated as separate events with a 'hard border' between them.

#### **E. COVID-19 Safety Plans**

The current COVID-19 Safety Plan templates applicable to a church building are:

- **Places of worship:** for general usage by church buildings or religious services celebrated outside – available online at [www.nsw.gov.au/form/covid-safety-plan/places-of-worship](http://www.nsw.gov.au/form/covid-safety-plan/places-of-worship). (effective **29 March** 2021)
- **Significant events:** for use for funerals/memorial services and weddings, etc. – available online at [www.nsw.gov.au/form-master-page/covid-safety-plan/significant-events-covid-19-safety-plan](http://www.nsw.gov.au/form-master-page/covid-safety-plan/significant-events-covid-19-safety-plan). (effective **12 April** 2021)

#### **F. Collection and Contact Details**

The current Public Health Order requires any person entering a place of 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 no longer requires there to be a person at the entrance to a church who is responsible for ensuring the specified information is collected.

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 contact 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 purpose of private prayer.

### **G. Management of Contact Details**

The current Public Health Order expresses a clear preference for the required contact information to be collected via the use of the Service NSW App and the associated QR Code for each church building.

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

It remains possible, however, to collect the specified information via 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 Office 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 purposes with the individual consent of the person involved.

### **H. Cleaning and Hygiene in Churches**

The COVID-19 Safety Plan templates outline the general requirements around hygiene and cleaning in our church buildings.

The frequency of cleaning in each church building is dependent on the frequency of use for liturgy and 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.

### **I. Public Health Advice**

NSW Health continues to provide advice to the public about general precautions for the current 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](http://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.

### ***J. Singing***

The current Public Health Order has removed any restriction to participation in singing during religious services, including congregational singing.

Singing remains a high-risk activity, however, and care should be exercised in observing appropriate physical distancing to minimise any risk.

These requirements apply to all liturgical celebrations.

### ***K. 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 or mandated in our churches.

The current advice regarding face masks can be found on the NSW Government website (visit [www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/how-to-protect-yourself-and-others/face-masks](http://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/how-to-protect-yourself-and-others/face-masks)).

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

## **PART II: Liturgical Directives**

**NB:** This section only contains those things that remain instructions. Other considerations for local discernment are contained in Part III: General Considerations.

### **A. Sunday Obligation**

The general dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass previously given to the lay members of the Diocese by the Bishop is withdrawn.

### **B. Anointing and Viaticum**

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

### **C. Distribution of Communion**

The distribution of Communion during Mass remains high-risk. Therefore:

- 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 from a second chalice.
- Holy Communion is not to be given on the tongue.

### **D. Baptism**

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 will require preparation in advance to avoid using the same water on multiple candidates (e.g., by having the water in a large pitcher from which it can be poured).

### **E. Confessions**

The current pandemic event does not meet the pastoral requirement for the celebration of the 'Third Rite' of Reconciliation (the "Rite of Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution"). The 'Third Rite' is therefore not permitted according to the universal law of the Church.

### **F. Holy Water**

The presence of Holy Water in door stoups is not permitted, and care should be taken when making Holy Water available in church buildings to ensure it can be safely accessed without risk.

## **PART III: General Advice**

With the current lack of communal transmission of COVID-19 in NSW, parish communities are encouraged to consider the following advice and discern the best liturgical response given the circumstances and needs of the local community.

Overall, where touch is integral to the liturgical sign and is limited (i.e. where a minister is touching a person), as long as ministers engage in thorough handwashing and/or sanitising, and participants are comfortable, ministers may resume using physical touch in those liturgies.

### **A. Adaptations to Mass**

Some of the adaptations and modifications to liturgical celebrations are only temporary; others might provide parishes with an opportunity for a more prayerful experience even after COVID-19.

The following advice and suggestions about ritual adaptations are offered:

- Apart from Communion Ministers, it is possible for parishes to use a 'fuller complement' of liturgical ministers during the celebration of Mass, subject only to ensuring that physical distancing, particularly in the sanctuary, is observed in line with general COVID-19 safety requirements.
- Care should be taken to ensure that liturgical ministers are not placed at risk because of the manner in which they carry out their ministry, with adaptations being used wherever necessary.
- It is possible for the Book of the Gospel to be included in the entrance procession. Otherwise, it could be placed on the altar before Mass commences.
- The Procession of Gifts presents particular challenges, especially around multiple handling of containers. The following is suggested as a possible solution:
  - Have those carrying the items (bowls, carafes, etc.) sanitise their hands before bringing them forward in procession.
  - If more than person is presenting the gifts, have them process in single file.
  - The procession moves into the sanctuary and stand to the side of the Presider while observing physical distancing. In the case of two people processing the gifts, have them stand either side of the Presider to ensure physical distancing.
  - 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 who presented the gifts can then return to their seats.

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

- The Sign of Peace may be given without physical contact, e.g., by a bow of the head or a wave, except between those residing in the same household.
- The distribution of Communion is addressed elsewhere in this document.

The following advice is offered about other considerations associated with the celebration of Mass and other liturgies:

- The handing of hymnals, bulletins, orders of service, and other items from one person to another is not prudent and instead should be placed in such a way as to invite people to collect them.
- If items are used that are recyclable, e.g., hymnals, care should be taken with hygiene and cleaning requirements. It is strongly recommended that non-recyclable items, e.g., bulletins, orders of service, etc., be taken home wherever possible by those who pick them up.
- The use of collection plates remains problematic at the present moment because of the need to pass them from hand to hand. The alternate methods already adopted should remain in place for the time being.

The adaptations and modifications suggested above should be considered in any other liturgy to which they apply.

### **B. Anointing and Viaticum**

Pastoral Care of the Sick and Dying, including visits and the celebration of Anointing and Viaticum, continues with appropriate care and precautions.

Where the sick and the dying, and their families, are not comfortable with physical touch, or where medical advice recommends against it, priests may continue to:

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

### **C. Baptisms**

With regard to the preparation for and celebration of Baptism, pastors should remain attentive to the concerns of families and respond accordingly.

Where members of the faithful are not comfortable with touch:

- Care to be taken to minimise any physical contact with the one being baptised.

- The anointings with the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of Chrism could be accomplished using cotton wool where necessary, with the cotton wool be disposed of appropriately after a single use (preferably by burning) **OR**
- A small amount of the Oil could be applied by the Presider who then invites one of the parents to rub the Oil into the child's skin.

Parish-based Baptism Preparation programs should be carried out in ways that are in keeping with general COVID safety protocols that are in place.

#### **D. Confessions**

With regard to the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, the following advice is offered:

- The First Rite of Reconciliation ("Reconciliation of Individual Penitents") is possible with appropriate care around maintaining physical distancing between the confessor and the penitent.
- The use of confessionals may be problematic and it is highly recommended that the use of flexible seating in an appropriate part of the church building may be more prudent at present.
- The celebration of the Second Rite of Reconciliation ("Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution") and Penitential Services may take place with due attention to the general COVID-19 safety requirements that apply to any communal liturgical celebration.
- Individual confessions during a Second Rite of Reconciliation should be celebrated in a way that maximise both safety of those participating and the need to privacy that comes with the act of confession.

#### **E. Distribution of Communion**

The distribution of Communion during Mass remains a high risk activity. The following advice is offered:

- It is recommended that only the number of Communion ministers absolutely needed be used to distribute Communion, subject to the following general requirements:
  - Appropriate physical distancing be observed between those distributing Communion.
  - The Communion procession take place in such a way as to allow participants to keep the appropriate physical distancing (which may require an adjustment to your traditional processional practice).
  - Generally speaking, it is thought that a maximum of **two** ministers (including the Presider) would be adequate in most settings.
- While not required, Ministers of Communion (ordinary and extraordinary) could wear a mask for the distribution of Communion if this was thought necessary or prudent.

- Those distributing Communion are encouraged to practice good hand hygiene, including thoroughly washing hands before Mass and, if thought necessary, sanitising hands discreetly before the distribution of Communion. The latter should take place at the credence table and not at the altar.
- In keeping with good liturgical practice, the use of disposable gloves during Communion and the presence of hand sanitiser on the altar are not appropriate and should be avoided.

## **F. Funerals**

The celebration of Funerals during COVID-19 presents some difficulties which pastors should continue to respond to sensitively.

The following advice and observations are provided:

- A funeral Mass should be adapted as for any other Mass, as noted elsewhere in this document.
- The placing of Christian symbols, where this is celebrated, can provide a particular challenge to maintaining physical distancing and minimising physical contact between ministers and those placing symbols. It is suggested that symbols be placed in a location from which they can easily be retrieved by those who are placing them.
- Limitations on the capacity of church buildings and difficulty in travel arrangements may prompt requests for a funeral Mass or Liturgy to be live-streamed. Pastors are asked to be generous in answering such requests during the present situation.
- The gathering of large crowds outside a church building following a funeral presents a significant risk at the present time, and should be managed carefully with the assistance of funeral directors and their staff.

## **G. Initiation of Children**

With the resumption of the celebration of Christian initiation of children, parishes are reminded of the need to consider the safety of all participants during the preparation for and celebration of the sacraments.

In preparing for any celebration of Christian Initiation, thought will need to be given to:

- The number of celebrations needed to accommodate candidates and their families and, ideally, other members of the parish community.
- The appropriate means of ensuring the necessary physical distancing required in your liturgical space.

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

- The 'Fallow Year' resource, and
- 'Shaping Liturgy 2021: a liturgical bridge from 2020-2021'.

Both of these documents can be found on the diocesan website via [www.mn.catholic.org.au/catholic-life/liturgy/diocesan-liturgical-guidelines/](http://www.mn.catholic.org.au/catholic-life/liturgy/diocesan-liturgical-guidelines/).

### **H. Use of Technology**

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the availability of live-streaming technology as a means of maintaining some sense of connection was embraced widely. It was one means among many of staying in touch with members of the Church community in the midst of lock downs and curtailed gatherings.

It needs to be recognised, however, that the nature of the Church's liturgy – in all its forms – is something that is embodied rather than watched, something that requires physical presence rather than virtual connection. As the numbers allowed in our church buildings slowly increases, it would be prudent for consideration to be given to the suitability of regularly live-streaming Parish Masses simply because it is technologically possible.

While an argument can be made for some live-streaming to remain, e.g., as a service to those in hospitals or the house-bound, for funerals and weddings, the only remaining reason for continuing the live-streaming of Parish Masses is one of pastoral necessity (e.g. where physical capacity of church building is limited, to facilitate contact with the sick and housebound, etc.)

Accordingly, the following advice is offered:

- Live-streamed Masses (and other liturgies) are not be proliferated beyond the normal schuded of Parish Masses (including funerals and weddings) and they are to be reduced over time as pastoral necessity lessens.
- The use of live-streamed Masses (and other liturgies) be reviewed in Parish life, and reduced wherever possible in favour of in person attendance.
- Technological possibility is not a prudent reason to upend the Church's theological understanding and praxis of its liturgy; "just because we can, doesn't mean we should."

### **I. Weddings**

The celebration of weddings are a joyous occasion even in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic event. The following advice and observations are offered:

- A Nuptial Mass should be adapted as for any other Mass, as noted elsewhere in this document.
- Limitations on the capacity of church buildings and difficulty in travel arrangements may prompt requests for a Nuptial Mass or Wedding Liturgy to

be live-streamed. Pastors are asked to be generous in answering such requests during the present situation.

- The gathering of large crowds outside a church building following a wedding presents a significant risk at the present time, and should be managed carefully with the assistance of the bride and groom and their immediate family.

## **A Note on Ministry in Schools**

The question of pastoral and liturgical ministry in the schools of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle remains problematic during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic event, not least because there are differences between what can happen within school grounds and what can happen in parish churches.

Catholic Schools NSW regularly prepare and circulate guidelines for the operation of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic event. These guidelines are circulated to all the schools of the Diocese. Rather than provide this information to parishes, parishes are encouraged to contact the schools within their boundaries, or to which they have some pastoral connection, to discuss the contents of the most recent guidelines.

Any ministry from parish to school must comply with the contents with the current guidelines. The overarching concern when planning or undertaking any ministry within a school setting must be the safety of all participants. Particular care should be taken to ensure that any ministry from parish to school does not unintentionally contribute to 'cross contamination' between various groups and locations.

The question of what is possible in any particular setting can only be determined via dialogue between both parish and school. This is particularly the case when it comes to the celebration of Mass and other liturgies. Neither parish nor school should be seen to be sole arbiter of what is possible in the current circumstances, and patience and grace are to be exercised by all participants in the conversation to arrive at a decision that is mutually acceptable.

The limitations currently in place around the celebration of Mass and other liturgies in our church buildings, particularly when it comes to capacity and the need for physical distancing, must be observed in all cases. It may not be advisable or possible, therefore, for schools to make use of the church buildings for Mass or other liturgies at the present moment. Where Mass or other liturgies are determined to be suitable and appropriate, it may be prudent and desirable to celebrate these within the grounds of the school, where the guidelines applicable to schools provide a greater range of options.

Since larger gatherings within school grounds is now more available, the need to live-stream (or equivalent) any form of liturgy seems to have passed. Given schools are focused on providing meaningful experiences of prayer and liturgy, the nature of the Church's liturgy as embodied prayer needs to inform decisions in this space.

That said there will be exceptional circumstances when live-streaming liturgy may be helpful. An example would be a Blessing and Opening. When adult guests come into the school for such such events that involve liturgy, the normal COVID safe restrictions for churches applies. This includes the one person per two square metre

rule. In such circumstances, streaming such celebrations to students in classrooms may be desirable.

The Bishop has requested that Mass in schools is not to be live-streamed.

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-19 provides the perfect opportunity to invert this relationship so that schools become a focus of the parish's missionary outreach.