

Memorandum

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

CC:

FROM: Fr Andrew Doohan VG

DATE: 29/06/2021

ATTACHMENTS: 0

SUBJECT: Clarification – Temporary COVID-19 Restrictions

Dear colleagues,

The purpose of this memo is to provide some clarification following my previous memo of 26 June. It has been prepared because both the Bishop's Office and the Liturgy Office have been contacted by a range of individuals expressing confusion or concern about what is or is not permitted under the current Public Health Order.

I have prepared this in the hope that it will assist you in both complying with the requirements of the Order and allaying the understandable concerns and anxieties being experienced by members of the Church following the announcement last weekend.

A. The Existence of Restrictions

Some of those contacting the Bishop's or Liturgy Office have expressed concern that some persons, including those in leadership roles, have said publicly that there are no restrictions currently in place in the Hunter Region. This has particularly been the case when it comes to wearing face masks in our church buildings.

This is simply NOT true.

The current Order established a range of restrictions that are applicable in Regional NSW. They took effect at 7:08pm on Saturday 26 June 2021 and will remain in place until 11:59pm on Friday 9 July 2021, unless repealed earlier or extended.

You will be aware of media reports of fines being issued for breaches of the Public Health Order, including the Deputy Prime Minister and some local examples.

I would strongly encourage you to be attentive to the legal requirements currently in place and comply with them, *regardless of your personal position on the need to do so or not*. Non-compliance is simply not an option.

B. Capacity of Church Buildings

Clause 11(1) has reintroduced the '4 square metre rule' for calculating the capacity of our church buildings. The number of persons in the church at any one time is the **greater** of 25 persons or 1 person per 4 square metres.

This in effect takes us back to the pre-December 2020 situation and appropriate procedures will need to be reintroduced if necessary to ensure these limits are observed.

Persons engaged in work within the church on behalf of the Parish, or persons who must be in there in an emergency are not included in the capacity numbers.

As previously advised, there is a difference between capacity (the number of persons in the building) and the physical distancing between persons (which requires 1.5m between persons not from the same household). While difficult to manage it is the combination of these two factors that will ultimately determine the numbers in any individual church building.

C. Singing in Churches

Clause 14(1) prohibits singing in our churches. This applies to congregational singing, singing by a choir, or singing by an individual.

There can be no singing in our churches at this time – and there are no exceptions to this provision.

D. Wearing Face Masks

Clause 17(1)(a) mandates the wearing of a face mask in indoor areas of non-residential premises, including our churches. This a **legal requirement** that must be always complied with.

Clause 17(2) exempts anyone under the age of 12 years or those with a physical or mental health illness or condition that makes wearing a mask difficult.

Clause 17(3) lists the circumstances in which a face mask can be temporarily removed, though it must be replaced as soon as those circumstances no longer exist.

Several of these circumstances have a direct application to the celebration of liturgy:

- a) Clause 17(3)(a) would permit a face mask to be removed to receive Communion, though it should be replaced immediately after receiving Communion.
- b) Clause 17(3)(d)(ii) would permit a face mask to be removed if necessary to permit the clear enunciation of spoken texts, though it should be replaced when not speaking.

For example: the presider could remove his face mask for the various presidential prayers, or for the proclamation of the Gospel, or for the homily, etc., if necessary to ensure they are heard, but he would need to replace it at other times during the Mass, e.g., when seated in the presidential chair, while distributing communion, etc.

A reader could remove their mask once they reached the ambo if necessary so the Scripture readings are more easily heard but must replace it as soon as they are finished.

A face mask must be worn by all members of the community at all other times unless you have an exemption.

E. Responsibilities of Pastoral Leaders

The sudden tightening of COVID-19 restrictions has been the cause of significant anxiety and uncertainty since the announcement on Saturday 26 June 2021. The timing of the announcement – mid afternoon to take effect early evening of the same day – did not help the situation. There presence of such uncertainty and anxiety is unsettling for a great many people, including some of our parishioners.

This is completely understandable given the prevailing belief that the worst was behind us, and we could look forward to brighter days in the foreseeable future. It is a complete shock to be cast back into tighter restrictions and a wider prevalence of reported cases, even if none have been identified locally so far.

It is incumbent upon all of us in pastoral leadership, lay and clergy alike, to ensure that our actions do not exacerbate any anxiety or uncertainty being experienced by those whom we are called to pastor. Not only should we comply with the law as it exists from time to time, but we should also be explaining and encouraging compliance with the law by others. I believe we should be exceptionally careful, both in our words and in our actions, to do nothing that will make the current state of play worse for our parishioners or the broader community.

Thank you to all who have been so adaptable to the changing circumstances we find ourselves in, and for all the efforts that will continue during the current tightening of restrictions. I am grateful to hear of the support that is being shared between those at the coal face and can only hope that we continue to support each other during these current difficulties.

As always, I am only too happy to be contacted regarding any specific concerns that might arise from time to time or for the seeking of clarification. While I would prefer email contact for 'routine' questions, urgent matters can be addressed via phone call to my mobile (0412 405 671).

If you have any questions about the above information, please get in touch.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Doohan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

(Fr) Andrew Doohan VG