

## CORONAVIRUS – UPDATE TO CLERGY MARCH 25, 2020

Dear Bishops, Priests and Deacons,

Thank you for your messages of support to all of us in the Chancery as we seek to assist you through these difficult days. Today's feast, The Annunciation of the Lord, reminds us that the Son of God took our wounded human nature as his own, and so in the crisis facing our world, we entrust our lives and cares with confidence to God's unfailing Providence.

In the light of the most recent Government directives, and other advice received, I provide an update on a number of matters. I realise there are many issue we have to address, so please take your time to study and work through the material below. **How we handle the current crisis will be crucial to how we emerge as a Church when it is over.** Questions or requests for further explanation are always welcome.

1. Managing parish staff and volunteers
2. New rules for weddings and funerals.
3. Advice about "private masses".
4. Communion to the sick
5. Easter Liturgies
6. Pastoral suggestions.

### General comment

**We are being urged to stay home and to minimize all gatherings of people.** As far as possible, therefore, we must discourage travel to work, face to face meetings, and unnecessary home visitation. If as a nation we are conscientious in following this directive, we may just be able to avoid an even tighter lockdown that would cause immense hardship for so many. Accordingly, we must look for other ways of connecting with our people and with our brother priests. **Pope Francis was (and still is!) famous for his "telephone ministry"** – and this may be the easiest way for us to connect with parishioners; try ringing 5 people each day, to say hello and perhaps to share a prayer. It is also vital that people are able to contact us, especially in an emergency. Please ensure your phone is on and take calls as they come; **ensure that any parish answering system explains how a person can contact you.** We must assume the current restrictions on activity will continue for at least 6 months, so we require strategies for the long haul.

### 1. Managing staff and volunteers

A critical aspect of the current crisis is **the impact on parish income and expenditure**, and the implications for your staff. We have obtained specialist advice from CCER about the options for managing staff at this time. We will provide this advice individually to parishes, because the situation will vary greatly

from parish to parish. We have identified parishes we expect to face imminent financial hardship – and we will contact them in the near future to determine how we can best help. Or course, **we also invite any parish that is concerned about its financial situation to contact Parish Support immediately.**

For today, I would like to emphasize a few general principles based on the Employment Services and legal advice we have received.

- First, be sensitive to the fact that your staff are likely to be anxious about the possibility of losing their jobs. We must reassure them that we will do all we can to assist them at this difficult time.
- Secondly, this is not a time for terminating our valuable staff members. In any case this would raise legal issues.
- Thirdly, assure your staff that you will be getting expert advice from Chancery and Parish Support in order to explore a range of options for them, including: working from home where this is possible; reducing work hours where this can be agreed; finding new or different work for staff whose role is suspended due to the closure of churches; giving access to paid annual or LSS leave entitlements; etc.
- Finally, **do not rush any decisions in these matters.** It is likely that parishes will be eligible for Government support to assist with the “business” side of our operations. The pandemic will cause financial difficulties for all Australians over the next few years, but we will work with our staff and our people to manage these issues as best we can.

## 2. New rules for weddings and funerals.

The Government last night announced that there can be a maximum of 5 people at a wedding, and 10 people at a funeral. The point of these rules is to minimize “gatherings” of people, whether indoors or outdoors, because this is when the virus spreads within the community. Most couples are postponing their weddings. If any do go ahead, then **only the celebrant, the couple and the two witnesses may be gathered in the one place.** You might suggest a mass on the anniversary next year. Unlike weddings, funerals can’t be postponed and the new restriction will be painful for many families. **Even at the graveside, only a small gathering is permitted.** Again, you could promise a memorial mass when that becomes possible. In all cases, indoors and outdoors, there must be the required physical distance between people, and adequate opportunity for hand sanitising etc.

### 3. “Private Masses”

A number of questions have been asked about how priests may celebrate mass at present. **It is permissible to be joined by a server, cantor or other person**, while maintaining distance and hygiene (ensure hands are clean before giving communion to another). If we take as a guide the rule of 5 for an “essential” wedding, then a maximum of 3 people, including the celebrant, would seem reasonable at a private mass. It is most important that we do not show favouritism in choosing who might accompany us at mass. Above all, the mass must not be advertised to the public. The church must remain closed at all times.

### 4. Communion to the Sick

For a number of reasons, it is no longer permissible to take Holy Communion to people’s homes on a regular basis. Anointing of the sick and Holy Communion should – indeed **must** – be taken to those who are gravely ill or dying, when this is requested. In this situation, the priest should take extra precautions – e.g. at least the use of a face mask and hand sanitizing. Fr Kelvin Lovegrove is currently sourcing **disposable face masks that will be available through the Deans**. Our Communications team will work with Deaneries to develop WhatsApp group for easier communication within the Deanery. If a priest is concerned for his own health or his risk to others, he should pass on the request to another priest in his Deanery. We do not want older priests, or priests with health limitations, to endanger their lives at this time. **But we need all priests to stay connected to each other** so that we can supply each other’s gaps and ensure that our people are cared for.

**In the case of a person diagnosed with Coronavirus, Anointing and Communion will be provided only by one of a small number of priests specially trained for this ministry.** These priests will need to follow the full Personal Protection protocols for treating patients with COVID-19. Bishop Richard has organized a group of mainly younger clergy who have generously volunteered for this role, and who are connected via a WhatsApp group. Where an Assistant Priest is committed in this role it is important that their Parish Priest is kept aware of their involvement. If the person with COVID-19 is in hospital, then the hospital will oversee the Personal Protections protocols. If the person is in their own home, then the Personal Protection kit will be used – and we thank Fr Sam Lynch for helping to source these kits.

## 5. Easter Liturgies

The **Triduum liturgies** will be celebrated in the (closed) Cathedral by the archbishop, and livestreamed. We will send more details about how you can help people join in these liturgies. (Some parishes may be livestreaming their own closed liturgies.) I know that a Brisbane Liturgical centre is advertising resources for the celebration of the Easter liturgies in private homes. Some of the suggestions in these resources are now problematic, given the latest government directives. The archbishop asks you not to use these Brisbane resources, and to use the guidelines for both a private, closed celebration in the church and for a celebration by people at home, that are being prepared by our Sydney Liturgical Office and will be sent to you shortly.

The Archbishop had decided to **postpone the Chrism Mass until Wednesday 28 October**, to be followed by lunch as usual. Please note in your diaries in the hope that this will be possible by then.

## 6. Pastoral Suggestions

Many parishes are already developing creative ways of staying connected with their people. Many people are likely to suffer mental distress and anxiety in the coming months. Our special concern is for those without family or other supports. While there are severe limitations on how much home visitation can occur, other forms of support by telephone, food drops, shopping, etc. can be provided by your volunteers. CatholicCare is also working to assist parishes in this regard. Contact CatholicCare on the dedicated Care Line which will direct people to whoever can assist them best. See <https://www.ccareline.org/> or Phone 13 18 19.

Other initiatives are being planned: e.g. that churches ring their bells several times a day and this is linked to various prayer intentions. More information will be sent shortly. There may be ways you can decorate the outside of your church to remind people of the liturgical seasons – e.g. using the schools electronic notice board. (Note that it is not wise to exhibit the Monstrance through a church window – at the very least this is likely to attract a gathering of people.) You might alert people to the Pope's intentions for each week, to the various On Line Masses available each day, and to ways of joining in shared prayer or meditations (including the Stations of the Cross) over the internet.

I would ask parishes that have developed creative initiatives to share their experiences with others – either through the deanery or via Chancery. We will compile a list of possible strategies that parishes can consider.

We will provide regular updates with further information in the weeks ahead. As always, do contact me or your Dean or Regional Bishop if you think we can help you in any way.

With prayers and best wishes

Gerry

Very Rev Dr Gerald Gleeson,

**Vicar General**

Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

Level 5, Polding Centre, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia

**tel:** +61 2 9390 5185 | **fax:** +61 2 9261 8312