



Fifth Pastoral Letter to the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Sydney with Special Directives for Churches and Liturgies under Step One of the relaxation of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, 13 May 2020

Dear brothers in ministry,

After a long Lent in which we have experienced severe restrictions upon our worship, as well as many other parts of ordinary life, there is at last Easter light at the end of the tunnel. The Bishops of Australia will be writing to you shortly to express our thanks, support and encouragement to you and to all the faithful. I very much wish to reiterate our collegial sentiments, and also to address our situation in Sydney. The National Cabinet has approved a **Three Step Framework** for a CovidSafe Australia to be implemented over the coming months and the New South Wales Government has begun rolling out a series of relaxations of restrictions accordingly.

Context of resumption of some church services

By way of context, the following points must be emphasized:

- COVID-19 remains present in the community and highly infectious, though in small numbers at present. With the relaxation of isolation measures and the approach of winter, an increase in cases is expected. Clergy and faithful are therefore encouraged to download the CovidSafe App and abide by the latest public health advisories.
- Permission to reopen churches and to conduct religious gatherings comes with strict conditions; we must take all reasonable precautions to protect the health of everyone involved. This means acting on the assumption that we or anyone we come in contact with might be infected, even if we/they are asymptomatic.
- Even as restrictions are eased, general precautions regarding hygiene and distancing must be observed. Special precautions for the Liturgy must also be observed.

‘Step One’ and general precautions

From this Friday, 15 May 2020, in New South Wales:

- churches may reopen for private prayer and Confessions, as long as no more than 10 people are in the church at once
- religious gatherings are permitted with congregations of up to 10 for Masses, Weddings, Baptisms, Eucharistic adoration, Rosary in common, Bible study etc.
- up to 20 mourners indoors or 30 mourners outdoors are permitted for funerals, in addition to celebrant and undertakers
- whether for private prayer or for a formal gathering in a church, contact details of the attendees must be recorded and spatial distancing and hygiene directions must be observed.

Future relaxations of the CovidSafe provisions are expected over coming months, in at least two more stages, but this will depend upon infection rates not spiking and churches being able to demonstrate responsible behaviour.

Special directives for all churches and liturgies during Step One

Throughout this first phase of relaxed restrictions:

- current regulations should be posted near church doors and on websites [document attached]
- churches may be reopened as long as the parish priest or trusted delegate is present to monitor numbers (maximum of 10), distancing etc.
- on entering the church each attendee’s contact details should be recorded (name, phone number, email address), but no record of why the person entered the church; in addition to satisfying the CovidSafe regulations, this will enable enrichment of parish databases for provision of pastoral care, and both purposes should be advertised when collecting the information
- spatial distancing should be ensured (e.g. by placing ‘sit here’ stickers in every second row of pews and at least 1½m from each other, and by having similar notices outside confessionals)
- commonly touched surfaces (e.g. door knobs, confessional interiors, pews etc.) must be regularly disinfected (see attached Health Department guidelines)
- celebrants and people should minimize the time they are gathered together

- at-risk parishioners should be exhorted not to attend (e.g. the very elderly, those with any symptoms, those with compromised immune or respiratory systems)
- attendees should be exhorted to take care when coughing or sneezing
- hand sanitizer should be provided at doors of churches and confessionals and in the sacristies and sanctuary
- live-streaming of liturgies should continue where convenient; please be aware of the need to observe spatial distancing but also to be seen to be doing so (some camera angles make it seem that the priest and assistants are very close to each other even when they are not)
- previous instructions on ways of simplifying the liturgy and ensuring distancing apply (e.g. using a lectern rather than a server to hold the book, turning pages or washing hands for oneself rather than with the assistance of a server)
- for the purposes of maintaining an upper limit of 10 for all liturgies (except funerals): the couple in the case of weddings, and the celebrant and essential assistants (server or acolyte, cantor, organist, reader, cameraman) are not counted among the 10
- spatial distancing should be preserved when queueing to enter church, for Holy Communion, for Confession, and by ministers in the sanctuary.

Special directives for particular celebrations

Confessions

- First Rite Confessions can be celebrated in the church; because of the backlog of people wanting to make their Easter Confession, priests are asked to be generous in providing times for Confessions
- when recording details of attendance, there should be no reference to why the person is attending
- a virus-proof barrier between the penitent and the confessor is recommended
- hand sanitiser at the doors of confessionals will help to ensure that the door knobs do not become high risk sites; frequent sanitizing of confessionals is recommended.

Masses

- the elements for the Eucharist should be protected from contamination before, during and after the Mass; a ciborium with a lid and chalice with a pall should be used; when uncovered the elements should be kept out of range of the celebrant's breath
- there should be no Gospel procession or procession of gifts, no passing of hymn books or collection plates
- the priest should sanitize his hands before distributing Holy Communion

- the sign of peace should be omitted or given without any hand-to-hand contact
- in the Ordinary Form of the Latin Rite, Holy Communion shall be distributed and received on the hand only
- home Masses remain an option if regulations applying to households are observed; but preference should be given to Masses for a broader cross-section of parishioners in the church
- religious communities should be assisted with Mass where possible
- regarding school Masses: see *Guidelines for Schools regarding the Celebration of Masses during COVID-19* (already communicated)
- migrant chaplains are encouraged to liaise with Parish Priests so there is a consistent response where they are sharing spaces in parishes
- see comments below regarding rationing of attendance.

Worship and reception of the Eucharist outside of Mass

- at Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament a maximum of ten people may be present; distancing and hygiene requirements must be observed
- the announcement of specific times for Adoration and Benediction may recreate similar issues as the announcement of Masses re rationing of attendance (see below)
- exposition of the Blessed Sacrament with or without Benediction is permitted provided that the usual rules around due dignity, candles, incense and at least one person present at all times are observed.
- the priest should sanitize his hands before distributing Holy Communion outside of Mass
- Holy Communion outside of Mass shall normally be distributed and received on the hand only.

Sacraments of initiation

- baptism should be celebrated when a family is happy to be limited to 10 attendees; where there is no danger of death, baptisms might be postponed until all the family can attend; but if there is a risk of death, the child should be promptly baptized
- fresh baptismal water should be used for each candidate (i.e. water that has already been used to baptize one candidate should not be reused for another)
- baptismal anointings should be hygienic (e.g. use hand sanitiser before and after contact with skin)
- the celebration of Confirmation is indefinitely postponed, except at risk of death or the baptism of an adult
- first Holy Communion might be postponed until family members and parishioners can attend.

Weddings

- up to ten persons plus the couple, the celebrant and assisting ministers are permitted
- weddings might be postponed until a fuller celebration is possible.

Anointing, Holy Communion and visits to the sick

- hygiene measures for the Anointing of the Sick have previously been communicated
- pastoral care of the sick, frail elderly and shut-in should as far as possible be undertaken by the clergy in accordance with current public health advice; Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should only take Holy Communion to people's homes if they are at low risk themselves and appropriately advised on, and agree to take, all necessary precautions.

Funerals

- up to 20 indoor mourners and 30 outdoor mourners are permitted
- a Requiem Mass can be foreshadowed after the COVID19 crisis has passed which all might attend.

Rationing of attendance and Sunday observance

In those parishes where weekday Masses typically involve fewer than 10 people, it may be possible to resume these Masses without rationing places. Other parishes might explore a booking or lottery system to identify 10 people for each gathering. Every appearance of favouritism or elitism should be avoided.

Priests must exercise judgment in deciding whether it is practicable to conduct one or more public Sunday Masses for 10 people. Even were Sunday Masses multiplied, the majority of the faithful will be unable to attend. All but priests therefore continue to be dispensed from attending Sunday Mass. The faithful can keep Sunday holy by setting aside some time for prayer at home, reading the Scriptures, watching Mass on television or online, and asking God for the graces they would normally receive in Holy Communion ('spiritual communion').

Other pastoral care

Please continue to check in on shut-in parishioners. When bringing the sacraments to people, please abide by the latest public health advisories. Particular priests have been trained, equipped and made available to attend those with the virus.

Priests are asked to continue live-streaming Masses where possible. On-line prayer groups, discussion groups, youth groups and catechesis might usefully continue, at least while the majority of people are unable to assemble for Mass and other parish activities. Parish websites and e-bulletins should continue to carry latest announcements, links to helpful resources, consoling messages etc.

Parish volunteers delivering groceries, medications etc. to those who are isolated should continue. I also commend those priests who, finding they have spare time on their hands, have been assisting with voluntary work such as Meals on Wheels.

Parishes, religious houses and the 'domestic church' of family homes are asked to continue to intercede for the Church and the world at this time.

Resources

Resources continue to be offered by the Archdiocese:

- the Archdiocesan Coronavirus Webpage includes **links** to live-streamed and on-demand liturgies, readings, current health and liturgical directives, prayers, reflections, devotions, podcast lectures etc.:
<https://www.sydneycatholic.org/coronavirus-updates/>
- daily live-streaming of Masses from St Mary's Cathedral:
<https://www.sydneycatholic.org/live-masses/>
- the *Catholic Weekly* is fully available on-line and offers regular news updates:
<https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/>
- the Archbishop's pastoral letters are available at:
<https://www.sydneycatholic.org/coronavirus-updates/>
- daily on-line lectio divina: <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/coronavirus-updates/prayer-resources-for-the-coronavirus-pandemic/#lectio>

Responses across the Church

As children return to school in stages, Sydney Catholic Schools will do all it can to ensure quality on-line teaching from home as well as classroom teaching, and to provide fee relief for families struggling financially. School Masses have resumed, under strict protocols (already communicated).

CatholicCare, the St Vincent de Paul Society and other Catholic agencies will continue to provide services to the vulnerable and needy, including the homeless. CatholicCare's CCareline is ensuring practical support, counselling and other services are provided by local communities or on-line as needed, especially for those who are isolated, anxious or financially insecure (ph. 13 18 19).

We are grateful to the Commonwealth Government for JobKeeper assistance. Archdiocesan and parish staff are gradually returning to work but some are continuing to work from home. The Polding Centre remains open for deliveries of mail, couriers and urgent transactions, and for the provision of services essential to the archdiocese.

'Step Two', 'Step Three' and beyond...

If infection rates continue to be low, the Government may in due course roll out Steps Two and Three of the easing of restrictions. Larger celebration will gradually be allowed. However this will depend upon us all exercising responsibility in keeping infection rates low and demonstrating that we are trustworthy in these matters. We pray for and look forward to the day when our parishes can gather again as normal.

In this season of Easter we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord Jesus above all, but also a kind of release from the tomb and resurrection to new life for His body the Church. The resilience demonstrated and pastoral energies released in recent times in our parishes and agencies will by the grace of Easter carry us forward in the months ahead. Please feel free to share relevant parts of this letter with your people. With my love and prayers for you all.

Yours sincerely in Christ



Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, DD BA LIB BTheol DPhil
Archbishop of Sydney



Directives for Churches and Liturgies under Step One of the relaxation of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, 13 May 2020

Notice for church doors and parish websites

From this Friday, 15 May 2020, in New South Wales:

- churches may reopen for private prayer and Confessions, as long as no more than 10 people are in the church at once (this must be supervised by the parish priest or delegate)
- religious gatherings are permitted with congregations of up to 10 for Masses, Weddings, Baptisms, Eucharistic adoration, the Divine Office, Rosary in common, Bible study etc.
- up to 20 mourners indoors or 30 mourners outdoors are permitted for Funerals
- contact details of all those entering the church (name, phone number, email address) must be recorded
- spatial distancing (at least 1½m from each other) and hygiene directions (including regularly disinfecting the church) must be observed; attendees are exhorted to take care when coughing or sneezing and to avail themselves of hand sanitizer provided
- the very elderly, those with symptoms, those with a compromised immune or respiratory system are asked to stay at home

Future relaxations of the CovidSafe provisions are expected over coming months, in at least two more stages, but this will depend upon infection rates not spiking and churches being able to demonstrate responsible behaviour.

Further special directives have been issued for the celebration of Baptisms, Confessions, Masses, Worship and Reception of the Eucharist outside of Mass, Weddings, Care of the Sick, and Funerals.

Priests must exercise judgment in deciding whether it is yet practicable to conduct public Masses. Even were Sunday Masses multiplied, the majority of the faithful will be unable to attend and so are dispensed from attending Sunday Mass. The faithful can keep Sunday holy by setting aside some time for prayer at home, reading the Scriptures of the day, watching Mass on television or online, and asking God for the graces they would normally receive in Holy Communion ('spiritual communion').