

Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP's Pastoral Letter on Coronavirus restrictions

By **Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP** - March 23, 2020

Reading Time: 9 minutes

Pastoral Letter to the Clergy and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Sydney regarding the latest restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 23 March 2020



Fr Greg Morgan FMVD, Parish Priest of St Charles Borromeo Church in Ryde, closes the church doors following Mass on 23 March. It is the last time the Church will be opened - with rare exceptions - under new regulations announced by the NSW government. Photo: Alphonsus Fok

Dear brothers in ministry and brothers and sisters in Christ

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all in this time of pandemic.

As priests bid farewell to parishioners today there have been tears and bewilderment. Please assure your people that even as the

Church cooperates with public health authorities to ensure the safety of all, we will do our best to keep in touch and maintain (even increase) our prayer on behalf of all, our health care, education and welfare services, and especially our pastoral care. I truly believe this is the time for us to shine as a Church.

Suspension of all public Masses and communal devotions from 12noon 23 March

It is with heavy heart that I announce that following the new commonwealth and state restrictions on public places, all public Masses and other communal devotions, whether inside churches or outdoors, are suspended in the Archdiocese from Sydney from 12noon until further notice. From now on our focus must be on helping people find ways to pray and nurture their faith from home.

As you know, we have done our best to maintain the availability of the Mass for as long as possible. But as I noted in my pastoral letter of 18 March, the Church in Australia was founded at a time when the Mass could not be celebrated on these shores. Following the most recent advice from the commonwealth and state governments it may seem that we are again in that situation. But where our forefathers and mothers waited for years to receive the Holy Eucharist, it will be at worst a matter of months for us. Just as prayer sustained them through those times, so can it for us today. The spirit of those first Australian Catholics should inspire us through the times ahead.

“Mass for You at Home” is broadcast on Channel 10 each Sunday from 6am. There are several live-streaming and on-demand services for daily Mass both locally and from around the English-speaking world. The cathedral, some parishes and several individual priests of the Archdiocese are already regularly life-streaming Mass and other devotions; more such initiatives are occurring in response to the present crisis. Links are available at the Archdiocesan website.

Closure of churches

Clarification has been received from government that, in New South Wales at least, all churches must be closed, even to private prayer.

Bishops and priests can still say Mass privately, and the NSW government has confirmed that bishops and priests may use their (closed) cathedral or parish church for that purpose and livestream the service.

There is also a broad exception to these social gathering norms for isolated communities, but this exception does not apply in the Archdiocese of Sydney.



Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP reflects during Mass in St Mary's Cathedral. Archbishop Fisher has "with a heavy heart" ordered the closure of all churches in the Archdiocese of Sydney.

Private Masses and religious gatherings outside churches

Private Masses, prayer meetings or other religious activities "for very small groups" in people's homes would seem to be permissible,

subject to physical distancing (4 sq meters each), hygiene and related directives being carefully observed. When these occur we must be very prudent about how this is communicated and about public perceptions of favouritism or of flouting public health restrictions. As soon as I can get greater clarity about what is permitted in this area, I will share this with you.

Sunday observance and alternative devotions

As previously communicated, all but priests 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/or asking God for the graces they would normally receive in Holy Communion.

I exhort priests, religious and lay faithful to engage in regular prayer and fasting for those who die, fall sick or are at risk from COVID-19, for those caring for the sick, seeking a cure and leading us through this crisis. Priests may offer privately the Mass for the Sick, the Mass for Any Need or a Votive Mass of Our Lady of Lourdes. Consecrated religious (as well as clerics and lay faithful) may pray the Divine Office with these particular intentions and add appropriate petitions. All of us can pray the Rosary and other prayers regularly. The Holy Father and the Bishops Conference are announcing regular times that we might pray together for these intentions.

Daily Mass by priests

Though our priests can no longer celebrate Mass with their people, they can and should celebrate Mass for their people. Priests are exhorted to celebrate daily Mass on behalf of their people whenever public Masses are restricted and churches closed. The Bishops Conference is hoping to have a specific "Mass in Time of Pandemic" approved for use soon.

Baptisms

Baptisms should be postponed for at least six months where they prudently can be. If there is a risk of death, the child should be baptised by a priest or, if not available, by a lay person.

Confessions

The Second and Third Rites of Reconciliation are religious services and are not permitted. Creative responses to church closures such as drive-by Confessions or confessionals set up outdoors (with appropriate respect for privacy) would be subject to the caveats already noted regarding not drawing crowds, distancing, hygiene etc. The faithful should be advised on the continuing importance of examination of conscience and making an act of contrition, and that they are dispensed from their annual duties until such time as it is practicable to fulfil them. Priests may and should respond to individual requests for the Sacrament of Penance, but may not advertise or open the church for Confessions.

Weddings

An exception to the government's church closure direction has been allowed for Weddings. But weddings may now only be celebrated with "very small groups" (i.e. immediate family) in attendance at the church, and subject to physical distancing, hygiene and related directives. The church should be closed once the limited participants have been admitted. Disappointed brides could be promised a larger celebration after the public emergency has passed (e.g. on the first anniversary). Now that wedding reception venues are closed, most weddings are being postponed for at least six months.

If a church is used for a wedding, pews, door knobs and other obvious contact points should be sanitised afterwards.

Funerals

Another exception to the government's church closure direction has been allowed for Funerals. But funerals may now only be celebrated

with “very small groups” (i.e. immediate family) in attendance at the church, and subject to physical distancing, hygiene and related directives. The church should be closed once the limited participants have been admitted. Grieving families could be promised a larger celebration after the public emergency has passed (e.g. on the first anniversary)

If a church is used for a funeral, pews, door knobs and other obvious contact points should be sanitised afterwards.



Families pray the Rosary at home. With churches forced into closure by government regulations, Catholics are called to live their faith in ways they had not necessarily expected. Archbishop Fisher has called for an intensification of prayer and fasting to spiritually address the Coronavirus crisis. Photo: CNS, Doug Hesse, The Leaven

Schools

Following announcements by the commonwealth and state governments, schools in New South Wales will remain open for supervision and teaching. But parents are encouraged to keep their children at home. Sydney Catholic Schools will be providing remote learning modules so that our children’s education continues. Should parents elect to continue sending their children to a Sydney Catholic

school, the same work will be undertaken there and the children appropriately cared for.

Pastoral visits to and Anointing of the sick

Pastoral care of the sick, frail elderly and shut-in should as far as possible be undertaken by the clergy and in accordance with current public health advice. All ministers should follow precautions recommended by health authorities when visiting people's homes, aged care facilities, hospitals, prisons and detention centres.

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 all precautions. Clergy, also, must be careful with respect to their own health and safety if we are to avoid exposing our people to risk and are going to be there for the long haul for people.

As previously communicated, when Anointing the Sick, priests are given permission to lay on hands by holding them above rather than upon the head and to anoint using a cotton wool ball, cotton bud or a protective glove which can be disposed of appropriately after a single use. Anointing the head would be sufficient. Physical distancing to the extent possible, disinfecting hands before and after pastoral encounters, and other current measures should be applied.

Availability

Priest must ensure that parishioners can contact them in emergencies.

Pastoral initiatives

The challenge for the whole church at present, including for parish priests, is to apply pastoral creativity and prudence so as to ensure that our pastoral care increases rather than decreases in this time of crisis. Priests should as far as possible ring their parishioners to check in on how they are faring.

In my Pastoral Letter of 18 March I emphasised the importance of caring for the frail, the elderly and isolated as our community faces the deep challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. To help these people in need, the Archdiocese is working alongside CatholicCare to roll out a volunteer program to help the needy access groceries, cooked meals, medicine and other necessities at this difficult time. You are asked to nominate a volunteer coordinator (not you or your parish secretary) and 5-10 people in your parish who are young and healthy enough to carry out these visits to the needy. Please provide their contact details to Laura Rahill at laura.rahill@sydneycatholic.org. The Archdiocese will collate all parish responses and communicate these to CatholicCare who will work with your volunteer coordinator directly to implement this at the parish level. Many of our frail and elderly will feel particularly isolated at this time, as only essential services continue to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. A service like this is critical to not only ensuring the needy get food and medicine, but human company as well to combat long-term loneliness and isolation.

CatholicCare's dedicated phone service, CCare Line (Ph one 13-18-19) will also manage calls for assistance as they come in and will pass on details of the person requiring assistance to the parish volunteer coordinator so that help can be arranged by the local parish.

Parishes might also consider organising a parish online rosary or prayer group.

To help people maintain their physical health and spiritual life through this crisis, we have a page on our archdiocesan website. For latest updates, prayers and spiritual resources, and to watch Mass online visit the Archdiocese's Corona virus updates page.

It is our hope that CatholicCare, the St Vincent de Paul Society and other Catholic welfare providers will continue to operate within

current public health requirements and provide additional care where needed.

Care of priests

Please be assured of my particular solidarity and solicitude, not just for our faithful hungry for the Eucharist, but for you, my brother pastors. I thank you for all your efforts so far to maintain calm in our local communities and some semblance of ordinary life, and to continue and increase the pastoral care offered to our people, even at a time of anxiety about their health and yours, and about restrictions, isolation, finances etc. I ask the Vicars for Clergy, Regional Vicars and Deans to keep in regular contact to see how you are going and how we might help you. Please do not hesitate to put your hand up for help.

Further communications

If these present restrictions are varied or clarified, I will advise you as soon as possible. I plan to issue regular messages and video clips to keep communication going. Particular guidelines will be issued by the Liturgy Office for Holy Week.

Commending you to Our Lord and Our Lady



I continue to entrust you, our Archdiocese and our nation to the intercession of Our Lady, Help of Christians, of Lourdes, and of Good Health.

Let us pray: O God, healer of all our ills, to whom we turn in this time of distress, grant we pray, in the power of faith, eternal rest to the dead and comfort to those who mourn, health to the sick and peace to the dying, strength to medical workers, wisdom to our leaders and a spirit of kindness to us all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Yours fraternally in Christ

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

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Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP

Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP is the ninth Archbishop of Sydney. He practised law before joining the Dominicans, and is one of the world's leading bioethicists.