

Dear Fathers and friends

Though we had hoped we might celebrate Christmas in the context of an easing of restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that this will not be so. The recent outbreak of transmission of the virus on the Northern Beaches has meant that we are needing to change our plans, and at the very last minute.

I am mindful that this can create some stress and anxiety as different parishes think through, the day before Christmas Eve, how best to proceed with their celebrations in the face of the unexpected limitations. Let us be particularly thoughtful of those parishes in our Diocese which will not be able to celebrate public Masses at all. We think of all the clergy and the families in those parishes for whom Christmas will be a very different experience than that for which they had planned and hoped. Again, we keep in our prayer all those who will be distanced from their loved ones during this time.

The situation is as follows:

- For our five parishes in the Deanery of the Northern Beaches – Pittwater, The Lakes, Warringah, North Harbour, Manly-Freshwater and French's Forest - Masses will be made available online, and not celebrated publicly. The Faithful are encouraged to participate spiritually in these broadcasts, and are dispensed from the Christmas Obligation.
- For the parishes in the remainder of our Diocese, the celebration of Mass is to take into account the following:
 - The number of people at any one gathering for Mass is limited to 300 persons or those that the site may welcome given the 4 square metre principle.
 - Congregational singing is not to occur; music may be provided by up to 5 cantors.
 - All are to wear a mask.
- The Christmas Obligation is suspended for all those who are unable to participate in Mass given the restrictions with which we are dealing.

I realise that parishes will have been planning Masses using the 2 square metre principle. The new restrictions mean that only half the number originally planned for inside the church may now be allowed there. There may be various solutions to this conundrum:

- If possible, a communique might be sent to parishioners from the parish office this evening, asking people to reconsider their attendance. It may be that many people may now opt to cancel the booking that they had made.
- Half of those who have booked for Masses may be seated inside the church; half of those who may have booked might be able to be located outside the church, with the Mass relayed by speakers or screens.
- All existing bookings might be cancelled, and new bookings taken on Thursday morning in light of the restrictions.

Again, I realise the stress that this will create for both clergy and parish staff as they seek to make arrangements in such a short period of time. Notwithstanding, it is very important that we enable as many people as possible to celebrate the Christmas mysteries, limited as our celebrations might now need be. I am confident that our parishes will find creative and constructive ways to deal with this very complex situation. Let's not forget that we have been doing a marvelous job at facilitating these kinds of arrangements all year.

This will be a Christmas celebration unlike any other. Yet, in the midst of the very real challenges we face let us go forward resolutely and in solidarity. We owe it to our people to enable them to celebrate the Birth of the Christ with joy and with hope. May our celebrations, simple though they may be, be a testimony to the enduring power of God with us.

Please reassure your people of my thoughts and prayers. You may wish to revisit my Christmas message: <https://www.bbcatholic.org.au/people/bishop/bishop-anthonys-christmas-message>.

My warmest Christmas greetings to you all.

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