

19 March 2020



Vicar General
**CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF
BROKEN BAY**

Dear Fathers and friends,

IMPORTANT UPDATE FOLLOWING THE LETTER TO THE DIOCESE FROM BISHOP ANTHONY

With the publication of Bishop Anthony's letter yesterday, Wednesday 18 March, we must now consider together the implications that are before us.

Firstly, it is important for us to realise that the situation is calling us out of our own personal and parochial ways of thinking. We are being asked to lift our eyes beyond what might be "good for me" - or even what might be good for my own parish - and to think of what might be good for our nation. We are the Body of Christ. When one part of the Body is in need, the other parts must attend to it. (1 Corinthians 12:26). We must look beyond the single part we are, and consider the good of the entire Body, especially those in the Body who are vulnerable.

Yes, we are being asked to let go of something very precious to us – our liturgical assembly – for the sake of something bigger than ourselves – the health and safety of our country, and even more the well-being and the very lives of others. We are being called to exercise truly self-sacrificial love. Is this not what the Eucharist is about? We are, therefore, being called at this moment truly to live eucharistically.

We must remember, too, that this is not the only time the Church has lived without liturgical assembly. We think of the great example of the Church in Korea, in Japan, in Spain, in Ireland, in Mexico, in Vietnam. Let us draw inspiration from their extraordinary example in which, for many decades in some instances, they could not gather for Eucharist. And for us, the circumstances are nowhere as dire. We are refraining from assembling out of our concern for the good of others. They were denied assembling because of violence. And yet their faith grew. And though our circumstances are so different, this period of refrain can be for us, too, a true moment of purification and renewal.

The situation of a public health emergency and our response to it is unique in our experience. There is no manual. Only in sharing our questions and concerns, and reflecting on them together, will we be able to identify the best stepping – stones ahead. Thank you for raising various questions with me and with the Office of the Bishop over the course of the day. Let us now seek to offer some guidance to them.

What has happened in other Dioceses?

Different Dioceses have responded in different ways. The Victorian and Tasmanian Dioceses have responded as we have. So has the Archdiocese of Perth. Both the Archdiocese of Sydney and the Diocese of Parramatta, for the time being, have left it to individual Parishes to determine over the coming weeks what might work best for each in order to remain compliant with the government regulation.

Bishop Anthony considered the complexity that might ensue from a diversity of parish responses and the sheer difficulty of the logistics of maintaining compliance with the government regulation when many of our own Parishes might be used to have 200-300 people present at any one Mass. He wished at all costs to avoid the situation of some people being granted admission to churches and others being turned away. He also was adamant that he did not want priests doubling the number of Masses they currently celebrate, especially when many are already celebrating 3, and in some cases 4 or 5 a weekend. This would not be sustainable for the long term. He considered the option of outdoor Masses but recognised the unpredictability of being able to guarantee these and the WHS issues involved with this scenario.

Already some parishes in Sydney such as St Patrick's in Church Hill have identified the logistical difficulties and suspended all public Masses. The option has been given to others, and the consequence may be very bewildering.

Further, at a time when the Government is urging social distance for the care and protection of others, especially the most vulnerable, Bishop Anthony wanted to convey that we exercise our shared life of faith committed to this cause and to be seen with leadership in this regard.

How should we respond this coming Sunday?

Though there will be general awareness in the community about the Government's restrictions, and though many will have heard of Bishop Anthony's decision, some will, inevitably, present for Mass in our Parishes at the ordinary scheduled times.

In this event, we would recommend the following:

1. A priest be available in the church at each of the scheduled times for Mass;
2. Vigilance be maintained that no more than 100 people are in the church. It may be necessary to ask those present to congregate outside the church if more than 100 are present. The Government still allows under 500 to gather in an outside space;
3. Bishop Anthony's letter be explained to the people who have gathered;
4. People be invited to pray before Blessed Sacrament or to pray the Rosary before departing.

The question could be asked, "If this Sunday there are less than 100 in the church, why not celebrate Mass anyway?" Bishop Anthony has suspended all public Masses. If a Mass were to be offered spontaneously this Sunday, it would quickly become known through the community and confusion would ensue among the Faithful. Again, it is critically important that our pastoral practice during this time is not exercised in contradiction to Bishop Anthony's Decree.

To avoid ambiguity and confusion, we have to abide Bishop Anthony's Decree suspending all public Masses until further notice. If exceptions were to be introduced to this, we would contribute to very real confusion amongst our people. One exception easily becomes a precedent from which it is very difficult to withdraw.

On this weekend, it will be important to seek to gather as many email addresses of people as present. In this way, the Parish can maintain contact with as many people as possible through this period.

I can understand the suspension of Sunday Masses. But why the suspension of weekday Masses?

In many of our Parishes the attendance at weekday Mass is less than 100. However, in some it is close to 100 and even more. If one Parish who has over 100 at a weekday Mass, limits this number to under 100, the excess may then look for Mass at an alternative Parish. That alternative Parish may then have to embark on the same restriction as the first. In other words, with a "roll-on" effect there could be the potential for confusion and frustration throughout a whole Deanery. Bishop Anthony has considered that a uniform 'whole of Diocese approach' counters such confusion and ensures that some are not advantaged to the exclusion of others.

What if there is a small group that is in the church and they ask for Mass given that the number gathered is so small?

Bishop Anthony has suspended all public Masses. If a Mass were to be offered spontaneously to a small group of parishioners, it would quickly become known through the community and confusion would ensue among the Faithful. Again, it is critically important that our pastoral practice during this time does not present as selective or exclusive.

To avoid ambiguity and confusion, we have to abide Bishop Anthony's Decree suspending all public Masses until further notice. If exceptions were to be introduced to this we would contribute to very real confusion amongst our people.

Is it possible for home Masses to be celebrated?

It is very important for us to recognise that the ban is on social gatherings. The Eucharist is not banned! The Eucharist will continue to be celebrated – privately by priests, in chapels of Religious Houses and other such contexts which are not open to the public.

Theoretically, it is possible for Mass to be celebrated at home for a family and their neighbours and friends. However, it is very important to guard against any form of elitism – i.e. that some families are advantaged and others not. This could pastorally be very divisive. Our recommendation is that unless there are exceptional circumstances, small private Masses for select groups of people should be discouraged.

Is it possible for a small group of Parishioners to meet for Liturgy of the Word with Communion?

Again, it is important to be mindful that it is not Mass that is being banned. If Masses are being suspended in response to the government's restrictions on social gatherings, then all liturgical gatherings should be suspended. It makes no sense to have one and not another. It may be that a select group of parishioners would like to gather for the Liturgy of the Word with Communion but then the risk of elitism would emerge quite strongly. For the reasons indicated above this potentially could become pastorally very divisive.

Can we advertise the Rosary being prayed in the church in place of Mass?

Likewise, if Masses are being suspended in response to the government's restrictions on social gatherings, then all advertised liturgical or prayer gatherings should be suspended. It makes no sense to have one, i.e. the Rosary and not the other, i.e. Mass. The advice is not to advertise any gathering in which the number who may present are unknown.

The most important thing is to encourage people to come to the church and to pray, especially the Rosary, as Bishop Anthony has urged, or other forms of prayer such as the Way of the Cross. They should be encouraged to come individually or in small informal groups at the time of their choosing. For this reason, our churches **must remain open** from early morning into the evening.

When might the priests celebrate Mass? And may they invite parishioners to this Mass?

It will be for the priests in each Parish to determine at what time they celebrate their Mass without a congregation. Though it is theoretically possible for them to invite parishioners to attend this Mass, every care must be made not to be selective with the danger of the pastoral division this would occasion.

The Masses of priests without a congregation may be celebrated in the church or in another chapel. To avoid pastoral confusion, the Mass should be celebrated at a time before or after the church is opened. It may be possible to publicise the time so that parishioners can join in spiritual communion at the time from their homes.

Is it possible to record a Mass and have this recording available to parishioners?

This is an excellent idea and we are exploring options to be able to provide advice about how this might be effected in the coming days. This would be a very important way to maintain contact with our parishioners and the means by which they might join together in spiritual communion through this period.

What about Communion to the Sick? Is this still possible?

Most certainly. At this time, we must be mindful especially of those who are sick and isolated. Every opportunity should be taken to bring Communion to those who are sick and frail. Both clergy and lay Extraordinary Ministers to the Sick may continue with the practice and procedure already in place in our Parishes. Clearly, there are now restrictions to our access to hospitals and aged care facilities, but those who are homebound must be our particular concern.

Viaticum must also be made available to the dying.

For this reason, we should ensure that there are sufficient hosts consecrated to enable this ministry to continue.

What about our RCIA Candidates? How might they now progress to the Easter Vigil?

Our RCIA candidates have been on a lengthy journey and are full of anticipation as Easter draws near. Given the suspension of Masses, the Scrutinies for the 4th and 5th Sundays of Lent may be taken at another time outside the celebration of Mass. However, it will still be possible for them and their immediate family to participate in the celebration of the Easter Vigil at the Parish, even though this event will not be open to the public.

In the coming days, Bishop Anthony will provide further advice about the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies and how these might be celebrated in Parishes in light of the suspension of public Masses. He will also detail how the Chrism Mass is to be celebrated and how he will undertake the ceremonies of the Sacred Triduum at the Cathedral.

What resources may we have to offer our people so that may live in spiritual communion?

Our Diocesan Office for Evangelisation is currently working on these resources and will be able to provide very shortly.

We have a small parish group that meets for prayer regularly in the church. May it continue to do so?

Yes, by all means such groups that will never attract more than 100 people are still able to use the church and indeed are encouraged to do so. Participants' presence is very much at their discretion. Whilst in the church they should apply some distancing and use all the preventative measures against transmission of the coronavirus that have been well advertised.

We have a small faith sharing group meeting in a parishioner's home. May this continue?

The Government has not put people in lockdown. People are still free to visit and be with friends in their homes. People are still free to invite others into their homes. However, the responsibility for this should be with the host, and they must be provided with the discretion to be able to withdraw their hospitality during this period. The availability of such gatherings can be advertised but only with the host's consent and awareness of the risks.

We hope that this guidance is helpful. Obviously, it is just a start. New questions will arise. Please share these with me so that we might journey together through what is such uncharted territory for us. In every way we must work to remain connected to each other even as, and especially because of social distancing expanding.

Bishop Anthony has approved all the advice given here. With the assurance of his heartfelt concern for us all,

Fr David Ranson
Vicar General