



Sixth Pastoral Letter to the Clergy and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Sydney with Special Directives for Churches and Liturgies following the further relaxation of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, 29 May 2020 in the Light of Pentecost

Dear pastors and brothers and sisters in Christ,

Come Holy Spirit!

The explosion of grace at Pentecost (*Acts 2:1-11*) changed people forever, how they thought, spoke, related. Frightened fishermen cowering in the cenacle became fearless evangelists who gave the testimony of their lives. The story of Pentecost and what it initiated is *a story of the power of the spiritual*.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, our community has on the whole responded very responsibly. The focus of our civic leaders has been very much on our physical and economic security. But what about friendship, intimacy, meaning and purpose? Such matters might be uncomfortable for public health authorities but, as the lockdown has highlighted, human beings have these other needs also.

Putting such needs in the ‘mental health’ basket doesn’t help. If we’re lonely, anxious, grieving or spiritually dry during the lockdown, if we miss being hugged or being around our extended family and friends, it’s perfectly healthy. It would be unhealthy if we didn’t feel that way! The inbreaking of the Holy Spirit speaks to that: quarantine and financial stimulus are not enough, even in a crisis, perhaps especially in a crisis. There’s the true, the good and the beautiful to consider, there’s love, and the sacred...

Deep down we all cry out: “Come Holy Spirit”. This simple prayer goes to the core of our being. It is our soul reaching out to the divine, our heart speaking to the Sacred Heart, our spirit inspired by his. For, like God, we are spiritual beings, even if like Christ we are bodily beings also. There is more to us than biology and money, important as these are. It is our souls that inform our bodies, making them live bodies, human bodies, our bodies; it is our souls that ground our consciousness, rationality and freedom, enabling creativity and, yes, economy. Our souls are also why we live after death.

In the Gospel for Pentecost Sunday (*Jn 20:19-23*), Jesus by-passes the barriers of isolation and distancing and re-joins his lonely disciples in the flesh, even letting them see and touch his hands and side. But first he says “Peace be with you” – Peace, Shalom, God’s presence be with you. He

breathes the Holy Spirit of Peace and Presence over them. At Pentecost that Spirit returns, to warm their cold hearts, fire up their tepid souls, fuel a deep passion for the things of God and the service of people, sufficient to carry the Good News of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. We pray at this time for that same Spirit.

Further easing of restrictions

It is with great joy that we learnt today that the New South Wales Government has agreed to relax the restrictions on churches and worship, to bring them into line with like venues and activities. This is a just and common-sense outcome but it took some negotiating, and I thank all those who joined our campaign for it. Other parts of Australia have not yet achieved parity between churches and other venues, and so you might still like to sign up to our revised petition at openourchurches.com.au.

We have a draft of the *Checklist for COVID-19 Safety in NSW Places of Worship* from NSW Health, but the Public Health Order has yet to be issued. Further updates will be given when necessary.

It is my request to you that you ensure, where possible, that **churches are reopened and services resumed**, in accord with these directives. And may I emphasise that these directives must be followed: if there are more than 50 at Mass or if altar servers or acolytes make no attempt at social distancing on the sanctuary, this may well come to the attention of the authorities and risk not only a penalty for that parish but a tightening rather than loosening of restrictions for all of us.

Directives for all churches and liturgies from 1st June 2020 until further notice

From this Monday, 1 June 2020, the Feast of Mary the Mother of the Church:

- current **regulations should be posted** near church doors and on websites, social media platforms etc. [see document attached]
- churches in the Archdiocese of Sydney are open and, subject to distancing requirements, may have **up to 50 people inside at a time** for private prayer, Confessions, Masses, Baptisms, Funerals, Eucharistic Adoration, Rosary in common, Bible study etc.; only 20 attendees are presently permitted at Weddings
- very small churches or chapels with a surface area for the congregation below 200 square metres must reduce their congregational limit to allow 4 square metres per person
- the parish priest or trusted delegate must be present when the church is open to monitor numbers
- at-risk parishioners should be exhorted not to attend: authorities have directed that **any unwell** priest, staff member, volunteer or parishioner stay away; they recommend that people with co-morbidities (e.g. compromised immune or respiratory systems) and those over 70 years of age elderly exercise particular caution
- **rationing of places** for weekday Masses is probably no longer required; parishes might continue to use a booking or lottery system to identify 50 people for each Sunday Mass, while eschewing any hint of favouritism or elitism

- **Sunday Masses should be resumed** and in some places they might be multiplied; nonetheless, even were Sunday Masses multiplied, many of the faithful will be unable to attend and so all but priests are dispensed from attending Sunday Mass; the faithful who cannot attend should keep Sunday holy as previously advised
- on entering the church each attendee's **contact details** should be recorded (name and phone number or email address) and **the attendee should certify that they are not unwell or high risk**; no record should be kept of why the person entered the church
- previous **instructions on spatial distancing** still apply and have been amplified: 'sit here' stickers or the like should be placed in every second row of pews and at least 1½m from each other in all directions so that at least four square metres is allowed for each person; other pews/seats might be removed or cordoned off; similar notices should be placed on pews outside confessionals; people should be directed to maintain spatial distancing when queueing to enter or leave church, for Holy Communion or Confession; spatial distancing should also be observed by ministers in the sanctuary
- previous **instructions on ways of simplifying the liturgy** still 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, omitting genuinely optional elements)
- previous **instructions on maximising hygiene** still apply: e.g. no holy water in stoups; hand sanitizer available at doors of churches and confessionals and in the sacristies and sanctuary; regularly disinfecting commonly touched surfaces (e.g. door knobs, confessional interiors, pews etc.) in accord with guidelines from NSW Health; **time must be allowed between services** for such cleaning to occur; **the elements for the Eucharist must be protected** from contamination before, during and after the Mass with a lid or pall; when uncovered the elements should be kept out of range of the celebrant's breath; no Gospel procession or procession of gifts; no passing of hymn books, bulletins or collection plates; the ministers should sanitize their hands before handling objects; **the priest should sanitize his hands** before distributing Holy Communion; the sign of peace should be omitted or given without hand-to-hand contact; attendees are exhorted to take care when coughing or sneezing; printed bulletins are for single use only; bathrooms should be regularly cleaned, be well stocked with hand soap and paper towels, and have posters with instructions on hand washing
- because of possible risk of aerosol transmission, **congregational singing is prohibited at this time** (this is ironic given how hard it is to get some Catholics to sing in public!); a cantor or small choir should provide the music if any (or a recording where this is not possible); any singer(s) should be positioned at least 3 metres away from the congregation and each other
- for the time being, in the Ordinary Form of the Latin Rite, **Holy Communion shall be distributed and received on the hand only**; the Chalice is reserved to the clergy
- celebrants and people should minimize the time they are gathered together
- 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)
- 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

- previous directives on Confessions, Worship of the Eucharist outside of Mass, Reception of the Eucharist outside of Mass, Anointing, Holy Communion and Visits to the Sick, and Funerals apply *mutatis mutandis*
- **alternatives to passing collection plates** include bags on long handles, a plate left at each door with clarity about its purpose, tap-and-go plates, and encouragement to use direct debit
- delayed **Baptisms** should now be celebrated; if more than one person is to be baptized, baptismal water should be used once only and fresh baptismal water used for the next candidate; 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
- **Weddings** with up to 20 attendees (plus the couple, celebrant and assisting ministers) are permitted, but might best be postponed until a fuller celebration is possible
- previous advice on the **pastoral care and practical support for elderly** and shut-in parishioners, live-streaming of Masses, on-line prayer groups, discussion groups, youth groups and catechesis, parish websites and e-bulletins, continues to apply; the various online resources available through the archdiocese previously advised continue to be available and enlarged.

Context of this relaxation of restrictions on places and activities of worship

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

- COVID-19 remains present in the community and highly infectious, though now in very small numbers; with the further relaxation of isolation measures and the approach of winter, we must do our best to ensure that no new outbreak occurs; 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 of up to 50 persons from 1 June comes with strict conditions: we must take all reasonable precautions to protect the health of everyone involved and to observe the directives we have received
- We are grateful that through the hard work of our Chancery staff, the Federal Government was persuaded to extend the JobKeeper allowance to clergy and employees in parishes and the archdiocese. Nonetheless, the closure of churches and state of the economy have seriously impacted upon parish and archdiocesan finances: the Charitable Works Fund appeal for May has been foregone and most likely will be for August; sustentation, rental and investment income have all been significantly reduced. We are by no means 'out of the woods' yet.

Where to next?

Where to next? In due course, we hope, to heaven. In the meantime living well through the COVID-19 pandemic, with all its effects on our daily lives including our worship and community life, is in God's strange providence part of our route to that goal. The resilience demonstrated and pastoral energies released in recent times in our parishes and agencies suggest that there will be a new momentum for our Parish 2020 renewal and our efforts of evangelisation and outreach after the pandemic passes. God can bring good out of any evil!

If infection rates continue to be very low, the Government will further ease the restrictions in coming months. But for now we can work with fifty. When a crowd of five thousand gathered around Jesus to receive his teachings and his healing touch, and he multiplied the loaves and fishes to feed them, “he said to his disciples, ‘Get them to sit down in groups of about fifty each.’” (*Lk 9:14*)

Larger celebrations will return in due course, we hope sooner rather than later. But this will depend in part upon us demonstrating that we can keep ourselves and each other safe by exercising responsibility. Our time apart has made us all reflect upon and more deeply appreciate the importance of human company, intimacy, community. Our time together in families has also highlighted the significance of ‘the domestic church’. I ask all priests, religious and the faithful in their domestic churches to keep praying for an end to the pandemic and our return to a better way of worshipping together.

Come Holy Spirit!

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 Monday 1 May 2020 the Feast of Mary the Mother of the Church:

- churches in the Archdiocese shall be open but no more than 50 people may attend at once (this must be supervised by the parish priest or delegate)
- this applies to private prayer, Confessions, Mass, Baptisms, Funerals, Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, Rosary in common, Bible study etc.
- only 20 attendees are permitted at Weddings
- contact details of all those entering the church (name and phone number or email address) must be recorded
- spatial distancing (at least 1½m from each other, the 4 square-metre rule) and hygiene directions (including regularly disinfecting the church) must be observed; attendees may sit only in marked places, to queue at a distance from others, to take care when coughing or sneezing and to avail themselves of hand sanitizer provided
- congregational singing is suspended until further notice; in the Ordinary Form of the Latin Rite, Holy Communion shall be received under the form of the Body of Christ only and in the hand
- those who are unwell or at high risk due to compromised immune or respiratory system must not attend; those over 70 should exercise particular caution

Further relaxations of the CovidSafe provisions are expected over coming months, but this will depend upon infection rates not spiking and churches being able to demonstrate responsible behaviour.

Further special directives have been issued to clergy and parishes.

Even with fifty in attendance and some multiplication of Sunday Masses, many of the faithful will be unable to attend. The faithful are therefore 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').