



24 March 2020

Pastoral letter to the Clergy and Faithful of the Diocese of Townsville regarding the latest instructions in response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear Friends

Peace be with you. At this time of world crisis all of us are going to miss gathering as communities to celebrate the Eucharist and share communion with one another. Life as we have known it is changing by the day.

At all times I have sought to follow public health authorities to ensure the safety of all. I did that last weekend by issuing directives accordingly. The Government has now upped the ante and the result is that we have been directed to close our churches and places of worship.

The news that follows is challenging: all regular Masses with a congregation are hereby suspended until further notice. This includes all Holy Week ceremonies. The obligation to participate at Mass on Sundays (Saturday evening) and Holy Days of obligation is dispensed.

Whilst many of you will find this situation deeply disturbing, as do I, we should not forget that the Church in Australia was founded at a time when the Mass could not be celebrated. This is an historical fact. It is important to keep in mind that those first Australian Catholics actually showed us the way and inspire us through what lies ahead.

Sunday Observance and alternate devotions

As stated, all but Priests are dispensed from attending Sunday Mass. The faithful can keep Sunday holy by setting a time for prayer at home, perhaps reading the scriptures of the day, watching Mass on television or livestreaming, and asking God for the graces they would normally receive in Holy Communion.

I ask Priests, Religious and all the faithful to engage in regular prayer opportunities. All of us can every day pray the rosary. Consecrated religious as well as clerics and lay faithful can pray the Divine Office with particular intentions and add appropriate petitions.

We are blessed in these days that many of us have access to internet and we can use this to support our prayer during these days. Mass for you at Home is broadcast each Sunday from 6am on Channel 10. We will livestream Mass from Sacred Heart Cathedral at 10am beginning this weekend. This Mass can be accessed at [youtube.com/user/SacredHeartCathTSV](https://www.youtube.com/user/SacredHeartCathTSV). We have posted links on our website to other prayer resources. They can be found here: www.tsv.catholic.org.au/COVID-19

Mass without a congregation on Sundays and weekdays

Bishops and Priests will still say Mass in their Cathedral or Parish Churches each day but will do so without a congregation. Whilst public masses will not be said until further notice, the Priests can and should celebrate Mass for their people for as long as this directive to close Churches applies.

Baptisms

I ask that the Sacrament of Baptism be postponed. If there is a risk of death, the child should be baptised by a Priest or if not available, by a lay person.

The Sacrament of Penance

In this present climate, the Sacrament of Penance should be celebrated by appointment only. The sacrament should not be celebrated in the Church or presbytery but in an open space if absolutely necessary. In these times, a good act of contrition and examination of conscience will suffice.

As the Second and Third Rite presumes a “congregation”, I do not believe that either can or should be celebrated given that this would constitute a public act of worship.

The Sacrament of Matrimony

Weddings should be postponed. Venues for receptions in many cases will also be affected by social distancing. It is better that couples consider this carefully.

Funerals

Funerals are allowed by the government but I suggest that the immediate family or very small groups attend the Church only. Social distancing applies as to numbers allowed. I suggest that a larger celebration might occur on the first anniversary of death.

Pastoral Visits to, and Anointing of the Sick

Pastoral care of the sick is critical. The clergy should use this as an opportunity to visit in accordance with current health advice. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion may visit people’s homes if they themselves are low risk, and appropriately advised on all precautions. Clergy, similarly, must be vigilant about the situation.

As mentioned in other directives, when the anointing of the sick is celebrated, Priests are given permission to lay on hands by holding them above the head and not touching the sick person at that point. Some have suggested that for the actual anointing, a cotton ball, cotton bud or a protective glove can be used. Anointing the head is sufficient.

Availability of the Clergy

Priests and Parishes must ensure that parishioners can contact them in times of emergency. The Parish Office should remain open as much as possible to assist with this contact. It will be important that parishes create ways to keep in touch with their flock.

Care of our Clergy and Pastoral Coordinator

It is important that our leaders know that I am very grateful for all that you do in these trying times. We need to keep on the front foot as much as possible and not lose heart. I ask that you the people walk with your leaders and assure them of your care and concern. They too will be feeling discouraged and perhaps a little lost. The community on Palm Island is affected in a particular way due to lockdown so I ask you to remember them all in your prayers.

Opportunities in the Crisis

I ask that we pray for each other and I encourage all of you to review your present practices and make changes to reflect the new realities if necessary. At the end of the day we are “Church” together, not only

as individuals but as a community. When one of us is suffering we all suffer. Let us play our part in keeping the faith and walking in love as one.

Mary, Our Help of Christians and Our Lady of Good Health, pray for us in our time of need.

Yours fraternally in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Timothy J. Harris". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

MOST REV TIMOTHY J HARRIS
Bishop of Townsville