



Pastoral Letter to the Pastors and People of the Archdiocese of Sydney in a Time of Pandemic 18 March 2020

Apocalypse now?

Drought, fires, storms and now plague. It can feel like the end of the world is coming.

In a sense it is. The world as we know it is being turned upside down – at least temporarily – as many get sick and some die from COVID-19, and so much of ordinary life is put on hold.

The Church is not immune. I was recently tested for COVID-19 and put into self-isolation myself and, though happily I tested negative, I know the disruption and anxiety people are experiencing.

But in times like these it's important not to panic or lose heart. If this pandemic shakes us up and starts us thinking about who or what's most important to us and what we should be doing with our lives, that can be a good thing.

Worshipping in spirit and in truth

One of the great Lent gospels is the story of the woman at the well. The woman asked some questions about worship. 'The hour is coming,' Jesus answered her, 'indeed it is here already, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.' (*Jn* 4:23)

What does that require of us at present? Several instructions have already come from health authorities and the Church. Outside gatherings of more than 500 people and indoors gatherings of 100 have been forbidden; in due course the public celebration of Mass may have to be suspended.

Individuals have already been asked, before attending liturgical celebrations, to consider their own health – both their potential to infect others and their susceptibility to infection. Parishioners or clergy who feel unwell or have flu-like symptoms should remain at home. Please be assured that the rest of us will be praying for you.

With this letter I am today issuing some new directives for the celebration of the sacraments and pastoral care in the Archdiocese during this pandemic.

The Church in Australia was founded at a time when the Mass could not be celebrated on these shores and our forefathers and mothers waited for years to receive the Holy Eucharist. For us it will be at worst a matter of weeks or months. But just as prayer sustained them through those times, so can it for us today.

We are now all going on retreat together

Our enforced retreat from the world can be an opportunity to grow closer to God and more prayerful.

People were greatly edified by recent images of Pope Francis' pilgrimage on foot through the empty streets of Rome to the image of Our Lady of Health. Let's join him, then, in prayer and fasting for those who have died or are suffering from COVID-19, those at risk or anxious, those treating the sick or seeking a cure, as well as those who are leading us. The power of prayer, married with the wisdom of health experts, will ease and hopefully eliminate this disease.

I ask that, as far as possible, churches remain open at this time to signal our continuing availability and as an incentive to private prayer. The Blessed Sacrament might at times be exposed in the monstrance for this purpose. Prayers of intercession for an end to the epidemic and for the safety of all should be included in Masses, the Divine Office, as well as private prayers. I ask consecrated religious to redouble their intercessory prayers for us all.

Continued pastoral care of the sick

Please be assured that any Catholic who contracts COVID-19 will as far as possible be assisted by our clergy with the sacraments and other pastoral care. It's at times like these that our pastors really shine.

Clergy will continue attending the sick, elderly and incarcerated to provide Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Communion and other pastoral care, unless they are themselves at risk of transmitting the virus. All ministers should follow precautions recommended by health authorities when visiting people's homes, aged care facilities, hospitals, prisons and detention centres.

Where a priest tests positive for COVID-19 or is required to self-isolate, every effort will be made to find a supply priest to take his place. In some places the cancellation of Masses may be required and/or provision of a Liturgy of the Word with distribution of Holy Communion.

Even if physical distancing is sometimes desirable, 'social distancing' is never so. We all need human company. So in addition to the sacramental care provided by parishes, healthy young volunteers and others should consider prudent ways to check in with the sick, frail elderly or otherwise isolated to inquire whether they have particular needs – for groceries, medicine, pastoral care or simple company. Individuals could cook meals and deliver them to the doorsteps of those in isolation. Modern technologies can also assist in overcoming some people's sense of isolation.

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 <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/coronavirus-updates/>.

In this difficult time I entrust our Archdiocese and our nation to the intercession of Our Lady, Help of Christians, of Lourdes, and of Good Health. God bless you all.

Yours sincerely in Christ

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "+Otha Fisher". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

(Most Rev.) Anthony Fisher OP
Archbishop of Sydney