



Come Home to Mass! On returning to the Eucharist following easing of COVIDSafe restrictions Eighth Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop of Sydney to the Clergy and Faithful during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Third Sunday of Advent, 13 December 2020

Dear pastors and brothers and sisters in Christ,

Dispensation now lifted

The government has announced a significant easing of restrictions upon places and activities of worship. The only restriction on numbers at indoor and outdoor Masses is now the two-square-metre rule. Of course, we must continue to observe appropriate hygiene and distancing practices. We know we are not out of the COVID woods yet. Along with this letter I have issued **new liturgical directives**.

In light of the significant easing of the restrictions upon church attendance, **I rescind my decree of 20 March 2020 dispensing the faithful of Sydney from the obligation to attend Mass** on Sundays and the Holy Days of Christmas and the Assumption. Under canon 1247 **attendance at Mass on those days is now obligatory once again**. Of course, we want people to come to Mass out of love more than obedience, but love itself brings responsibilities. Those who are of great age, have health conditions or are otherwise anxious about the risks of COVID-19 are free to remain at home and find another way of keeping holy the Sunday Sabbath: I have indicated some ways in my previous letters.

If people find they cannot get in to a particular Mass, they should regard their attempt as satisfying the obligation. But most of our faithful have many options for Mass and it will be rare that someone can't get in: with greater capacity, additional Masses, pre-registering and other measures, almost everyone should be able to be accommodated. Our priests are looking at a mix of in-church, in-bigger-hall and outdoor Masses to accommodate the Christmas crowds.

Distancing has been hard

Distancing troubles Christians because we know life is about *following close behind Christ* (Mt 16:21-7): gathering in families, parishes and communities, hearing His word proclaimed and articulating our needs in common prayer, receiving His substance into our own in Holy Communion, and then being sent out to assist the poor and lonely.

For much of this year we've been unable to do these things, or could only do so in very reduced ways. Though our pastors and parishioners have shown remarkable resilience and creativity in responding, it has been a real loss for us.

We have accepted the restrictions imposed on us with a heavy heart because we want all the community to cooperate in keeping people safe. But even as we have physically distanced, we have been especially conscious that we must never distance ourselves emotionally or spiritually from God and others.

Community and communion

For some, this pandemic-enforced 'retreat' has been an opportunity to connect more deeply with family and God – to give time to conversation and prayer so often crowded out by our busyness. Many have maintained their connection to Mass and parish by live-streaming; others, who can't normally come to Mass, have enjoyed Mass coming to them at home.

But we rightly miss the experience of **community** at Mass, our union with family, friends, neighbours and fellow parishioners in Christ's mystical body the Church. It's been very isolating for many of us. As your bishop and on behalf of your priests may I say: **we've missed you!**

If we rightly miss community at Mass, we also rightly miss **communion** at Mass, our union with Christ's sacramental Body the Eucharist. Not being able to receive sacramentally has been a terrible loss for many of us. On God's behalf I say: **Jesus has missed you at Holy Communion time!**

We have rightly have missed congregating in our usual way. This is **the ecclesial consciousness**: that salvation is not just between me and God. We are saved and God is mediated with and through others. Human beings are made for community and communion.

Sign and sacrament

"Come to the water," God says through Isaiah (*Isa 55:1-3*), and in Advent we see John fulfilling this through baptism. "Come to the table", the prophets and psalmist cry out (*Isa 25:6; Ps 23:5*), and we see that fulfilled by Jesus in His Paschal Eucharist. If John was to be the witness to the Light, he had to be seen; if he was to call all to prepare for Christ's coming, he had to be heard; if he was to baptise us with water, he had to stand beside us (*Jn 1:6-8,19-28*). As spiritual as they were, these intimate encounters with God required physical presence.

Ours is a God-come-close religion, a come-close-to-God religion, sacramental, ecclesial, up close and personal. Because we are bodily, God became bodily. Because we are hungry, God became food. Because we are substantial, God lends His substance. No mere virtual reality, or spiritual feeling, or ghostly presence: God in the flesh, body-and-blood, for us to receive.

This is **the sacramental consciousness**: that through physical realities like bread and wine, oil and water, incense and vestments, ritual and music, art and architecture, bodily creatures like us are joined to spiritual realities like God. Sacraments require physical or 'moral' presence.

The big question

In our pandemic-enforced retreat we've been confronted with the question: **what is life for?** Many people have been re-examining their priorities. Such 'apocalyptic' events can be just the wake-up call we need.

Our health officials have naturally enough focussed on saving life. Our politicians have also been concerned to save the economy. But there's more to life than keeping healthy and affluent – desirable as both are. Other things like family and friends, education and sport, arts and leisure, issues of justice or service and, of course, the worship of God – these things matter very much also.

Our long fast *from* the Eucharist has sharpened our sense of these things. We appreciate better than before the personal connection the Mass occasions with our God and our fellows. Which is not to say that God's grace can't reach us outside His house! In today's Gospel people encounter God in the wilderness around the River Jordan (*Jn* 1:6-8,19-28). They hear God's prophet, John, as "a voice that cries in the wilderness: make straight the way of the Lord."

Yet even out there contact with God required contact with others. John gathered people together and baptised them in person – not via a letter or zoom! The experience of remoteness only serves to underline our need for community and communion. It whets our appetite for the satisfying Bread and priceless Wine.

The answer to our biggest question, the meaning of life, is: **Jesus Christ**. He is the God-who-comes-close and the only thing to fill our inner void.

Go Make Disciples!

The COVID-19 pandemic and public health orders have hit the faiths hard. Churches were closed for a time, then reopened with only a third to half our normal congregations. Many joined Mass by live-streaming and some donated on-line. But others fell away and collections fell dramatically. Now it is time to return to normal.

But it will be **a new normal**. There may be further outbreaks and so we must continue to be vigilant and to

pray for an end to the pandemic. There will be ongoing restrictions and a greater consciousness of hygiene and other safety measures. There will be a continuing challenge to reach out to the isolated, anxious or economically devastated. Above all, as people are called back to Church, we must ask **what kind of Church they are coming back to?**

By a happy providence, this very weekend we launch *Go Make Disciples*, our **archdiocesan mission plan** several years in the making. As things have turned out, it will be our COVID recovery plan as well. It is all about personal and community renewal, so that we can be the kind of missionary disciples and welcoming communities needed for the new normal.

The call of every generation to a 'new evangelisation' is as old as Christianity itself. What's *new* about it is our particular gifts, enthusiasm, audiences, approaches. Our new mission plan is packed full of ideas on how we can offer the kinds of evangelisation, leadership, community, formation and worship that people need today.

Come Home

The 19th century Scottish poet and Christian apologist, George Macdonald, published a poem entitled "The Shortest and Sweetest of Songs". The title is longer than the poem itself, which contains but two words:

*Come
Home.*

The poignancy of these two words, separated by a line, is undeniable. It could be addressed to anyone. Is it a directive? A plea? A hope? It seems to me that this song voices God's call to **come home to Mass**.

In coming back to Church, we are returning to *God's house and ours*, the entrance hall to our eternal home. But through the renewal ahead in *Go Make Disciples*, it should be more evident than ever. We want to make ourselves and our communities sites of encounter with God, where people will find their spiritual home.

Christmas is coming! Please plan to include Mass in your Christmas celebrations. Plan to bring with you some people who are less regular attenders. At last we will be able to sing carols again. At last we can celebrate the greatest of all Christmas gifts: God-made-baby for us.

Yours sincerely in Christ



Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP
Archbishop of Sydney