



20 March 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I write to you today as we continue to come to grips with the COVID-19 virus. This morning we, the New Zealand bishops, have made the decision to suspend all Masses with a congregation. Why have we done this? An Australian doctor has written something useful about why these measures are being taken around the world.

Cancelling large gatherings will slow the spread of the virus so hospitals are not overwhelmed. I'm a doctor and I don't want to have to tell you that we can't treat your mum because we've run out of oxygen. I don't want to call you to tell you that your dad died in a corridor, because we didn't have enough beds. This is what Northern Italy is experiencing right now, and they have one of the best healthcare systems in the world. This is what areas of the US are currently experiencing. China had to build 16 new hospitals in a few weeks for a city with the same population as Australia, and they still ran out of resources. We don't have this ability. If we can slow it down, so there are enough resources and staff to treat everyone that gets sick, less people will die. A lot less. So yes, most people will develop mild symptoms, but up to 20% may need hospitalisation. That's 1 in 5 people, and if this amount of people need hospital admission suddenly, like in Italy, China and America, our world class healthcare system is going to struggle, and people will not be able to get the care they need... If you are asked to self-isolate, please stay at home the whole time. Don't just "duck to the shops" because "I'll only be there for 5 minutes, it won't hurt anyone". It does and it will. When the lockdown in Italy started, people in Italy were still going to the gym, to cafes and other places in public. Look where they are now: the whole country is in lockdown and funerals are banned. They can't even grieve their dead. Isolating yourself when asked to is a sign of altruism. Going out when you've been asked not to is essentially saying that your short term pleasure/job etc is more important than someone else's life.

These measures, and others that will flow from them, are aimed at people being safe and not inadvertently posing a risk to others. As a Eucharistic people the receiving of the Body of Christ implies also a care for the wider Body of Christ. As St Augustine said, in the fourth century, You hear the words, "the Body of Christ" and respond "Amen." Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true.

In the midst of sickness or trauma our natural inclination is to turn to God. My brother priests and I will be available to help you in your spiritual needs during this time, but we need to be prudent and do this in ways that are safe for all. Today I will issue pastoral protocols for administering the sacraments in the current circumstances. This asks all of us to be sensible and flexible. As part of this I need your assistance. I ask you, please do not make this a 'political' issue, but, rather reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, look at this time as an opportunity to grow in your own spiritual life and holiness.

Despite not having access to Sunday Mass, I remind you of the commandment to keep the Lord's Day holy and I make the following suggestions to you;

1. Create a prayer space in your home, maybe using a candle, crucifix or statue.

2. Have an extended prayer time. You may wish to pray the Rosary, read from the Gospels, use a prayer app or whatever form of prayer you prefer. Please remember to pray for the sick and the medical professionals who will face the burden of care for the sick.

3. Links to a videoed daily Mass will be available on the Diocesan website, www.cdh.org.nz. Alternately, you may have access to EWTN which often has Mass screened. If you are watching Mass on TV or on your device, at communion time make a spiritual communion which is a rich part of the Church's spiritual wealth for those who cannot receive Holy Communion. I want to suggest two parts to this – one is posture – one is prayer.

Firstly, posture. In the fourth century, in his Catechetical Instructions, St Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) describes how we should receive Holy Communion. He writes...

In approaching, therefore, come not with your wrists extended or your fingers spread, but make your left hand a throne for the right, as for that which is to receive a king. And having hallowed your palm, receive the Body of Christ, saying over it, "Amen." Then having carefully sanctified your eyes with the touch of the holy Body, partake of it, taking heed lest you lose any portion of it; for whatever you lose is evidently a loss to you, as it were, from your own members. For tell me, if anyone gave you grains of gold, would you not hold them with all carefulness, being on your guard against losing any of them and suffering loss? Will you not then much more carefully keep watch that not a crumb fall from your hand of what is more precious than gold and precious stones?

Calling to mind this beautiful image, hold your hands in this posture as a sign of your hunger for the Eucharist and the graces the Lord bestows as you pray the prayer below.

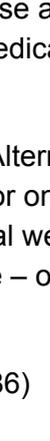
*My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.
I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul.
Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally,
come at least spiritually into my heart.
I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You.
Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.*

4. I have asked that our churches remain open for people to make a visit and have personal prayer.

In the midst of the trial of this time we remember the Lord's promise to us that he is with us always, until the end of time. As we rejoice in the Lord's promise we also come together in solidarity with the wider community. May we be conscious of the needs of our neighbour, especially the vulnerable in our parish and wider community. In the history of the Church Christians were seen as those with a special care for the sick. May this be so in our circumstances. Any further updates will be posted on the Diocesan website, www.cdh.org.nz. Finally let us invoke the heavenly intercession of the national and diocesan patrons and, please God, our first New Zealand saint.

Our Lady assumed into Heaven, pray for us
St Peter Chanel, pray for us
Mother Suzanne Aubert, pray for us

Yours sincerely in Christ the Good Shepherd

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✠ Steve Lowe
BISHOP OF HAMILTON