



Diocese
of Dunedin

Alexandra Catholic Pastoral Area

Omakau (1870) Alexandra (1924) Roxburgh (1950)

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Fourth Sunday of Lent

22 March 2020

20 March 2020

Temporary suspension of all Masses due to Covid-19 (Coronavirus)

The New Zealand Catholic Bishops have been carefully considering the steps they need to take with Mass and other public liturgical gatherings because of the strong Government restrictions on public gatherings to counter the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic.

Effective immediately, all Masses are to cease until further notice. Churches may remain open seven days a week for private prayers and reflection, but parish priests should ensure that numbers of people present remain small and follow Ministry of Health social distancing guidelines to stay at least 2 metres from each other.

Funeral services may continue but they must be brief and only with small numbers of close family and friends allowed. Those attending must also follow Ministry of Health guidelines for social distancing. Baptisms, weddings and other public liturgical gatherings already planned may proceed but only with very small numbers of close family and friends present; again, those attending must follow Ministry of Health guidelines for social distancing. Public liturgical gatherings not yet planned must not be approved and should be delayed until further notice. Funeral services will continue but with small numbers; these services will also meet safe practices and must be brief.

Your bishops must emphasise the serious nature of the Government restrictions and announcements of the past 24 hours – New Zealand's borders have been closed to all non-NZ residents; indoor public gatherings of more than 100 people have been banned, as have all outdoor gatherings of more than 500 people. The Government has imposed these and other measures to try to stop the Covid-19 virus from being passed on within the New Zealand community; closing the borders and strictly limiting public gatherings are seen as important ways to achieve this.

Your bishops' announcement today will disappoint many people, but it will also be welcomed by others. It also follows identical moves by Catholic bishops in many other countries. Pope Francis is himself setting the international Church example by not celebrating public Masses. Your bishops and a number of dioceses are looking at live-streaming of Mass. Online resources for those who wish to pray at home, especially on Sundays, and to follow daily Mass online are offered at www.nlo.org.nz or on your local Diocesan website.

We again emphasise to all parishioners the importance of good practices of hygiene, including regular washing of hands, covering coughs and sneezes with elbows not hands, staying at home if sick, and keeping a reasonable distance from other people when in public. The official public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic is changing quickly and frequently. The primary concern of your Bishops is the safety of all parishioners, clergy, families, friends, staff and visitors to our many and varied premises.

We will continue to send updates as soon as new developments happen.

- ✠ Patrick Dunn, Bishop of Auckland and NZCBC President
- ✠ Steve Lowe, Bishop of Hamilton and NZCBC Secretary
- ✠ John Dew, Cardinal Archbishop of Wellington
- ✠ Paul Martin, Bishop of Christchurch
- ✠ Michael Dooley, Bishop of Dunedin
- ✠ Michael Gielen, Auxiliary Bishop of Auckland

20 March 2020

Pastoral letter to parishioners from the Catholic Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand regarding the Covid-19 Coronavirus-related suspension of Mass

The psalm we pray together at this weekend's Masses for the Fourth Sunday in Lent is perhaps the best known and most loved of all the psalms. For almost three thousand years those who know God have prayed this prayer in times of comfortable peace and from the heart of the battlefields of life when anxiety, persecution and sickness threaten to overwhelm us.

We often pray this prayer especially as a hymn, when we gather to bury those we love. And today, in union with our brothers and sisters of every nation on earth, together facing the threat of the new coronavirus, we call to God with deepened awareness of our need and with confident hope:

Even though we walk in the dark valley, we fear no evil for you O God are with us giving us courage. In recent weeks we *your bishops* have communicated to you the people of our Catholic community in Aotearoa New Zealand the professional advice from the Ministry of Health on how to keep ourselves and all people, especially the most vulnerable, safe, and protected from this virus. We are grateful to all who have immediately implemented the necessary restrictions, especially those who find the required changes most difficult.

Now that it is no longer possible for us to gather for Mass and the sacraments it is important to remember that the church and the ministries of the priest remain open twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. It is our hope that church buildings remain open for personal prayer, even when the liturgy which gathers people together is not able to be celebrated. If you know of people who need the ministry of a priest for any reason do not hesitate to make contact with a priest or diocesan office. In these days, even when the liturgy is not able to be celebrated together, side-by-side, the life of Jesus Christ communicated to us through the church remains open to us.

Diocesan websites are being constantly updated as new information, restrictions and resources become available. Please make sure that all parishioners have access to this important information.

While the visible present fear is a biological virus, the fact is that we humans face fear every day. While in these days we are wisely focused on keeping people safe from the present threat of infection, in our families and friendships and local communities we continue to accompany those who are facing fears that are not related to the coronavirus; those who are struggling with a relationship break-down, and financial anxiety, and those who are terminally ill, and those who care for them.

We live in an age when it seems possible to believe that modern opportunities, education, medical care and technology can deliver us the happiness we seek. When we are faced with a fear that threatens to overwhelm us, we become aware of the fact that we remain vulnerable creatures, dependent on a God who is greater than us for everything, including every breath that we take. Without God this vulnerability is a problem to be suffered and solved. In personal and shared faith in Jesus Christ we understand that the reality of human vulnerability is a gift that opens us to receive and to give love.

May these difficult days be for all the people of our land an opportunity to realise anew that when we dwell in the "House of the Lord" here on earth, goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life.

Perhaps our mantra for these difficult days can be our psalm for today prayed as a simple repeated line when you are not sure what to pray: *The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.* Then as a communal prayer: *The Lord is our shepherd; there is nothing we shall want.*

Yours in Christ,

- ✠ Patrick Dunn, Bishop of Auckland and NZCBC President
- ✠ Steve Lowe, Bishop of Hamilton and NZCBC Secretary
- ✠ John Dew, Cardinal Archbishop of Wellington
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