

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE CATHOLIC PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA FROM THE BISHOPS OF AUSTRALIA

Dear brothers and sisters,

Grace and peace to you in these Easter days. We write to you from a plenary meeting of the Bishops Conference which is like no other. Unable to meet face-to-face as we normally do, the bishops are meeting online for a week. We are intensely conscious of our isolation – not only from each other but also from you, the people whom we serve in the name of the Risen Lord. As we think of you, we make our own the words of St Paul: “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

Australia has certainly suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but not as grievously as some other countries. For that we thank God and we congratulate public health authorities and governments on their prompt and prudent responses. Australians in general have also shown the solidarity and good sense, the generosity and kindness needed in such a time. In our healthcare workers particularly we have seen an exceptional spirit of self-sacrifice, and for that we are all grateful.

The Churches and other religious communities have played their part, which has meant the suspension of public worship and the closure of places of worship. This has been a real deprivation, and the bishops understand not only your anxiety about the virus and shutdown but more especially your deep desire to return to the sacraments and to resume public worship. There is a real hunger in this. It is something we all feel, and we long for the time when our hunger will be satisfied as together we return to the feast of the Lord.

Even when our doors are closed, our hearts are still open. The churches may not yet be fully open, but the heart of the Church, which is the heart of Christ, is wide open. The celebration of Mass has never ceased. Though we and our brother priests cannot yet offer Mass with the people, we are still offering Mass day by day for the people – for all of you who are “flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone” (cf Genesis 2:23). The Church which is the Body of Christ still glows with the life of Easter, “thought to be dying, yet we are alive...to be sorrowful, yet still rejoicing...to have nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:9-10).

At the heart of the community of disciples, there is always Mary the mother of Jesus (cf Acts 1:14). In this month of May, Pope Francis has urged us to look to her to intercede for us in this time of affliction; and to Mary we will entrust our homeland later this month, looking to a mother’s unfailing love. May she who is Health of the Sick and Help of Christians pray for us now, that we may see Jesus with her eyes, the eyes of Easter, and love him with her heart, which is the heart of faith: “O Mother of the Word incarnate, despise not our petitions but in your mercy hear and answer us” (Memorare).

The experience of shutdown has stirred great energy and creativity among people and pastors; this is producing unexpected gifts which we will take with us into the future. No locked door can keep the Risen Lord out; he is everywhere, even in this time of distress. "I stand at the door and knock," he says. "If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come to you" (Revelation 3:20). We have heard his voice and opened the door to him who has come to us. That is the reason for our hope, even our rejoicing.

One important service which people of faith provide to the wider community in this time is an unceasing prayer of intercession. So we ask you all to continue praying in the power of faith for those who have died, who are sick or at risk from COVID-19, for our healthcare professionals, essential service providers and researchers, for all who are isolated and anxious, and for our civic leaders and health authorities.

In the hope born of faith we look forward to the time when the crisis will pass and we will be able to resume fully the Church's worship and mission, even in a landscape which may be quite changed. In the meantime, we are talking with the states and the federal government about the reopening of churches and the gradual relaxation of restrictions. We will work with governments and local authorities at each stage of any resumption of Church life. We commit to keeping ourselves and each other safe by observing strictly the advice regarding numbers, distancing and hygiene when the reopening of churches is permitted.

We urge people to abide by the best advice on how to keep themselves and others safe physically, emotionally and spiritually, especially the vulnerable elderly. That is why we recommend the live-streamed Masses and the many other resources offered on diocesan websites, our Catholic counselling services and the COVIDSafe App.

The season of Lent may be behind us, but this time of shutdown has been a kind of long Lent. Now, we pray, Easter is dawning as our country recovers from the pandemic and looks to build the future. There is no room for complacency but there is certainly room for the hope that Easter brings to birth, the hope that "after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10-11). Looking to the God of all grace, we send to you our blessing of peace and all consolation.

From,

The Catholic Bishops of Australia

14 May 2020