



We proclaim a crucified Christ

1Co1.23

15 November 2022

Welcome Home!

My dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Over recent years, our freedom to be physically present in the Lord and with each other has been severely curtailed. We, God's pilgrim people, have had to withhold from assembling as Christ's tangible Body, and have been reduced to relying on virtual and mediated ways of gathering. Thanks be to God for the technological means that have sustained us!

We found a way to hear God's Word and to pray together, but we have not been free to physically gather together in the Lord. We are rightfully grateful for the many ways in which we reached out in Christian faith and service over the past few years – online rosary, care check-ups, prayer circles, support drop-offs, zoom and phone ministry, to name a few. Yet, it has been difficult to experience in person the words of Jesus, "*When two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.*" (Mt 18.20) Gathering virtually is not the fullness of the presence we bring of ourselves to God and to each other.

At the heart of our Catholic faith, we believe in the Word who became flesh, Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus offered his body on the Cross, so that we might have life in him. And we believe that Christ's Body and Blood is now given to us sacramentally in the Holy Eucharist. Jesus, who bound himself to us on the Cross, left for us his sacramental presence, to bind us together in Him. Perhaps we lost contact with this bodily reality over the time of the pandemic. In desperate times, what was needed to be done was done. We learnt many things, particularly about loss, but also gratitude for what we so easily take for granted. Now that we are able to come back together as the Body of Christ, we should do so with joy, thankfulness and renewed energy.

From the earliest days of the Covenant, God called his People to assemble with Him. "Keep holy the Sabbath" is God's command to take up this happy invitation. (Exodus 20.8) The Lord's Day – for Christians, Sunday – is precious to us, borne out of our love for Christ, who first loved us. Dispensation from our Sunday obligation to physically gather for the Eucharist during the pandemic was always meant to be a temporary exemption for the sake of the common good, without dispensing us from the ongoing sanctifying of our day in some form of prayer and charity in our homes and families. The need for this dispensation has now passed.

Therefore, as from the 1st **Sunday of Advent, 27 November 2022**, the general dispensation from our Sunday and Holy Day obligations will be lifted. As always, the ordinary individual exemptions will remain in place (e.g., for reasons of ill health, family care of the vulnerable, etc.).

Similarly, there is no longer a general need for televising or streaming local Masses, now that we can fully gather without restrictions. I note that some online and telecast options will continue to be offered where needed –e.g., the I am Sunday Mass from the Cathedral on Community TV C31 (Channel 44) and the Archdiocesan YouTube channel, as well as daily Mass via YouTube at any time.

Our communities of grace look forward to welcoming you this Advent. As the anticipation of Jesus' nativity grows, might we also extend our arms in invitation and welcome to others. Many family, friends and neighbours still experience uncertainty at this time. Being a people who can warmly provide a place of refreshment, hope and light is a gift. In all the messiness of parish life, here we can know that the door of grace is opened for us, the medicine of healing is there for us, and the hand of help is outstretched towards us.

We will continue to update the Liturgical Guidelines on the Archdiocesan website (<https://melbournecatholic.org/covid-19-guidelines>), which answers many of the practicalities that might aid with our safe return and acceptable sacramental practices.

May I offer one final word of encouragement: be open to seeking the Lord's mercy and healing in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When we return to the assembly of God's people, let our return be a reconciled one. (Mt 5.23-24) I am sure our priests will willingly open the doors of mercy at convenient times, so that we might find ourselves back at the Table of the Lord knowing that a banquet of mercy and forgiveness awaits us. (Cf. Lk 15.24)

May the Lord who gathers us into his Eucharistic Body continue to deepen our desire to be with him and each other in joy and hope. As the lyrics go for a popular song with our young people, "We are one Body, one body in Christ, and we do not stand alone."

Welcome back and welcome home this Advent and Christmas!

With every grace and blessing, I remain,

Yours sincerely in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter A. Comensoli', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
Archbishop of Melbourne