



3rd June 2020

Regarding the decision to not resume Masses at this time.

Dear Parishioners,

You may well be aware that the Victorian Government has eased restrictions on gatherings in churches to a limit of 20 people. For funerals the restriction has been eased to have churches accommodate 50 people. The Archdiocese has provided guidelines and referred to procedures to be taken to ensure registering attendees, maintaining distancing, cleaning and sanitation, and has offered suggestions as to how parishioners could book-in to participate. Many parishes have used the opportunity to open their churches for Masses with the current restrictions.

I have had reservations about opening our churches for even 20 for Mass, but I decided to convoke a meeting of parishioners from each of our three parishes last Friday to decide how we would proceed.

At this meeting, a decision was made, based on the majority (ten out of eleven) being in agreement that we would not resume Masses for our partnered parishes at this point of time. The twelfth person, who was an apology for the meeting, also later conveyed her full support of the decision. What follows are the considerations of the meeting in making this decision.

Inclusion

Firstly, it was considered that restricting the numbers, even to 20, results in excluding many who would like to celebrate Mass. It was felt that to exclude even some people is not consistent with what the Eucharist is about. Further, the suggestion that people could book in online would exclude those who do not have access to the internet, or the skills to navigate electronic booking systems; usually the older parishioners. The prospect of having to lock the church door when the 20 people are inside is totally abhorrent.

Duty of Care

Secondly, we feel a responsibility and duty of care for our parishioners, and even exercising the most diligent care, we cannot insure the safety of everyone to ensure that the virus is not spread through our gathering, especially when the majority of those who come to Mass are in a vulnerable age group.

Resources

Thirdly, it was considered that the extraordinary requirements necessary to be undertaken to record attendees, separate people, cleanse and sanitise the church before and after each use of the church was too demanding for us to undertake at this time for just 20 people.

I know the pain many of you are experiencing at this time in not being able to gather to celebrate Mass. Reception of the Eucharist on a weekly, or even daily basis has been a fundamental part of your faith.

Further considerations leading to this decision

The Eucharist is the Source and Summit of our lives and thus leads us to the integrity of community. In this regard, it belongs in and to the whole community, without exclusion. As St Paul says, "...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it." 1 Cor 12:26. To privilege some at the exclusion of others, would be in contradiction with the essence of the Eucharist.

As a priest, I feel an enormous void, not just because the celebration of the Eucharist is a major part of my work as a priest, but because I've made the celebration of the Eucharist with the community for whom I am responsible, the very basis of my spiritual and prayer life, but I also feel a responsibility of care to ensure the safety of those who would come to Mass. I, and we, would be devastated if there was to be an outbreak of the virus because we have gathered for Mass. I am acutely aware that we are not dealing with a nasty influenza, but a serious virus that is fatal for many. I am not acting out of fear in deciding not to have the Eucharist celebrated publicly yet, but rather, out of a duty of care where your safety at this stage outweighs my responsibility to celebrate the sacraments with you.

In the meantime we are investigating the information about the environmental cleaning and disinfection requirements that we would need to put into place when we open the churches for the celebration of Mass and the other sacraments.

The group who met last Friday will meet again on June 19th to review our position. The possibility of the number of attendees being increased to 100 will also influence our decisions.

Also, though I know this is not satisfactory, if you are able to access the internet, you can participate in the Sunday Mass that is celebrated on Saturday morning at one of our four church and is uploaded as a YouTube video and is made available directly on the YouTube App (just type in "St Mary's Greensborough Masses), or on our parish websites or Face Book Pages. Lenin also provides a video reflection on the Sunday Gospel, and Tao and I provide a written copy of our homilies, also available on the parish websites. For those who cannot access the internet, the 11.00 am Sunday Mass from St Patrick's Cathedral is continuing to be televised on C31, listed as Channel 44 on digital television.

Know that I hold you all in my thoughts and prayers in these difficult times that even challenge fundamentals of our faith life and practice.

Take care of each other and keep safe.

Fr. Steven.