



Dear Members of the Catholic community

20 March 2020

You will have read the public statement of the Bishops of New Zealand regarding the suspension of all Masses in the country from 20 March. It was not an easy decision to make knowing as we do that the Eucharist is at the heart of our Catholic life. We are acutely aware of the sacrifice this will be for many of us. However we also know that we need to play our part as good citizens and to support what is being asked of us by the government and the medical authorities. The COVID-19 epidemic is serious and so we want to do all we can to stop the spread of this disease.

Since public Masses are now suspended in the diocese I am dispensing all Catholics in the diocese from their obligation to attend a Sunday Mass. This is in accordance with Canon 1248. This will remain until such time as we are able to resume the public celebration of the Eucharist.

It is very important that we use this time to deepen our spiritual life and to pray for each other, those who are sick and in need. It is also important that we nourish our faith life even more than we might have previously. It is one of the hopes of our new pastoral initiatives that the spiritual life of each of us will be deepened by more personal prayer, reflection, spiritual reading, praying of the rosary and other traditional faith practices of the Church. I would encourage you to gather together as a household on Sunday to reflect on the scriptures and to find ways of worship. There will be resources made available to help you in this on our diocesan website.

One aspect of this will include livestreaming of Masses so that you can participate in this way. The priests of the diocese will continue to offer private Masses for the intentions of the people and for the eradication of this virus.

Our churches will remain open for prayer and for the Sacrament of Reconciliation where possible. Each parish will work out the logistics around this and keeping the necessary social distances as outlined by the Ministry of Health.

We have moved into uncharted territory in terms of this pandemic and it is challenging for us all. It is important that we continue to look out for each other, especially the elderly and those who might be alone, that we maintain contact with each other appropriately and ensure that all are cared for. This is our Christian duty.

This will certainly be a different Lent than we have ever experienced before. But we are people who believe in a God who loves us and in whom we trust, through all the stages of life and whatever might happen. Let us place our trust in Him, pray for strength and courage as we face these challenges and not let fear rule our heart. As the scriptures tell us 'do not be afraid'. This time will allow us to find new ways of being a church community and of being united in our faith.

Be assured of my prayers for you all.

Yours in Christ

† Paul Martin SM
Catholic Bishop of Christchurch