



*Bishop's Office  
5 Lyons Street South  
Ballarat VIC 3350*

*P.O. Box 121  
Ballarat VIC 3353*

*Phone: (03) 5337 7121  
Fax: (03) 5332 1122*

*E-mail: [bishopsoffice@ballarat.catholic.org.au](mailto:bishopsoffice@ballarat.catholic.org.au)*

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Dear Friends,

This is a follow-up to my email message earlier today regarding measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus. We have received some further advice from civil authorities, providing a clearer picture on a number of points.

### **Churches, Masses and Liturgies**

We have been directed by both federal and state governments to close all places of worship. This means the closing of our church doors, not just for the celebration of Mass and other liturgies, but for all activities that would involve the presence of a number of people for a period of time. Therefore, I ask that you close the doors of your church(es) and place appropriate signage on doors.

The message could be as follows: "In line with government directives aimed at slowing the spread of the coronavirus, the church will be closed to the public at least until April 14. Please continue your prayers at home for the health of our community. God bless you always. Bishop Paul."

**Live-Streamed Masses** These may go ahead if your parish is able to provide live-streamed Masses via your website, YouTube or Facebook channels. The celebrations need to adhere to good hygiene and distancing regulations. You will be going out to a public audience and you need to model responsibility in all areas. Only the very minimum number of ministers/assistants should be present. Doors are to remain closed.

**Private Prayer** We are still waiting for clarity on this question. However, New South Wales has closed its churches to private prayer. Until we hear further from the Victorian government, I ask that we do the same, so that we are not encouraging any gathering that might be against the health provisions. Many people will feel deep sadness that churches need to be closed. I share this sadness. However, this decision has been made on medical advice in the present health emergency as one of the steps to reduce the number of people who will become ill and indeed to save lives.

Although our churches will be closed for a time, we can, of course, continue to pray. In the present circumstances, I recommend that we increase our prayer at home.

We might recall the words of the gospel that was read on Ash Wednesday, at the start of this season of Lent. "Jesus said to his disciples, 'When you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.'" (Matthew 6:6) We can pray in our own homes. In a spiritual sense, we can go into the private room of our heart in times of reflection. There we can speak with God about our own needs and about the needs of people around the world.

### **Special Arrangements for Weddings and Funerals**

Weddings and Funerals may still be celebrated in the church, but only with small groups and where the '1 person per 4 square metres' rule applies.

All hygiene precautions must be adhered to and every encouragement should be given for the elderly and those who are unwell not to be present.

Once the small group has assembled, the doors must be closed to prevent public access.

All surfaces must be disinfected before and after the liturgy; this is the responsibility of the church.

There must be a clear statement of specifics about physical distancing from one another, with no kissing, no hugging, no embraces, no touches, and people keeping 2 metres apart.

The newspaper announcement should state that this is a "small, closed, family service".

### **Measures are for the Safety of the Community**

Please assure your people that the measures being put in place are for their safety, for the safety of the most vulnerable, and for the safety of the community as a whole.

### **Prayer Resources**

I am grateful to you all for helping our people find ways to pray through these difficult days. Please draw on our diocesan website at [www.ballarat.catholic.org.au](http://www.ballarat.catholic.org.au) for prayer resources and links to live-streamed Masses.

### **A Prayer in this Time of Distress**

The Bishops of Australia offer the following prayer for this difficult time.

O God, healer of all our ills, to whom we turn in this time of distress, grant, we pray in the power of faith, eternal rest to the dead and comfort to those who mourn, health to the sick and peace to the dying, strength to medical workers, wisdom to our leaders and a spirit of kindness to us all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

God bless you all.

Yours in Christ,



Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat