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Dear Friends,

Earlier today I sent out copies of the letter from the Victorian bishops regarding the suspension of liturgies as part of the efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The following are some notes providing further details for our diocese of Ballarat.

Given the seriousness of the current pandemic, we recognise the need to follow public safety provisions. The government restriction limiting indoor gatherings to 100 people applies to church congregations as well as to other groups. However, this does not rule out people visiting churches for personal prayer. To encourage such visits, I ask that, as far as possible, churches remain open to signal our continuing readiness to serve the community and as an invitation to people to take some quiet, prayerful moments in the midst of this stressful time.

While there will be no publicly advertised liturgies until further notice, the faithful are still able to gather for prayer in small groups, keeping some physical distance between participants. This might be, for example, for small gatherings for morning or evening prayer.

Priests and Extraordinary Ministers of Communion will still be able to take Communion to the sick and elderly when requested, unless they themselves are at risk of transmitting the virus. All ministers should follow precautions recommended by health authorities when visiting people's homes, aged care facilities and hospitals.

In the coming days, we will add some resources to our diocesan website to help us in our prayer in this very unusual situation. I will also provide some particular notes regarding Holy Week and Easter and how we might celebrate these special days in these exceptional circumstances.

As we do our part to respond to the worldwide health emergency, it is good to add prayer to all the other steps we are taking. Earlier this week, a parishioner asked if I could compose a short prayer that would touch on some of the needs we see in the current crisis. On this feast of St Joseph, I offer the following: *We pray for all those affected by the coronavirus pandemic in Australia and around the world. We pray for those who have died and for their families and friends who are grieving. We pray for those who are sick and for the doctors and nurses and all who are caring for them. May Mary and Joseph and all the saints pray for us that we may have health of body and peace of heart and a spirit of kindness to one another.*

Yours in Christ,

Paul Bird CSSR

Bishop of Ballarat