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Hello Everyone,

As you may have seen on the news today, in response to recent coronavirus infections, the Victorian government has introduced a 5-day lockdown for the whole state. This will come into effect at midnight tonight, Friday, February 12, and continue until midnight on Wednesday, February 17.

During these days, no public gatherings are permitted. This includes gatherings for religious ceremonies. Under the “Ceremonies and religious gatherings” heading, the government’s summary says: “No in-person gatherings permitted. Broadcast permitted.” The major gatherings affected will be the Sunday Masses that would have been celebrated this weekend and the Ash Wednesday services that would have been celebrated next Wednesday.

In relation to funerals, the government summary indicates that funerals (either indoor or outdoor) may involve no more than 10 people, plus those necessary to conduct the funeral.

For the coming five days, we will not be able to gather in our churches for Masses or other ceremonies. However, we will still be able to pray at home and there are resources available to help us in this.

I note in particular the page on our diocesan website that provides a list of links to Masses online and links to Scripture and prayer resources. There are also links to sites with ideas for family activities during lockdown. The page on our diocesan website is <https://www.ballarat.catholic.org.au/coronavirus-the-churchs-information-and-advice-2/>

People occasionally take time out for a “retreat”, some days of quiet and reflection and prayer. With the requirement to generally stay at home, the coming days will be something of a five-day retreat for everyone in Victoria. While it will involve restrictions, I hope it can be a fruitful time with some extra moments of quiet and reflection and prayer. In this sense, we might count these days as an early start to Lent.

God bless you all.

Bishop Paul