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### **Easing of Restrictions – Third Step**

As you would be aware, the Victorian government has announced some easing of the restrictions that have been in force to counter the spread of COVID-19.

In regional Victoria, including our Diocese of Ballarat, we will move to the Third Step of the government's staged reopening. This will apply from September 16.

What does this mean as far as our churches and chapels and religious ceremonies are concerned?

Weddings will be able to have up to 10 people gathered (including the couple and two witnesses), plus the celebrant.

Funerals will be able to have up to 20 people gathered, plus those required to conduct the funeral.

Outdoor religious gatherings will be allowed for up to 10 people, plus a faith leader.

Churches and chapels may be open for private worship for households or social bubbles, plus a faith leader.

These provisions allow for some increase in numbers for weddings and funerals. Furthermore, it will now be possible to have an outdoor religious celebration for up to 10 people, plus the person leading the prayer. Parishes may be able to arrange some such outdoor celebrations.

Moreover, we will now be able to reopen our churches and chapels, at least for private worship. I encourage parish and school communities to open churches and chapels for some time each day so that people can spend a while in personal prayer in the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

It is still possible for parishes to live-stream Mass. However, this can only involve up to five people. The provisions do not allow us to gather in our churches to celebrate Mass as we would dearly wish to.

Together with the other Bishops of Victoria, I have been making representations to government for an easing of the restrictions in relation to places of worship. I have proposed that places of worship should at least be treated in the same way as other places where people can gather socially. In the coming week, bishops and other religious leaders will have further meetings with government. I hope these meetings will bear fruit so that we will be able to gather again in our churches. We do need to safeguard the community's health. Yet we have shown that we can observe the necessary precautions for physical health at the same time as we celebrate the liturgy, which contributes so much to the spiritual and mental health of the community. I pray particularly that we will soon be able to share the Eucharist, source and summit of the Christian life.

Peace be with you.

God bless you all.

Bishop Paul Bird