Ad Clerum – 24 March 2020

Dear brothers,

I hope you will forgive me for writing yet another letter to you, but in the present difficult circumstances I really feel the need to keep in touch with you as much as I can. I wish we could all meet together in 450 Hay Street for one of the morning teas we have started to organise, but that is simply not possible at the moment. This is about the best I can do given what we are facing.

Today you will have received another Pastoral Letter which follows the most recent directives from the Federal and State governments concerning, among other things, the closure of all places of public worship. For your reference I am attaching to this letter the document: *'Closure of Certain Places of Business, Worship and Entertainment Direction - Signed 1150, 23 March 2020'.* As you know I had hoped that we might be able to leave our churches open for private prayer but this is now not possible. Please read this *Ad Clerum* letter in conjunction with the Pastoral Letter: it is better that I don't repeat here everything I have said there.

I hope I can rely on each one of you to follow the government's directives and my own decisions fully and faithfully. To fail to do so would be to risk putting people's lives in danger and would be a source of shame and scandal for our own people and the wider community of which we are a part.

The great challenge for us now, apart from taking care of our own health and following the government's directives faithfully, is to discover ways in which we can continue to be the leaders of our faith communities in these new circumstances. We are not alone in carrying the burden of leadership in our parishes and other communities. We have Parish Councils, Finance Committees, School Principals and trusted friends and advisers to help us. But as you have heard me say so often we are, by virtue of our diaconal or priestly ordination, the servant leaders of our communities. It is our responsibility, and our privilege, to be the living "sacramental" signs to our people that Jesus is still with them as their servant and as their Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep – who gives all that he has and all that he is for his people – and this is what the Lord is asking of us at the moment. In these days, when normally we would be preparing to celebrate the beautiful liturgies of Holy Week with our people, including the Chrism Mass in which we renew our priestly commitment, our renewal will have to take a new form: we will make our commitment not simply in words but in actions.

The Chrism Mass, which this year we cannot celebrate together at this time, is always a powerful celebration of our unity as the ordained members of the Church here in this archdiocese. As deacons and priests we gather around our bishop. In doing so, and in communion with all our brothers and sisters in the faith, we celebrate who we are as the Church. This year our communion with each other, as important now as it has ever been, will need to be expressed through our support for each other. As I have suggested before, even though we cannot celebrate the Eucharist with our people we can, unless the government enforces a complete shut-down, gather privately and quietly with one or two other priests in nearby parishes to celebrate Mass together. We need to keep praying for each other and for our people.

In these extraordinary circumstances it is permissible for priests to celebrate Mass alone and in private. I encourage you all to consider this possibility, especially on Sundays but more frequently if you wish, even though for many of you it will be at first a strange experience. Of course it is not the ideal, but it may well be a very good way for you to maintain your own prayer life.

In making this suggestion I would caution against creating a small group of people for whom you regularly celebrate Mass either in the locked Church or in the presbytery. This will inevitably give rise to resentment from those who are not in this privileged position. Circumstances are depriving people of the Bread of Life. In God's providence this might reawaken a deep desire for the Eucharist and a recognition of what a precious gift it is in the life of the Church. In one sense the bridegroom has been taken from his disciples – and therefore we must fast and mourn (cf. Matthew 9:15).

As many of you would be aware, Pope Francis has issued norms regarding the celebration of the Holy Week and Easter Liturgies for those places where the public celebration of Mass is prohibited (www.cultodivino.va). These norms indicate that:

> *"in the Cathedral and parish churches, though without the physical participation of the faithful, the Bishop and parish priest(s) can celebrate the liturgical mysteries of the Paschal Triduum … In this occasion the means of live (not recorded) televisual or internet broadcasts are helpful".*

It is my intention, subject to adequate technical facilities, to take advantage of this permission. As soon as the details are worked out I will inform you so that you can alert your people, in whatever ways you have of contacting them, to this possibility. Obviously it is not permissible to organise groups of people to gather together to share in this experience, but individuals and family groups may wish to follow the liturgies on-line at home.

As regards the Chrism Mass the Pope has indicated that it is possible for the bishop to decide to postpone this celebration until the health crisis has passed. I will seek advice on this matter and let you know. It will partly depend on the amount of the Holy Oils which we still have at the Cathedral. However, if we do go ahead with the Chrism Mass, this celebration, too, will have to be in private. It will not be possible for me to invite any of you to join me at this Mass. I will provide information on this and other Holy Week and Easter liturgies in the coming days.

In relation to individual parishes taking advantage of the possibility of celebrating the Holy Week and Easter liturgies in their own churches I am still waiting for advice from the Bishops Conference, which is delegated by the Pope to make decisions in this area. Whatever is eventually decided, here in WA the government instruction is very clear: **places of worship must be closed to the public.** This applies not only to large gatherings but also to very small gatherings, except for weddings and funerals. This might simply make it impracticable for parish priests to conduct the Holy Week and Easter liturgies, no matter how advanced the local technological capabilities might be. It would clearly not be possible, for example, to bring the choir in or to invite some acolytes to assist you. It is the Holy Father's clear instruction that if the ceremonies go ahead they do so *"without the physical participation of the faithful."*

The above would apply also to those parishes which have the facility to regularly live-stream Mass and other liturgical ceremonies from their churches. I know that this would be very much appreciated by your people. In doing so, however, we must be very careful not to create privileged groups of parishioners who have access to Mass when everyone else does not.

These celebrations, too, would need to be conducted *"without the physical participation of the faithful."*

In my Pastoral Letter of today's date I have spoken about discovering new ways for us to be present to our people and new ways for our people to be present to each other. I would encourage you all to think carefully about what these "new ways" might look like. Our people will need us to offer encouragement, hope, trust and confidence in the Lord and in the Church at this difficult time. The Lord is not abandoning his people and nor must the Church. Many of you have great expertise in the area of technology and social communication. This may offer you many opportunities for creative interaction with at least some of your parishioners.

As an archdiocese we will do our best to constantly refresh our Archdiocesan website (www.perthcatholic.org.au) with ideas and resources which might be useful in helping us all maintain and deepen our faith at this challenging time. Already you can find there 'Sunday Mass Stream' and 'Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)' links which are easily accessible.

At least at the moment it is still possible to make pastoral visits to people in their homes, providing that all the necessary precautions are taken and the government's directives are adhered to. Of course this may change as the government's directives are updated. In this matter we will be guided by the best advice of the health professionals. In the end our whole society, of which we are a part, is engaged in the vital task of slowing down the spread of the virus, especially through the practice of social/physical distancing. In our desire to continue to connect with our people we must not put them at risk.

I am very conscious that some of our priests and deacons may be especially vulnerable to the virus, given age and underlying health conditions. Please monitor yourselves carefully. If emergencies arise, such as the need for the Sacrament of Anointing, and you cannot respond yourself please contact a brother priest who may be able to help. I hope we can all be generous in making ourselves available for this ministry as the need arises.

I am also very conscious that many of you are isolated, either because you are caring for a remote or rural parish, or for other reasons perhaps known only to yourself. Please don't hesitate to reach out for help and support. And please don't hesitate to ring your brother priests to see how they are travelling at this difficult time. We need to know that we have each other's prayer and support.

Remember, too, that we have our Clergy Assistance Scheme for those who feel in need of particular help. Please contact Fr Brian McKenna for information on how to access this scheme.

I also want to remind you of the availability of the Archdiocese of Perth Clergy Nurse, Vicky Docherty. Vicky can be contacted for confidential, independent and timely advice and support. Vicky's role is to be an additional resource in addition to your own General Practitioner and other allied health care professionals. Vicky is available to all clergy working in the Archdiocese. Vicky's days of work are Tuesday and Wednesday and she can be contacted in the following ways:

- M: 0419 707 923
- E: vicky.docherty@perthcatholic.org.au

To say that we are facing an unprecedented crisis is both an understatement and, by now, something of a cliché. As each day passes the statistics world-wide grow more alarming and

the government's calls for action more insistent. We as ordained ministers in the Church are not immune from the growing sense of concern, and even fear, which is spreading through our society even faster than the virus itself. Now more than ever we need to call on the resources of our personal faith and of the Church's tradition. To paraphrase Saint Paul, we believe that *"nothing can come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (cf. Rom 8:39). I pray that in these difficult times our own faith, faltering though it may sometimes be, and the richness of our Catholic tradition, can enable us to be the living signs of the Good Shepherd among his people that our ordination calls us to be.

And may the prayers of Mary, the Help of Christians and the Mother of the Church, support us in all that lies ahead.

Yours sincerely in Christ

+Timothy Costelloe SDB

Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB DD
Archbishop of Perth

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