



Seventh Pastoral Letter to the Clergy and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Sydney with Special Directives for Churches and Liturgies following the further relaxation of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2 July 2020

Dear pastors and brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our Babylonian captivity to COVID-19

Rivers of Babylon is a reggae song written in 1970 by Brent Dowe and Trevor McNaughton but popularized in 1978 by “Boney M”. It was the number one hit in Australia for six weeks and one of the Top 10 best-selling singles of all time in the UK. It is one of the few pop songs to be taken directly from the Bible and in 1979 a crowd of 280,000 people gathered in Galway, Ireland, sang it to the new pope John Paul II.

The song is based on Psalm 137, a psalm of lament sung by the Jews after their kingdom had been split in two, with the Assyrians conquering the northern part (Israel) and the Babylonians the southern part (Judah – from which we get our name ‘Jews’).

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion... There the wicked, [who] carried us away in captivity, required of us a song. Now how shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land? (cf. *Ps* 137:1-4)

These past few months we have felt like the Jews in the Babylonian exile, unable to visit the Temple in Zion. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health restrictions have prevented our attending Mass and other celebrations in our parish communities. For the first time in a century, Catholics in Sydney and around the world could not gather to celebrate Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday or Corpus Christi.

It has been inspiring to witness the creativity and collaboration of clergy and laity in response to the pandemic. *Rivers of Babylon* takes from Psalm 19 the recognition that we can pray anywhere, even when we are precluded from attending the Temple:

Let the words of our mouth, and the meditation of our heart, be acceptable in thy sight here tonight... (cf. *Ps* 19:14)

The explosion of online Catholic content, from the livestreaming of Masses to virtual parish meetings and prayer groups, has demonstrated that, despite recent obstacles, our clergy and faithful are deeply committed to ensuring that the Gospel is proclaimed and worship offered to God. As *Ecclesiastes* points out, “there is a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing” (*Ecc* 3:5).

Return to ‘Ordinary’

Religions function as a social glue and, especially in individualistic societies like our own, as a prophetic call to community. Catholicism, as an incarnational and sacramental faith, emphasizes even more strongly the need for physical-moral presence to each other. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’

teaching and to fellowship, to the Breaking of the Bread and to prayer.” (*Acts 2:42*) So it is with great joy, as we return to liturgical ‘Ordinary Time’, that our lives are also slowly reverting to their more ‘ordinary’ state. With the easing of COVIDSafe restrictions from 1 July, we can return to church in significant numbers, like the children of Israel returning to the Temple in Zion.

While going to ‘church at home’ had its upsides, we knew it was second best. Our highest prayer is the Mass – the Church’s offering of Christ to the Father in intercession for the needs of the world. We participate most fully in Christ’s self-giving by being present to each other and receiving His substance into our own in Holy Communion. And we extend that experience by praying before the Blessed Sacrament. While necessary public health restrictions forced a long Eucharistic fast upon us – not just abstaining from earthly food for an hour before Holy Communion, but abstaining from our heavenly food itself for several months now, we are now free to return to the Table of the Lord.

The hunger we’ve experienced should make us appreciate the Eucharist all the more, as we realise better than ever how important it is to gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ and receive Him together. Good as it has been to practice spiritual communion during this time, our hungry souls have craved sacramental Communion. As we return to the altar not just hungry but more appreciative, we can discover anew how deeply satisfying is that Eucharistic food and, hopefully, be more determined than ever to receive it every Sunday and well-prepared, not just out of habit but out of love.

The four square metre rule

From now, the 4m² rule will allow a greater number to gather in a church for Mass and other activities. St Mary’s Cathedral will be able to accommodate 500-600 people; several parish churches around 100. It will be important that you estimate the square meterage of your church, divide by four, set a maximum number to be inside at one time, post this on the door of the church with the other directives herewith, and ensure that this is observed.

The 4m² rule applies not only to Mass but to private prayer, Confessions, Baptisms, Weddings, Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, Rosary in common, Bible study etc. If a church is so small that fewer than 50 would be allowed following the 4m² rule, up to 50 people may nonetheless attend a Funeral. Restrictions of outdoor gatherings to 20 do not apply to religious services held outdoors, so larger Masses might be conducted outdoors if needed and weather permitting, as long as social distancing and hygiene requirements are followed.

Resumption of Sunday Masses

Sunday Masses should now be resumed in all churches across the Archdiocese and in some places they might be multiplied (for which I thank our clergy) or temporarily moved to a larger space such as a school hall, town hall or (weather permitting) outside. Parishioners who are unwell or in high risk categories must stay home; they might ask that Holy Communion be brought to them. As the 4m² rule and prudential concerns will continue to prevent many of the faithful attending, all but priests continue for the time being to be dispensed from the obligation of attending Sunday Mass; but **those who are at low risk of infection and able to do so are exhorted to take all reasonable steps to attend Sunday Mass.**

The faithful who cannot attend Mass should keep Sunday holy by setting aside some time for prayer at home, reading the Scriptures of the day, or watching Mass on television or online, asking God for the graces they would normally receive in Holy Communion (‘spiritual communion’). They might attend Mass on a weekday where possible. Churches should, where possible, be open during the week for private prayer, especially for those unable to attend Sunday Mass; but, again, this must be scheduled and supervised.

Sacrament of Confirmation

With respect to the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation, it will be possible for many parishes to hold celebrations later this year if the candidates have been sufficiently prepared. Having determined how many people your church can now hold (under the 4m² rule) and allowed one place each for the candidate, sponsor and parents (only), please contact the bishop, vicar or dean assigned to your celebration and discuss with him the best way of proceeding. In some cases the number of celebrations may be multiplied or the celebration moved to a larger space such as the school hall or cathedral. In some cases delegation to the regional Dean or Parish Priest to celebrate the sacrament may be required. Inevitably, the number of guests for the celebrations this year and next will have to be somewhat restricted and we ask for people's understanding in this matter.

Sacrament of Matrimony

With respect to the celebration of weddings, it will be possible for some to now go ahead with limitations on numbers as prescribed above.

Other requirements

Previous instructions on spatial distancing and hygiene continue to apply including:

- people should sit at least 1½m apart and stand 1½m from each other when queuing
- the liturgy should be simplified in the ways previously directed e.g. no Gospel procession, procession of gifts, passing of bulletins or collection plates
- hand sanitizer should be widely available and used especially by ministers
- churches should be disinfected in accordance with Health Department guidelines
- holy water should be removed from stoups
- the elements for the Eucharist should be protected from contamination before, during and after the Mass with a lid or pall
- congregational singing is suspended and thus hymn-books or sheets should not be distributed and hymns not projected overhead
- receiving Holy Communion by “making a throne for the king with our hands” (St Cyril of Jerusalem) remains normative in Australia in the ordinary form of the Latin Rite and is recommended during this COVID emergency; great care should be taken when exercising the option of Communion on the tongue; while clergy should receive Holy Communion under both kinds from the sacrifice confectioned at that Mass, the faithful shall only receive the Body of Christ
- ministers should receive particular instruction on sanitation
- contact details of all those entering the church (name and phone number or email address of one adult in each family) must be recorded, either by registering online or signing up at the door
- printed bulletins are for single use only.

The current regulations require that a new COVID-19 Safety Plan be in place for each parish, addressing the matters in the checklist provided by the government and this must be available for inspection. A pre-populated version will be distributed by the Vicar-General for local adaptation. (This will very largely align with the one previously distributed.)

As parishioners in the high risk categories or who are unwell are being encouraged to stay home, I exhort priests to make contact with them directly and visit them at home.

Other aspects of archdiocesan life

Staff are beginning to transition back to the Polding Centre and our other Archdiocesan workplaces such as the Sydney Catholic Schools, the Catholic Institute, the Ephpheta Centre, Aboriginal Catholic Ministry and the University Chaplaincies. SCS and CatholicCare have been responding generously and effectively. COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plans have been developed, consistent with Government

directives, which include a testing, reporting and notification action plan in the event that any staff member or student exhibits symptoms consistent with COVID-19.

The heads of Archdiocesan agencies have shown compassionate leadership with their staff over this crisis period and I am delighted that staff are now able to return safely to their workplaces. Our Executive Director of Administration & Finance, Mr Michael Digges, with the finance, property and employment services teams, have very ably managed “business as usual” through these most *unusual* times and are also managing the staged return to workplace.

My collaborators and I are doing all in our power to keep clergy, staff, volunteers and faithful safe as we move forward and especially in this winter season. However, I would encourage you all to take your own steps to ensure you remain well, such as obtaining ’flu vaccinations, downloading the COVIDSafe App, and isolating if you are exhibiting flu-like symptoms.

Where to from here?

These latest regulations are expected to be in place for some time. The recent spike in cases in Victoria is a reminder that the virus is still with us and we must not be complacent. We must take all reasonable precautions to protect people’s health and to observe public health directives. If there are more present in a church than the 4m² rule allows, or if music ministers, acolytes or communicants fail to observe social distancing, this may well come to the attention of authorities and risk penalties and new restrictions. But if cases remain low in NSW and we demonstrate that we are operating responsibly, we can hope that larger celebrations will again be possible.

Continuing prayer

Rivers of Babylon captures one moment in sacred history. After the Babylonian captivity the Jews gradually returned to Judah, restored the Temple, and celebrated their feasts there (see the *Book of Ezra*). The *Book of Nehemiah* records the new song which we can pray with them:

LORD our God, blessed be your glorious name,
and may it be exalted above all, for you alone are the Lord.

You it was made the heavens and the highest heavens,
the earth and seas and all they contain.
You it is give life to everything,
and the multitude of angels worship you.

You it was chose Abram
and made a covenant to give the land to his descendants...

You it was saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt
and sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh...
You divided the Red Sea in two,
so Israel passed through dry-shod...

You it was came down from heaven on Mount Sinai
and gave them laws that are just and commands that are good...
In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven,
and in their dispossession a homeland...

But our leaders, priests and ancestors did not follow your law...
they worshipped a golden calf... and killed the prophets...
Arrogant and stiff-necked, they did not obey your commands;

they refused to listen or recall the signs you had worked for them...

But you are a God of mercy, gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love.

Therefore you did not desert them...

When they were oppressed and cried out to you,
you heard them from heaven and delivered them...

You returned us to our homeland and your Temple.

And so, in our present hardship, we turn to you our God,
for you are mighty and awesome and keep your covenant of love...

We rededicate ourselves to your holy covenant...

to the Bread of the Presence and the holy offerings...

and to all the duties of the house of our God. (*Neh* chs 9 & 10)

Please continue to pray for an end to the pandemic and for all those who have been affected, especially those who are sick or at risk, those who are isolated or anxious, those who have lost their employment or who are experiencing financial hardship. And pray for a renewed reverence for the Eucharist, as we joyfully return to its celebration and reception.

Yours sincerely in Christ

Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, DD BA LIB BTheol DPhil
Archbishop of Sydney



**Directives for Churches and Liturgies for the Archdiocese of Sydney
under current COVIDSafe restrictions from 1 July 2020
Notice to be posted near church doors and parish websites**

From Wednesday 1 July 2020:

- churches in the Archdiocese shall be reopened and Sunday Masses resumed
- the maximum number of people allowed in the church at one time shall be determined by dividing the total area in square metres by four (“The four square metre rule”); **the maximum number allowed in this church at the one time is therefore ____**; the parish priest or designated delegate must supervise this
- this applies to private prayer, Confessions, Masses, Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, Eucharistic Adoration, the Divine Office, Rosary in common, Bible study etc.
- contact details of all those entering the church (name and phone number or email address of one adult in each family) must be recorded, either by registering online or signing up at the door
- current spatial distancing directions (people are asked to keep least 1½m from each other) and hygiene directions (including hand sanitizing and regularly disinfecting the church) must be observed; attendees are to sit only in marked places, to queue at a distance from others, and to take care when coughing or sneezing
- congregational singing is still suspended and in the Ordinary Form of the Latin Rite in Australia, Holy Communion is normally received in the hand under the form of the Body of Christ only; great care should be taken when exercising the option of Communion on the tongue;
- those who are unwell or at high risk must not attend (they might ask that Holy Communion be brought to them at home); those over 70 should exercise particular caution
- as the 4m² rule and prudential concerns will prevent many of the faithful attending, all but priests continue for the time being to be dispensed from the obligation of attending Sunday Mass; but **those who are at low risk of infection and able should do so are exhorted to take all reasonable steps to attend Sunday Mass**
- the faithful who do not attend Sunday Mass should keep Sunday holy by setting aside some time for prayer at home, reading the Scriptures of the day, and/or watching Mass on television or online, asking God for the graces they would normally receive in Holy Communion (‘spiritual communion’); they might attend a weekday where possible or pray before the Blessed Sacrament during the week.