



Ref: 2020.3

**Pastoral Letter by
The Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

19 March 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the Book of Genesis when Cain, after having killed his brother Abel, is asked by God where his brother is he replies with a question of his own: *Am I my brother's keeper?* (Gen 4:9). For Cain the answer is clear. He has no responsibility for his brother. For God the answer is very different. Cain is absolutely responsible for his brother, and must answer to God for his brother's welfare.

This ancient biblical story has a powerful message for us as we face the global pandemic of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). At this time in every aspect of our lives we are faced with a fundamental question: *Do I put myself first or should I act for the good of my brothers and sisters in the reality of my own life's circumstances?*

The decision I have taken, reluctantly and deeply conscious of its gravity, to temporarily suspend all public Masses in the Archdiocese of Perth, is based on my deep conviction that as a Christian community we must act in the best interests of all the members of our society. The government has directed that, at least as I write this letter, all indoor gatherings of more than 100 people must be cancelled. When less than 100 people gather, they must practice "social distancing". These measures are designed to slow down the transmission of COVID-19. While the decision to temporarily suspend all public Masses goes beyond the strict requirements of the government as they presently stand, I have judged that, in order to fully respect the intention of the government in issuing these directives, we as a Catholic community can best express our commitment to the well-being of everyone in our community by taking the action that I have.

I know that this decision will cause great distress to some, and perhaps many, of you. I want to assure you that I did not make this decision lightly. The Mass is at the heart of our lives as Catholics. It is our way of gathering as a community of faith to draw strength from each other. It is our way of listening to the Word of God in faith. It is our way of offering our lives, our needs, our hopes and our loved ones to God. It is our way of allowing the Lord to unite us to himself in Holy Communion. It is our way of renewing our commitment to "*go out in peace, glorifying the Lord with our lives*". For us to be deprived of the Mass is a great sacrifice and a great suffering. But the Lord himself calls us to this - because we **are** our brother's keeper. We make this sacrifice now for the well-being of our community because, as Jesus himself tells us, "*by this everyone will know that you are my disciples - that you love one another as I have loved you*" (cf. John 13:35). Jesus sacrificed everything for us - and as his disciples we must be ready to make sacrifices for others in imitation of him.

Even though we cannot gather at the moment to celebrate Mass together we are not deprived of the presence of the Lord. We know that he is with us, closer to us than we are to ourselves. We know that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (cf. Hebrews 12:1), who always



Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

accompany us on our journey of faith. Mary, the Mother of God, walks with us in company with the saints who never stop praying with us and for us. God continues to send his angels to protect us and guide us. The Church, especially though, not only through its ordained ministers, continues to be the Lord's chosen instrument through which he remains present among us as our Good Shepherd.

The present decisions I have announced will be reviewed within two weeks and will be confirmed, modified or cancelled at that time. However, we must prepare ourselves for the very real possibility that we will not be able to celebrate the beautiful liturgies of Holy Week and Easter in the Cathedral and in our parish churches this year. We have a duty to remain responsive to the advice and directives of our government and our public health officials. As both Catholics and citizens we wish to be responsible and cooperative members within our society.

The Eucharist is the greatest gift we have. Our Catholic faith is also very rich in its many other spiritual traditions. The first Catholics in Australia, deprived of the Mass, gathered around the Blessed Sacrament, left by a priest who was unable to remain in the colony in what is now Sydney. In the presence of their Eucharistic Lord, the people entrusted themselves to Christ at a time of great uncertainty. With this in mind I have asked our priests to keep our churches open for private prayer where possible, and to organise times of Eucharistic Adoration. As long as only small groups gather, and maintain a safe distance from each other, this will be an ongoing possibility for us and a source of strength and comfort for many.

Those first Catholics also turned to Mary as a source of hope and comfort. The rosary became a central part of their lives, and this prayer could well become once again a treasure for all of us. Saint John Bosco, the founder of the religious order to which I belong, was fond of saying that if we want to see what miracles are we should entrust ourselves to Mary, Help of Christians. Under this title Mary is the patroness of Australia. Let us ask her to pray for our country, and indeed for the whole world, at this time.

There are many other spiritual resources available to us in our Catholic tradition. Both here in Perth through our Archdiocesan Liturgy Office, and right across Australia, people are working to compile lists of resources which might help us connect more deeply with God, who is with us in this moment of crisis as he was with Jesus in Gethsemane and on Calvary. I encourage you to regularly visit our Archdiocesan website, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference website, and other reputable Catholic websites, where you will find many helpful resources. You will also find on our Archdiocesan website regular updates on many practical issues related to our response to this crisis, including information on the planned live-streaming of some liturgies on our web page: www.perthcatholic.org.au

Although public Masses are suspended for the time being our priests are still ready and willing to be at your service. In cases of emergency, especially as regards to the Sacrament of the Sick for those in danger of death, please do not hesitate to contact your local parish. There you will also be able to enquire about opportunities for the Sacrament of Penance. And you can be sure that our priests will continue to celebrate Mass in private for all their people.

Because of the decision I have made I wish to make it clear that the normal "Sunday Obligation" to attend Mass on either Saturday evening or Sunday does not apply to anyone at this time, except our priests. But we are still called to "keep the Sabbath Day holy". Just as we are free to determine how we make each Friday of the year a day of penance, so in this time of crisis we are free to decide how we, in our particular situations, will observe the "day of rest and prayer".



Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

"Do not be afraid". These words recur over and over again in the pages of both the Old and New Testaments. They were the words addressed by the Angel Gabriel to Mary when she was told that she was to become the mother of the Messiah and they were the first words addressed by Jesus to his disciples on the evening of his resurrection. In the midst of the health crisis in which we find ourselves these same words are addressed to us: *Do not be afraid. Have courage. I am with you.*

We are a people of faith and of hope. We know the Lord is with us. Let us draw strength from this faith and support each other when worry or fear threaten to overwhelm us. Let us allow this temporary deprivation of the Eucharist to sharpen our hunger for Jesus, the Bread of Life. Let us recognise the presence of Jesus in all the different ways in which he steps into our lives. And most of all let us keep praying for each other, for those who have died, and for those who are selflessly putting themselves at the service of our community at this challenging time.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

+ Timothy Costelloe SDB

Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB DD
Archbishop of Perth