



OFFICE OF
BISHOP WILLIAM WRIGHT

5 March 2020

**Letter to the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle
Concerning COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus)**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The advent of what is now known as COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) has been the cause of much anxiety for many. The media coverage, while helpful in promoting public awareness, has understandably added to levels of anxiety in the broader community.

Public health authorities are actively monitoring the spread of COVID-19 related illnesses across Australia, and their latest advice is that the virus spreads through:

- close contact with an infectious person
- contact with droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze
- touching objects or surfaces (like doorknobs or tables) that have cough or sneeze droplets from an infected person, and then touching your mouth or face.

Based on the generally available advice from public authorities, there may be little need for any changes to the usual liturgical practices in our parishes.

Given the heightened anxiety, however, and with a desire to ensure a level of comfort for those attending public celebrations of the Church's liturgy, I direct that our parishes adopt the following precautions, effectively immediately and until otherwise advised:

1. Individuals should consider their own health, including any potential to infect others with an infectious disease, before attending a public liturgical celebration
2. Holy water stoups are to be emptied of holy water, though holy water should still be available for parishioners to take home
3. When exchanging the sign of peace, members of the assembly are to avoid shaking hands, though it is possible to offer the sign of peace by simply saying "Peace be with you", and smiling, offering a wave, or nodding
4. Holy Communion from the Chalice is to be restricted to the celebrant(s) for the time being
5. Because of the increased infection risk, Holy Communion is not to be given on the tongue until further notice, with those attached to this pious practice being asked to adjust their practice for the sake of fellow parishioners

6. Parishes are asked to make alcohol-based gels or other hand rubs available near the entrances to church building, and also to provide disposable tissues and appropriate means of disposal
7. Parishioners are to be reminded that if they are too unwell to attend Sunday Mass, they can honour the Sunday obligation by participating in a time of prayer within their home, reading the Scriptures, or watching Mass on television.
8. Those assisting in the distribution of Holy Communion are to observe good hand hygiene in preparing to distribute Communion at Mass, including the possibility of washing their hands in the sacristy using hot water, soap and clean towels.
9. Care is to be taken when Communion Ministers use alcohol-based gels or other hand rubs before distributing Communion, as some people have been known to react negatively to the components in such products, particularly when the hands are not completely dry.

These arrangements will remain in place until the risk from COVID-19 is mitigated, and appropriate advice is received from public health authorities. Parishes will be advised when it is possible to return to our normal liturgical practices.

The NSW Department of Health advises the best way to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus is to:

- Stay home if you are sick
- Clean your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, or with an alcohol-based hand rub
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing with a tissue or a flexed elbow
- Avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms
- Practice cough etiquette (keep away from other people, cover coughs and sneezes with disposable tissues or clothing, and clean your hands.

We could do worse than to follow the 'common sense' advice being provided by public health authorities, both individually and as parish communities.

I thank you for your support in implementing these temporary measures which may offer comfort to those who are experiencing any anxiety at this time, and will hopefully assist in supporting the general welfare of our Catholic and wider community.

Yours in Christ,



Most Rev Bill Wright
Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle