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PASTORAL LETTER

- *Diocesan Regulations from 28 January 2022* –

Dear Brothers and Sisters

The Omicron variant of Covid-19 has entered our Diocese. It is possible that the Delta mutation may do the same.

As a Catholic community, we need to ensure that we do all that we can to protect the health of others and ourselves, particularly of the more vulnerable due to age, other health issues and frailty. We need too to respect the very reasonable fears in the general community in the light of the news from interstate and overseas.

The purpose of this Pastoral Letter

The purpose of this Pastoral Letter is to outline arrangements in the light of these realities for the Diocese of Bunbury from Friday, 28 January 2022, in the light of the following considerations.

Our first calling is to be communities of love

When instituting the Eucharist, Jesus taught that others would recognise his followers by their love for one another.¹ Therefore, let us keep Covid political disagreements and protests *outside our parish communities*. Let us leave them outside the doors of our churches.

Second, *let us be sensitive to those who are afraid*. Let the physically stronger be sensitive always to brothers and sisters who fear contracting Covid. Whatever our opinions about State Government Covid requirements, let us remember the call of the Word of God for the stronger never to insist on personal rights when these conflict with Christ-like love for those whose health is not strong.

St Paul emphasised that we need to ‘put on the mind of Christ’ who ‘did not count equality with God something to be grasped’ but who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a slave’ and ‘becoming obedient unto death, death on a cross’.²

St Paul told the Corinthians not to eat foods others would find scandalous because of its association with pagan sacrifice, even though Christians knew differently. He taught that they should never exercise their freedom out of love for those who would be scandalised.³

¹ John 13:35

² Philippians 2:5-8

³ 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

May we all strive to ‘put on the mind of Christ’ as communities of love. Let us keep political disagreements outside our parish communities, as I pleaded earlier.

The responsibility of Bishops to regulate the liturgy

Church law requires a Bishop to regulate the celebration of liturgies in the Diocese he serves. This includes recognising generally accepted risks to health during a pandemic. Priests and people have been asking of late for clear regulations for the Bunbury Diocese. Priests’ views are almost unanimous.

Diocesan regulations from 28 January 2022

The following special regulations will apply across the Bunbury Diocese from Friday 28 January until further notice.

Church entrances

1. Holy Water dispensers which are safe because they do not require parishioners to dip their fingers in water are permitted. Holy Water should be removed from stoups at the doors of churches to reduce the possibility of transmission of the virus.
2. Alcohol-based gels or rubs (or like products) should be available near entrances.

The Sign of the Peace

3. Individuals should avoid physical contact during the Sign of Peace but say simply “Peace be with you” with a smile, wave, nod, or bow.

Holy Communion

4. All Ministers of Holy Communion should wash their hands both *before* and *after* distributing Holy Communion.
5. Parishes should continue not distributing Holy Communion from the Chalice.
6. Because the coronavirus is easily spread through saliva, the Body of Christ should be administered only in the hand.

It should not be distributed on the tongue because of the high risk of transmission of the virus through spittle on the Minister’s finger.

Hymn books, collection plates, parish bulletins

Hymn books should not be used.

Collection plates should not be passed from person to person – baskets on long handles, entry and or leaving collection bowls or electronic ‘tap and go’ terminals may be used.

Hygiene

Holy water should be removed from all stoups but still be available for taking home.

Alcohol-based gels (or the like) should be available near church entrances, confessionals, baptisteries, and in the sanctuary.

Hard surfaces people touch should be disinfected between Masses – door handles, light switches, back of pews or chairs people touch during Mass.

Please all help keep your parish church safe for all

In the present situation, special cleansing arrangements need to be in place. I ask all parishioners to help with these rather than to leave them to a few. I ask Parish Pastoral Councils to help ensure that:

- Pews where parishioners have been sitting are cleaned after each Church service.
- Parishioners are invited to consider reducing the number of pews used, considering the need for social distancing rules. I ask them to be considerate too to those helping to clean pews after Masses
- Appropriate detergents and equipment are available.
- Surfaces people touch – horizontal surfaces, door handles be cleaned regularly
- Toilets are cleaned regularly.
- There is frequent vacuuming with an HPA filter, especially of high traffic areas
- Cleaning mops and cloths are replaced regularly.

To those who wish to receive Holy Communion on the tongue

I want to conclude by speaking to those who prefer to receive Holy Communion on the tongue and so will be disappointed with the regulation about this. In making the Diocesan regulations, I was particularly sensitive to the fact that their wishes are for sincere reasons. I ask them to reflect upon the following.

*First, Jesus taught that the Eucharist is essential for the Christian life. Jesus made that the Eucharist is essential for the nourishment of the divine life he has shared with us through Baptism: ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life... (they) live in me and I in them’.*⁴ It is through this life that we receive guidance, strengthen and empowerment to overcome temptations.

Jesus made clear too that the price of not receiving him in Holy Communion is spiritual malnutrition: ‘If you do not eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you’. Many reveal that they are suffering from this through bad life decisions which bring unhappiness, and there are many temptations in society today.

Children and young people especially the Lord’s guidance and strengthening, particularly in the face of temptations. They cannot afford to suffer spiritual malnutrition in their spiritually formative spiritual years.

⁴ John 6:53-56

Second, it was Jesus himself who told us to 'take and eat' – no one else. This was an essential element in the sacrificial ritual of the Last Supper, and remains so in the Mass. He did know what he was doing.

None of us is worthy of receiving the Lord in Holy Communion. But we do so in faith as the Lord commanded. In the Word of God, the tongue is no more worthy than the hand.

From scriptural times, the tongue has been recognised as the source of what St James taught 'no one can tame and is a restless evil'⁵ Gospel examples include curses, lies, gossip, destroying others' reputations, unsavoury conversation, tempting others to wrong and abuse.

Finally, the normal practice of the Church for centuries was receiving Holy Communion in the hand. We think too of saints, such as the teenage St Tarcisius in the fourth century, martyred because young pagans tried to take the Eucharist from him.

I ask those whose preference is to receive the Eucharist on the tongue to consider accepting the way the Lord gave us during the Last Supper during the current pandemic for the sake of the need of all of us for the spiritual nourishment of the Lord's Body and Blood. A prayer of spiritual communion is a human created devotion and is no substitute for receiving the Lord himself.

Again, I realise that this is a sensitive matter for some Catholics. However, as Pastor of the Diocese, my first concern is the spiritual malnutrition consequences the Lord warned of if parishioners fail to receive Holy Communion during this terrible pandemic - especially our children and young people.

Let us all pray that humanity be freed of Covid pandemic soon.

God bless

Bishop Gerard

27 January 2022

⁵ James 3:8