



PASTORAL LETTER

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THE RETURN TO OUR EUCHARISTIC HOME

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SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST SACRED HEART OF JESUS

COVID-19 restrictions on the numbers allowed at Mass are slowly being relaxed. Thanks be to God!

We continue patiently to pray for this terrible pandemic to cease and all its extensive and serious consequences. We pray for all those impacted in the world, especially in the health and economic areas of human endeavour.

As the doors of our Churches slowly open to congregations, let us reflect on the "Eucharistic fasting" that we have all been doing.

Eucharistic fasting is not new to Australians.

EUCHARISTIC FASTING IN AUSTRALIA'S BEGINNINGS

First, 2020 marks the bi-centennial anniversary of the first official Catholic priests allowed to offer pastoral care in Australia.

Before this a number of priests did come to Australia on the many ships bringing people from many diverse backgrounds to these shores inhabited by Aboriginal peoples for millennia. These priests, however, were only able to stay short periods. Their presence was often seen as a threat to the colonial authorities. Upon departing they did leave the Blessed Sacrament, nonetheless, with some colonial families – the Davis and Dempsey families.

During the many years prior to 1820, Catholics gathered near Sydney Cove for prayers and Eucharistic devotion in these family homes. There was no Mass.

After the official priests (Fr. John Joseph Therry and Fr. Philip Conolly) arrived and celebrating Mass was permitted, the great Eucharistic missionary efforts began systematically in this new but ancient land. We are now heirs of that Catholic evangelising impulse of over two hundred years ago. We are truly grateful.

It was a long Eucharistic fast!

The Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn



PROLONGED EUCHARISTIC FASTING

Secondly, great Eucharistic piety was demonstrated in another type of fasting of only a few generations ago.

So many of us can remember stories of the long Eucharistic fasting requirements of earlier times. The liturgical demand was to fast from the night before one received Holy Communion at Mass. Perhaps, with lenient fasting rules presently applicable, we have lost a sense of the long spiritual tradition of fasting before the Eucharistic feasting. Should this be considered afresh today?

Notwithstanding current assessments on this matter from present sensibilities, these older requirements did raise generations imbued with a solid understanding of the piety needed to reverently receive Holy Communion. The stomach pains of hunger did remind the pious of the spiritual hunger for "panis angelicus" (the bread of angels). In rural areas, there are many examples also of the long distances fasting families needed to travel to the nearest parish for Mass. Few complained. The love and respect of the Holy Mass matured. We ought to learn from this with docility.

COVID-19 EUCHARISTIC FASTING

Thirdly, I believe that the current Covid-19 induced "Eucharist fast" is deepening our Catholic instinct that the Eucharist is the very centre of our lives in Christ, Jesus.

Over these months I have heard of our Catholic people yearning for Mass and reception of Holy Communion. Sure enough, there has been a huge uptake in online daily Masses. Here "spiritual communion" is explained and appreciated by those participating from home. However, as one committed Catholic mentioned to me recently, "We are not really "e-Catholics" in the sense of *electronic* Catholics, but we are "E-Catholics" in the sense of *Eucharistic* Catholics.

This is the Catholic instinct arising within us. I see it as a wonderful sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in this "valley of tears".

THE RETURN TO OUR CHURCHES

Some lonely voices are already saying that Mass numbers will not return to their earlier numbers once all Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. Some suggest that the movement from comfortable couches and armchairs to wooden Church pews is a distance too far. I respectfully disagree.

Clearly, we are learning of the usefulness of modern technology in advancing our faith. Online platforms for Mass ought to continue in some form in the future,



especially for the sick and elderly. Thousands who have participated in online Masses comprise many who had previously lapsed in the practice of their faith. Some speak of their re-engagement in the Catholic Mass over these months of online Masses. Unless there is a good reason, the Catholic instinct will not be satisfied with simply a "stay at home" faith. We are radically communitarian both as human beings and as people of Christian faith.

Making the step to return to Masses in parish will be sheer joy for many. It will be a transition that will be difficult for some for many reasons.

Yet the gathering of the People of God for the gift of the Eucharist that Jesus gave us at the Last Supper is irresistible to the depths of the human spirit. Ask those adults that have become Catholics in recent years. They will tell you as they have told me: "Fully participating in the Mass we find our true home!"

Let us prepare now to welcome everyone's return to our Eucharistic "home".

Please read the current health protocols regarding participating at Mass from your local parish bulletins or from the Catholic Voice website: (www.catholicvoice.org.au). They are being revised periodically, according to government regulations.

My expectation is that now our Churches in the Archdiocese are open, at least for a period of time during the day, Masses with reduced numbers will be celebrated. Please access your local parish bulletins for details.
