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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As each day goes by the extent of the health crisis facing us here in WA, across our country, and around the world, becomes more obvious and more alarming. We are all affected by this crisis, and many will feel a growing sense of concern in themselves and in their families and friends as the dangers we are facing become more confronting.

It would be easy to give way to panic: we see signs of that panic in the empty shelves of our supermarkets. But the temptation to panic must not lead to an abandonment of our Christian hope and of our trusting faith in the providence of God. While so much is changing around us one thing remains the same: God is with us, his mercy and compassion overshadow us, and his call to us to love one another as Jesus has loved us still rings in our hearts.

Even though, in this letter, I must share with you the implications of decisions made by our governments and health authorities, I also want to reassure you that, in these changed circumstances, the Church will continue to be a living sign of God's fidelity and God's loving presence. But the Church will have to do this in new ways: **we** will have to do this in new ways, for all of us, the community of disciples, are the Church. We may not be able to gather together in our churches, but we can recreate the Church in our homes. Long before Catholics in Australia were able to build big churches for the celebration of Mass, they gathered together in their families for the rosary around an image of Our Lady. We may not be able to offer each other the sign of peace at Mass but we can offer each other the gift of our sincere prayer. We may not be able to organise morning teas for the elderly in our parish halls but we can ensure that those who are lonely and afraid are not left to themselves, even if all we can do is ring them on the phone or leave a casserole on their front doorstep. As our practical capacity to reach out to others is curtailed our determination to be disciples of Jesus, who gave everything he had and was for us, can lead us to discover new ways to live out our Catholic faith.

Government Directives

The recent decisions by the Prime Minister and the Premiers and Chief Ministers of the Australian States and Territories concerning the closure of "places of public worship" have significant implications for all Australians including, of course, for Catholics. In Western Australia, the Minister for Emergency Services declared a state of emergency from 12 noon on 16 March 2020 in respect to the pandemic caused by Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pursuant to section 56 of the *Emergency Management Act 2005 (WA)*. Our way of life as Australians, and our way of being Catholic, will consequently alter dramatically while the COVID-19 health crisis persists. While the decisions taken by our leaders are dramatic and challenging, they are designed to ensure that our country is not overtaken by the spread of



the virus to such an extent that our health services collapse under the strain and many more people's lives will be at risk.

As Catholics we share with all other Australians the responsibility of adapting our patterns of living to the new reality we face. It is at the heart of our faith that everyone is a child of God, deserving of respect and care, and that each of us has a responsibility to live in such a way as to enrich and not diminish the lives of others. As I said in my most recent Pastoral Letter on this matter (Wednesday 18 March 2020), we are indeed our brother's (and sister's) keeper.

Extension of the Temporary Suspension of all Public Masses and Gatherings for Prayer and Worship in the Archdiocese of Perth

I am writing to inform you that all public Masses and other gatherings for prayer and worship are now temporarily suspended throughout the Archdiocese of Perth until further notice. We have no way of knowing how long this situation will last and I am very conscious of the distress this will cause to many of you. We all know how important the Mass is for us. It is, as I said in my last letter, 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*". To be deprived of the Mass will be a great suffering for us all. But I believe it is what the Lord is asking of us at this time.

It had been my hope that, even with the suspension of public Masses, we might be able to keep the churches open for private prayer. Following directives issued by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Sunday 22 March 2020, this option is no longer available. On Monday 23 March, Christopher Dawson (State Emergency Coordinator and Commissioner of Police) in accordance with Section 71 of the *Emergency Management Act 2005 (WA)* issued directions applicable to the state of Western Australia for the '*Closure of Certain Places of Business, Worship and Entertainment*'. Under these directions:

'Every owner, occupier or person apparently in charge of an affected place must close that place to the public for a period commencing at 12 noon on 23 March 2020'.

Under the relevant definitions, '*a place of worship, other than for the purposes of a wedding or a funeral*' is defined as an '*affected place*', and is subject to Section 71 of the *Emergency Management Act 2005 (WA)*.

For that reason, and with great sadness, I directed the priests of the Archdiocese of Perth to close all public churches and chapels at 12 noon on Monday 23 March 2020 until further notice. Should the State government of Western Australia make a different decision I will review the total closure of our churches, but for the time being, effective immediately, we will not be able to visit our churches and chapels for private prayer. I know that many of you will find this very difficult. I do ask you to be understanding and not to put unfair pressure on your priests.

Many of you will have specific questions about particular matters. I will try to address some of those questions here.



Baptisms and Confirmations

Unless a child (or other person) is seriously ill, baptisms are to be postponed until this health crisis is over. In emergency situations priests and deacons will make themselves available for baptism. In extreme circumstances any person can validly baptise, provided they have the intention to baptise according to the faith of the Church. If you are worried about this please contact your parish priest for clarification.

Confirmation will not be administered in the Archdiocese of Perth, except in the case of emergencies, until the crisis has passed.

Weddings

Weddings can still be celebrated in churches but only with "very small groups" which in effect means immediate family. All other requirements relating to health precautions, including social/physical distancing in the church, must be observed. The church should be closed once the small group of guests has arrived and should also be closed immediately after the wedding. It would not be possible for the wedding party to linger outside the church for photographs or socialising.

Funerals

Funerals can also be conducted in churches but the same rules apply as for weddings: "very small groups", social/physical distancing, all the other health precautions, and the closure of the church during the funeral and immediately after. It will not be possible to organise any refreshments in the parish hall or centre after the funeral is concluded. Funeral Directors and the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board also have regulations relating to the conduct of funerals. Families will need to consult the Funeral Director about these matters.

The Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation

Only the First Rite of Penance (individual confession and absolution) can be celebrated, because of the restrictions on numbers. Priests will do their best to respond to individual requests for the Sacrament, but it is not possible to establish and publicise particular times when the sacrament will be available. People who identify within themselves the need for confession should contact their parish clergy. It is also important to remember that in these extraordinary circumstances we are still able to come before God in sorrow and seek his forgiveness, confident that he is "full of mercy and compassion". As I said above many things are changing, but God's compassion, mercy and forgiveness never change.

Anointing of the Sick

While "Anointing Masses" can no longer be celebrated, it is important that the Sacrament of Anointing be available to those seriously ill and in danger of death. Our priests will do their very best to be available for this important ministry. They will, of course, be guided by the protocols of the relevant hospitals or aged-care facilities, and will also visit the homes of the sick and dying when asked. The priests know that they have to take the usual precautions in relation to those who may be contagious. If they themselves are in a high-risk category or for any other reason are unable to come, they will do their best to help you find another priest who is available.

At the moment Holy Communion can still be taken by the clergy or even by Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion to the sick, elderly and house-bound if this is explicitly requested



by the person or their family. This advice may change if the government imposes new restrictions. When conducting such visits all the precautionary measures need to be taken and no-one, clergy or lay person, should undertake this ministry if they are in the high-risk category themselves or are in any way unwell.

Pastoral Care

At this time, when the normal patterns of pastoral ministry are so severely disrupted, it will take some time for us to find new ways of being present to each other and supporting each other in our faith. People will rightly look to me as the Archbishop and to my brothers in the ordained ministry to continue to support everyone in their faith. We are meant to be living signs of the presence of the Good Shepherd among his people. I think it will take us some time, and require pastoral creativity, for us to discover new and valid ways of being at the service of you all. Be patient with us, but don't be afraid to offer us suggestions. It is together that we will discover how to continue to be the faithful people of God that we are called to be.

Our particular concern must be for those who are sick, lonely, isolated and afraid at this time. We have an enormous resource in the faith-filled and generous people of our parishes. I hope that we may find ways of making real and concrete our concern for those in need. All of us can offer spiritual support through our prayer, not just for ourselves and our families and friends but for everyone, and in particular for those in great need. We may not know how God will respond to our prayer – we do know that he will. In addition to this, many of us may be in a position to offer various kinds of material support: organising meals and other practical assistance for the housebound and visits, or at least phone calls, to the lonely. Depending on further government decisions we might be able to make ourselves available to help with household tasks, both inside and outside the house. If we all do what we can, and are prepared to “think outside the box”, then this crisis might also become an opportunity for us to rediscover what those outside the faith discovered in the early days of the Church: *See how these Christians love one another!* I ask, too, that this love and concern be extended to our priests. In the midst of their desire to be at the service of God's Church they too are feeling confused and uncertain as they face an unexpected and unknown future.

There is so much more to be said about the experience we are all living through, but this letter is long enough. I will do my best to keep in touch with you all and will certainly let you know if any of the matters I have dealt with in this letter change or need further clarification. The government is issuing new directives on a regular basis and often they will impact directly on our Catholic community. For those who are able to do so I would ask you to keep visiting our archdiocesan website on a regular basis: www.perthcatholic.org.au. The Archdiocese will be offering various suggestions and resources to help you maintain your spiritual focus at a time when the churches are not available to us.

As we did last Sunday we will live-stream Mass from the Archdiocese of Perth each Sunday morning at 11.00am. We are also exploring the possibilities for streaming other liturgical celebrations as well as short messages from me and others in the archdiocese to provide information and, hopefully, inspiration. To the extent that it is possible, and following recent instructions from the Holy Father, we will live-stream the Holy Week liturgies in a modified form. The details of this will be available on the website as soon as they are finalised.

When the disciples of Jesus were overwhelmed by a storm which had overtaken them, Jesus came to them in the midst of the storm, encouraging them not to be afraid because he was



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with them. He reached out to Peter as he was sinking and lifted him up (cf. Matthew 14:22-33). The Lord is with us in this present storm which is engulfing us and he is encouraging us, too, not to be afraid. He has not deserted us. Rather he is calling us to discover him in the midst of this crisis and allow him to lift us up and lead us safely to shore.

The Lord also reminds us that, on the cross, he gave us his mother, Mary, to be our mother. In Australia we turn to her as the Help of Christians. May she come to help us now with her prayers for us and with her presence among us.

Yours sincerely in Christ

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