



Diocese of Armidale

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

“By the Rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, we wept when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137).

This was the prayerful cry of the ancient People of God when they were expelled from their holy city of Jerusalem and its temple and exiled to Babylon. How, they wondered, can we continue to worship God away from our holy site? This psalm with its lament may very well express how you are feeling now. Our churches are locked, and we cannot worship God and bask in his grace by being present at Mass, particularly Sunday Mass.

During their seventy years of exile the Lord taught His people not to despair; to continue to worship Him joyfully (though differently to how they were accustomed) because He was still their God and He was still with them; and to live in hope of their return to Jerusalem and its temple. This is now what the Lord asks of us too – not for seventy years, but until it is again safe for people to gather together in numbers.

Drastic Measures for the Common Good

By order of the Government, places of public worship must not be open to the public. These and other severe restrictions placed upon all people in Australia surely indicate to us the serious threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential to cause grave harm and death to many people. We in the Church willingly make every effort to play our part for the sake of the common good. We cannot be complacent in any part of the Diocese of Armidale, not even in the tiniest of our towns or communities for there are already confirmed cases of infection in our region.

Our churches are closed, The Church is not!

Our churches may be closed but The Church is not! We, the People of God (made one with Christ and with each other through Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist) are *not* ‘closed-down’. We – every one of us - continue to be the Mystical Body of Christ on Earth, called to be the sign and sacrament of God’s loving presence in the world and of His mercy to all. In difficult and trying times like these the grace of God *will not* be lacking. The Good Lord wishes to strengthen and fortify us. He *is* with us always “even unto the end of time” (Matthew 28:20).

Throughout this pandemic we need to engage in new ways of staying connected as parish communities. Your priests, religious sisters, parish staff and volunteers will be making every effort to reach out to you and stay connected. If you are good with technology, you might offer them your assistance. Remember that *we are not closed*: We are making every effort to be accessible and available for you, but please remember we are constrained by the same restrictions so there are some things we may not be able to do for you.

We are all affected by this pandemic, but some more than others. Some have died or lost loved ones; others have had or will have their livelihoods seriously impacted; others will be feeling particularly vulnerable or isolated. As well as keeping these people in our prayers, a Church that is truly the Church of Jesus Christ reaches out to such people. If you have ideas or can help the parish in doing so, please do not hesitate to offer your help.

The Domestic Church

The Catholic Church has a long and strong tradition of what we call the Domestic Church – the Church at home. Now is a time for each of us to revisit how the life of the Domestic Church is faring in our own home and daily lives. The Domestic Church is nourished most of all by daily family prayer, and now in the current circumstances Sunday family prayer especially. A regular daily meal together around the table also helps, as too does steering our conversation at times to good and holy topics. And we must never forget the example of love in action which Pope Francis reminds us gets a very good start by regularly using three simple phrases: “Please; Thankyou; I’m Sorry.”

While you are at home fanning the flames of the Domestic Church, remember that your priests and I continue to celebrate the Holy Mass every day in our parish churches. The Sacrament of the Eucharist does not only encompass the reception of Holy Communion; it also refers to the entire celebration of the Mass. The priests and I offer the Mass every day for you and for the world. In your daily prayer, and particularly on Sunday, I encourage you to unite yourself spiritually to this awesome mystery which continues each day. In the absence of being able to receive Holy Communion I encourage you to make a regular Spiritual Holy Communion, and to nurture the growth of a Eucharistic hunger in your heart and soul.

Please visit the website of the Diocese www.armidale.catholic.org.au where you will find ideas and resources for prayer; a link to join virtually in my Mass each Sunday and links to other Sunday and daily Masses; and links to much more. We hope to continually update the site each week. Some parishes have their own website and social media which I encourage you to visit and engage.

A Time of Grace

Many of us are frightened, worried or anxious as a result of this pandemic. Many of us are understandably saddened at not being able to come to Sunday Mass or pray in our churches. This is natural. But let us remember that we can also react according to God’s Grace. By this I mean that God has poured into our hearts the Spiritual Gifts of faith, hope, and love. These are three gifts Saint Paul tells us endure forever (1 Corinthians 13:13). So, in these trying times, let us ask the Lord to increase our faith, strengthen our hope, and deepen our love.

The Mother of God, under her title “Our Lady of the Rosary”, is the patroness of our Diocese. In this time of great need we implore her intercession for God’s protection upon us.

May God bless you all

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Kennedy', with a cross symbol to the left.

Most Reverend Michael Kennedy

Bishop of Armidale

27th March, 2020