

A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand

Living, Caring, Worshipping and Ministering in a Covid-19 World

November 2021

Caring for and prioritising the most vulnerable

We find ourselves in challenging times as we struggle to live with the global Covid-19 pandemic which affects our lives in many ways.

We have all had to make significant sacrifices because of the restrictions imposed as a consequence of Covid-19. We are acutely aware that some people have carried, and continue to carry, the burdens and negative consequences of Covid-19 more than others. Many among us are more vulnerable to the virus, susceptible to a higher risk of infections, hospitalisation, or death. They include those with a compromised health status or living circumstances as well as those with a chosen involvement in higher-risk front-line roles related to keeping us all safe. The principle of the 'preferential option for the poor', which is an integral part of Catholic social teaching, demands that the needs and vulnerabilities of all these people take priority as we continue to respond and adapt to the new world shaped by Covid-19.

Faith and Reason – the case for vaccinations

More than five million deaths have been directly attributable to the Covid-19 virus worldwide since the pandemic began early last year. While our combined efforts to date mean that we in Aotearoa have been spared large numbers of deaths and large numbers of seriously ill people in our hospitals, we know the catastrophic effects the virus has brought to countries with low or previously low vaccination rates. As the Delta variant spreads in our country, there are serious concerns about the capacity of our health system to cope with a surge in Covid-19 hospital admissions.

We bishops are vaccinated. We renew our call for those of you who are not yet vaccinated to do so.

We know that, by far most New Zealanders, Catholics included, are vaccinated. We have previously sought to reassure those with questions about the moral status of the vaccines and we reiterate, in the words of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that all of the Covid-19 vaccines recognised as clinically safe can be used in good conscience.

We hear from some Catholics concerned that requiring people to be vaccinated for certain jobs or to gain entry to some places potentially undermines their freedom to choose, as well as their right to religious and other forms of association. Some have concerns about the vaccine's makeup and

its long-term effects. We accept that for most such people, the wish not to be vaccinated is based on a sincere conscience. Catholic moral teaching upholds the central importance of conscience, describing it as a person's inner sanctuary where we are alone with God and as a judgement of reason that we are obliged to follow.

Equally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes conscience as that which enables us to assume responsibility for the acts performed. For those who by following their consciences do not want to be vaccinated, the consequences are significant, potentially including a loss of employment and income. In these circumstances, wherever possible, all efforts should be made to find other roles or give people leave without pay for the duration of the public health emergency.

The introduction of the Vaccine Pass means that people who are not vaccinated could face restricted entry to certain venues and public events, potentially including entry into some church spaces, including Mass.

We know that the tensions emerging around 'vaccine mandates' and the 'My Vaccine Pass' are creating lines of division within families, faith communities, friendship circles and places of work. These tensions call for restraint and discipline. While we can disagree with those who have a different view to our own, the Gospel dictates we continue to show care, love and respect even while we experience the real-world consequences of the different decisions people make around getting vaccinated.

Guidelines for worshipping and ministering with Covid-19 in our midst

The 'traffic light' system will allow people to gather in churches under certain conditions; either in limited numbers if vaccination passes are not required, or in potentially unrestricted numbers by presenting proof of vaccination in the form of the official 'My Vaccine Pass'.

As Church leaders, we have been struggling with how we might best and safely allow for church gatherings to take place under this system without people feeling alienated. We believe that churches should be safe places for all people, physically, emotionally and spiritually. In the spirit of the Gospel, we also want our churches to be places of hospitality and inclusion, open and welcoming to all without prejudice or discrimination. With that in mind, we have agreed to the following guidelines:

- Parishes will provide Masses for people with a My Vaccine Pass while ensuring there is the opportunity for people without a pass to access a separate numbers-restricted option where possible.
- Accordingly, we anticipate that parishes will, either singly or in collaboration with neighbouring parishes, provide worship opportunities for the vaccinated (requiring proof of vaccination) as well as separate gatherings, subject to number restrictions, that will be open to vaccinated and unvaccinated alike (no proof of vaccine required).
- All lay people involved in public-facing public ministries related to a worship service or other parish ministries (ushers, readers, ministers of the Eucharist, collectors, those leading liturgies of the Word, Communion to the sick, home visitation) will need to be fully vaccinated at vaccination-only Masses and when performing other work where vaccination is required.
- Priests who are not fully vaccinated will, under the current public health orders, be significantly constrained in their ministry; they will be unable to exercise pastoral care in aged-care residential

settings or hospitals as well as schools. Priests who are not fully vaccinated or who do not wish to declare their vaccination status will not be able to attend and preside at vaccinated-only Church events.

- When asking a fully vaccinated priest to preside at a service open to both vaccinated and unvaccinated, parishes and priests need to give due consideration to any specific health conditions a priest may have which could make him more susceptible to the health consequences of being infected by Covid-19.
- Similarly, all church workers (whether paid or voluntary) involved in home-based pastoral care visitations need to have regard for the vaccine status of those they are visiting, along with their own health conditions which may make them more susceptible to the health consequences of being infected by Covid-19.
- Pending any changes accompanying the 'traffic light' system, the current situation also demands that parishes continue with measures designed to minimise the risk of transmitting Covid-19, such as encouraging the use of masks, social distancing, communion only in the hand, no holy water for blessing, and no shared hymn or other books.

Faith and trust in God

In these times we need more than ever to draw on our faith and trust in an all-loving God. Thus, recalling the recent re-dedication of Aotearoa to Our lady Assumed into Heaven, we pray with Pope Francis:

Mary Most Holy and Beloved Mother, help us realise that we are all members of one great family and to recognise the bond that unites us, so that, in a spirit of fraternity and solidarity, we can help to alleviate countless situations of poverty and need. Make us strong in faith, persevering in service, constant in prayer.

Mary, Consolation of the afflicted, embrace all your children in distress and pray that God will stretch out his all-powerful hand and free us from this terrible pandemic, so that life can serenely resume its normal course.

To you, who shine on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope, do we entrust ourselves, O Clement, O Loving, O Sweet Virgin Mary. Amen.

(Excerpt from Pope Francis' prayer to Mary for the end of the pandemic – May 04, 2021.)

- ✠ John Dew, Cardinal Archbishop of Wellington, Apostolic Administrator of Palmerston North and NZCBC President
- ✠ Michael Dooley, Bishop of Dunedin
- ✠ Patrick Dunn, Bishop of Auckland
- ✠ Michael Gielen, Auxiliary Bishop of Auckland
- ✠ Stephen Lowe, Bishop of Hamilton and NZCBC Secretary
- ✠ Paul Martin SM, Coadjutor Archbishop of Wellington and Apostolic Administrator of Christchurch.

