

15 September 2022

Tēnā koutou Priests & Parish leadership,

## **“We cannot live without Sunday”**

*Martyrs of Abitene. 303 AD*

With the recent lifting of all Covid-19 restrictions we are happy to extend an enthusiastic invitation for all Catholics of Aotearoa New Zealand to return to full and active participation in Sunday Mass.

We have lived through difficult times since March 2020, including serious illness and months of restrictions prompted by our concern for the weak and the most vulnerable. We have embraced necessary and often difficult restrictions with precautions to keep our communities, families, workplaces and parishes safe and healthy.

Throughout this time our personal relationship with Jesus Christ has sustained us and we have continued to pray together in innovative and creative ways including social media resources. However, we have longed for the time when we could once again worship together. In recent months this has been possible to an increasing degree and with the lifting of all restrictions we welcome all Catholics of Aotearoa to return to weekly Sunday Mass.

When we speak of our Catholic commitment to Sunday Mass as an obligation, this is not the imposition of an external rule but rather the expression of a healthy heart’s desire. While the projects and successes of the world can bring us significant satisfaction, we Catholics are aware of an inner restlessness which reminds us that only God can give the depth of earthly peace and wholeness that we seek.

We nurture and savour this relationship with Jesus Christ, who is God-with-us in our own life of prayer and recognise that this always draws us to the Sunday Eucharist which, from the time of the first Christians, has always been an event of encounter with Christ which we cannot live without.

Many of us remember a past time when the *Sunday obligation* was carried as a heavy burden, often motivated by fear. In the absence of such fear, we find a new opportunity to embrace Christ’s gift of the Eucharist as something freely chosen, and from which we are dispensed for reasons due to illness or other circumstances which make it difficult to participate.

While many have already begun returning to Mass in these weeks after a Covid-break, this time of lifting restrictions provides an unprecedented opportunity for others who may have been away from Mass for many years or decades to return. If you know of someone who may be uncertain about returning to Mass you might offer to accompany them. If you would like company as you return, don’t hesitate to call a friend and take the step together.



We take this opportunity to remind our Catholic community that the Mass is the ultimate Earthly encounter with Jesus and our Catholic ancestors often made great sacrifices to take part in this weekly event which is once again fully available for each of us.

In the wake of the removal of wider government Covid-19 restrictions, all restrictions regarding the Mass are lifted. It is ultimately for parish communities to decide what changes they wish to make, while always keeping to the fore the concern for those who are most vulnerable. It is important to remember, however, that the lifting of all Covid-19 restrictions does not remove the risk of transmission of infections from Covid-19 or other viruses. We therefore ask every community and each community member to be prudent in retaining particular restrictions as deemed necessary in the interests of continuing to protect the most vulnerable.

As we prepare to receive Holy Communion, we recognise the invitation to enter into communion with the Risen Lord and each other. We question our disposition of heart as we remember the beautiful teaching of St. Cyril who in the late third century wrote: "When you approach...make your left hand a throne for your right hand, since the latter is to receive the King." As we receive the King so may our hands be hands of blessing and service to our brothers and sisters.

We wish to take this opportunity to thank you, the Catholic community of Aotearoa, for your patience, your generous and faithful commitment and your service over the past two and a half years. This has been a time of learning for all of us as we become more aware of our need to care for those who are most vulnerable.

Most of all, we celebrate the opportunity we now have to discover anew the blessings and graces of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist without which we cannot live.

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