

## **A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CITY PASTORAL REGION**

### **CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The last two years have been a challenge for many people in the broader community and the faithful community of the three parishes that constitute the City Pastoral Region. The arrival and persevering presence of COVID-19 has impacted how our communities interact. Our inability to gather each Sunday to worship God and celebrate Eucharist has challenged the bonds that usually draw us together. The imposition of 'lockdowns' and other restrictions, the requirement to 'check in' wherever we go and avail ourselves of vaccines, and other assorted developments have been a genuine shock to our understanding of who we are as a Church and as a community.

That said, however, I have been filled with hope at how many people have weathered these challenges and maintained contact with each other in the face of circumstances that made that usual task more difficult than it should be. The ingenuity and commitment of so many people to maintaining our bonds has been truly inspirational.

In the spirit of that ingenuity and commitment, I write this Pastoral Letter in which I hope to put before you some of the challenges facing the parishes of the City Pastoral Region. I do so in the hope that together, we might find solutions that everyone can embrace and move forward to continue our mission of proclaiming the Reign of God in the inner suburbs of the City of Newcastle.

#### **Financial Challenges**

COVID-19 has seen a dramatic decrease in the three parishes' ordinary income for the financial year ended 30 June 2021. We are certainly not alone in experiencing such an impact by any means, but we also need to remember that generally speaking, our parishes 'run on the smell of an oily rag'. The decline in income presents a challenge for us and other parishes in similar situations.

While there are some cash reserves that the parishes can draw on, this is not sustainable in the long term and, realistically, is only delaying the inevitable need to address both our income and our expenditure. I have already directed those responsible for reviewing our budget for the current and future financial years to look at ways by which our income can be increased and our expenditure reduced. However, such a task is not always easy, and there will be some angst associated with the necessary changes to allow us to live within our means.

One part of this expenditure review is a moratorium on spending outside what is already budgeted. Requests for such expenditure will be assessed on a case by case basis with the assistance of the Finance Committee, and only those cases considered as vital will be approved.

As an additional result of the moratorium, some projects previously planned but not yet commenced have been paused. They will be revisited once the outcome of the consultations and decision envisioned by this Pastoral Letter have concluded (see further details below).

#### **Our Physical Assets**

The City Pastoral Region is blessed with many significant physical assets in our church buildings, presbyteries, and other buildings. Given the age of some of these assets – particularly our church buildings – many of them require significant capital expenditure to ensure their longevity. In light of the above information, the need for capital expenditure presents a challenge for the parishes of the Region.

In addition, it needs to be recognised that the schools within our Pastoral Region occupy land that is canonically owned by the parishes of the Region. These assets are not immediately available to the parishes to financially support the mission work of the parishes. There are legal reasons why this is so. There are continuing conversations at a diocesan and state level about acknowledging the canonical ownership of these particular assets rightly. However, we should assume that no immediate benefit can be gained from these specific real estate assets owned by the parishes.

I have asked the Regional Business Manager to look at all the non-church buildings to identify possible ways of generating additional income streams for our parishes. These possibilities will allow the parishes of the Region to strengthen their financial situation without relying solely on the generosity of our parishioners.

The question of the church buildings raises several unique challenges:

- **St Columban's Church, Mayfield**, remains unsafe for use and has been 'deconsecrated'. In reality, the only option available to the parish is for the building to be demolished and the land reused to provide opportunities for both the parish and the neighbouring schools. Newcastle City Council is refusing to approve the necessary demolition at present, and the associated risk remains with the parish.
- **Christ the King Church, Mayfield West**, is landlocked by the aged care facility that surrounds it. The facility's operators have approached the parish about acquiring our property to permit the expansion of their facility. The proceeds of such a sale could be put toward constructing a new joint facility on the site of the decommissioned St Columban's Church, Mayfield.
- **St Laurence O'Toole's Church, Broadmeadow**, is currently closed because of a need to undertake some significant internal work, including electrical rewiring, stabilising the choir loft, and replacing windows. The estimated cost of these repairs is high and would ultimately be unaffordable if asbestos is found on the site, a danger that has already been identified.
- **Sacred Heart Cathedral, Hamilton** is one of the church buildings not currently needing much by way of capital expenditure. There is a proposed internal lighting upgrade planned, but the parish has received a specific legacy that has already been earmarked for that purpose. The bequest stipulates that it be used on the fabric of the Cathedral building itself and not for other purposes. The parish is canonically obliged to honour the donor's intention now that the legacy has been accepted.
- **Mary Immaculate Church, Tighes Hill**, is currently being prepared to repair guttering and windows as the first part of required maintenance. The proposed repairs have been deemed urgent and necessary and planned before the capital expenditure moratorium.
- **St Joseph's Church, Merewether**, faces some potential structural issues that may require urgent attention but is otherwise in reasonably good shape. The necessity of work is currently being assessed, along with developing a potential scope of work. A decision about the priority of this work will be made once all the information is available.
- **St Mary, Star of the Sea Church, Newcastle** remains a significant challenge to the parish because of the heritage listing of the building. The proposed ramp project has been

mothballed, and remedial work that is deemed necessary and urgent by the Finance Committee will be undertaken as required.

- **St Peter-in-Chains Church, Stockton**, has recently completed significant maintenance work to ensure its stability and continued usage. There may be other maintenance needed in the future, but the urgency of repairs and maintenance is not a high priority at this particular point.

The financial challenges currently facing the parishes of the City Pastoral Region make the maintenance of seven operational churches a difficult one. The question of just how many churches need to be open for regular use in the Region, and more specifically in the Inner Newcastle Parish, possibly should have been addressed well before now. However, the current challenges facing the parishes of the Region make it a more pressingly urgent issue. The continuing ability for the Inner Newcastle Parish to operate five churches needs to be questioned, and some difficult choices are 'just around the corner'.

I realise that seeing this in print will come as a shock to many. I wish it were different, but this is the reality we face as a Region and as the parishes of that Region.

### **Availability of Mass, Clergy and other Ministers**

With the departure of Fr Peter Street in mid-2021, we are now permanently reduced to a total of three members of the clergy appointed to the parishes of the City Pastoral Region. There is no likelihood that this situation will change at any time in the immediately foreseeable future, and, if we are realistic, the only possibility we do face is a further reduction of clergy numbers as more of the diocesan clergy retire.

We are very fortunate to have the generous support of a number of our retired clergy assisting us at present to maintain a schedule of Masses that was predicated on the availability of many more clergy members than we currently have. While appreciated, this is not a situation that can continue indefinitely. We need to face the real challenge of questioning how many Masses we have in the Region on a Sunday and where we have them.

As a basic rule of thumb, the Sunday Mass schedule needs to be manageable with the number of active clergy appointed to the parishes. We cannot continue with a program with our retired clergy assisting us each week.

In addition, we need to ensure that the appropriate number of ministers – sacristans, readers, servers, musicians, communion ministers, etc. – are available to assist the Parishes in celebrating Mass (and other liturgies) with the kind of dignity and solemnity that it requires. While it may be logistically possible to celebrate Mass in a church building at a particular time, the inability to field a full range of ministers might make it practically impossible.

The ability to gather for the celebration of Mass (and other liturgies) cannot simply be left to, or based on, the availability of a member of the clergy of the Region; it must be an effort of all the community in ensuring that we can celebrate worthily.

Accordingly, the challenge of Sunday Masses needs to be addressed now in a cooperative way rather than waiting until we have no other option, ensuring that we have a schedule of Masses across the Region that provides a good range of times and locations. This rescheduling will mainly be a challenge for the Inner Newcastle Parish because of the number of churches we have **and** because one of those churches is the Cathedral Church of the Diocese.

Unfortunately, we will need to consider reducing the number of Masses available in the City Pastoral Region and reconsider where Masses are celebrated and at what times.

A weekday liturgical schedule is similarly in need of review. Still, the options are broader in that it is not always necessary for Mass to be celebrated on a weekday in every church. Other options can be explored, drawing on the rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Church to provide a range of possibilities across the week and across all the churches that are operational in the Region. The one place in the Region that is obliged to offer a daily Mass is the Cathedral, and only because it is the Cathedral.

As a Region, we need to embrace the possibilities available because of how many clergy members we have, the number of operational churches, and the range of liturgical and spiritual experiences we are prepared to explore.

### **Where To From Here**

There are no easy answers or solutions immediately available to any of the above challenges. And I certainly do not have any answers. The solutions, and a way forward, will need to be found through conversation, consultation and discernment. If solutions are identified, we also need to be open to 'the bigger picture' and willing to embrace change and sacrifice what we have always done.

The purpose of this Pastoral Letter is to outline some of the more pressing challenges facing the parishes of the City Pastoral Region. It is the first step in a more extensive process of determining how we might best continue to embrace the mission that has been entrusted to us. The hope is that this Pastoral Letter will prompt the necessary conversations among parishioners that will ensure that all of the above issues – and others – are canvassed and talked about openly.

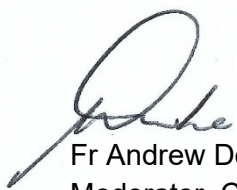
The second step of the process will be a more formal conversation and consultation sessions to be planned for towards the beginning of February 2022, where issues can be spoken of in larger groups and potential solutions identified and canvassed.

The third and final step will be a Regional Assembly towards the middle of the year. At that Assembly, the way forward can be prayerfully discerned and settled on, ready to be implemented by everyone as together we seek to move forward.

The Regional Pastoral Council will be the primary driving force of this process of discernment and decision making. Any solution to the challenges facing the City Pastoral Region must come from this process. I ask everyone to embrace the process willingly and wholeheartedly to meet the challenges facing us and find a way forward.

Above all, I invite you all to pray about the challenges facing us. If we approach the challenges facing us firmly anchored in prayer, I am confident that we will find a way of continuing to be Church, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in the inner suburbs of the City of Newcastle.

Yours sincerely in Christ,



Fr Andrew Doohan  
Moderator, City Pastoral Region

8 December 2021, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.