

A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand (extended version)

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

November 2021

Living with Covid-19 restrictions

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

Since March 2020, we have lived with significant restrictions, restrictions we have been prepared to tolerate, and that are justified, only because of the Covid-related public health risks. When public health is severely threatened, the State is legally empowered to introduce sweeping public health measures which can override personal freedoms for the sake of protecting society as a whole. Such actions are consistent with our Catholic commitment to the common good.

In what some may see as a paradox, our faith teaches us that when we willingly put aside some of our freedoms in the service of protecting others and in the interests of solidarity, we are actually realising a deeper aspect of our freedom rather than giving our freedom away. When we give ourselves in love or service to others, we fulfil a fundamental dimension of what it means to be authentically human which flows from our inherent interconnectedness with others.

Caring for and prioritising the most vulnerable

We understand that commitment to the restrictions imposed as a consequence of Covid-19 means we have all had to make significant sacrifices. We are acutely aware that certain people have carried, and continue to carry, the burdens and negative consequences of the Covid-19 restrictions more than others. Many people 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.

We acknowledge and continue to support the efforts of our government and many voluntary groups – among them church organisations – to reach out to those who have been most harmed by the Covid-19 restrictions. These include many workers and business owners, as well as those whose

mental and emotional well-being is suffering from the consequences of lockdowns. Among the latter group are people living alone as well as those cut off from their whānau, many of whom are homeless, living in transitional housing or in aged care rest homes.

We know that our rangatahi are among those most seriously affected by the disruption of their educational, social and recreational opportunities, and we need to show particular care for them.

Awareness of growing tensions

While somewhat understandable, it is of concern to us that within Aotearoa, we are starting to witness a decreasing tolerance among some people for the restrictions created by the lockdowns and other Covid-19 responses. This intolerance, which is being exhibited in a variety of behaviours, has the potential to create new divisions within our communities, including faith communities, as well as harden already existing divisions.

In response to this, and as the realisation has grown that we need a new approach to be able to live with the highly transmissible Delta variant of the Covid-19 virus, our country's public health advisers and political leaders have recently begun to move away from the strategy of 'elimination' of the Covid-19 virus. This shift relies heavily on achieving high levels of vaccination rates amongst the population to (i) reduce the transmission of the virus and (ii) lessen the severity of its effects for those who will become infected.

The push to get people vaccinated is now adding to the tensions within our communities.

Faith and Reason – the case for vaccinations

We bishops are vaccinated. We renew our call for those of you who are not yet vaccinated to do so – www.get-vaccinated-catholic.co.nz.

At the time of writing, more than five million deaths are directly attributable to the Covid-19 virus worldwide. There is also increasing evidence that up to one-third of those who catch Covid-19 suffer significant ongoing health side-effects months after infection. 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 only too well the catastrophic effects the virus has brought to countries with low or previously low vaccination rates, including our Pacific region sisters and brothers, firstly in Fiji and now in Papua New Guinea.

As the Delta variant begins to take a greater hold in our own country, there are serious concerns about the capacity of our health system to cope with the expected surge in Covid-19 hospital admissions.

As bishops, each of us has been challenged by people who disagree with our promotion of the Covid-19 vaccination programme. In forming our views about vaccination, we have closely followed advice from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Their approach applies a moral analysis, stretching back to the early Church, which stresses the interconnection between faith and reason. As articulated by Pope St John Paul II: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth."

Experts, including epidemiologists and other medical specialists, tell us that vaccinated people are about 75 per cent less likely than unvaccinated people to develop a Covid-19 infection if exposed, thereby reducing transmission rates, and over 90 per cent less likely to develop severe disease.

As of 7 November, out of a total of 4352 reported cases from the current Auckland and Waikato

outbreak, only 363 or 8 per cent were fully vaccinated. In addition, out of a total of 294 people hospitalised during the current outbreak, only eight or 3 per cent of these were fully vaccinated. (Source: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-case-demographics> - accessed 7 November 2021).

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. (Source: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html)

Vaccine choice and conscience

More recently, we have received correspondence from a small number of Catholics concerned that vaccine-mandates potentially undermine their freedom to choose as well as their right to religious and other forms of association. Some harbour concerns about the vaccine's makeup and its long-term effects. We accept that for most in this group, if not all, 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 (CCC#1781). For those who, for conscience reasons, do not want to be vaccinated but find themselves subject to the recent public health orders, the consequences of following their consciences 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.

Furthermore, the introduction of the 'My Vaccine Pass' under the Government's 'traffic light' system will mean that those who are unvaccinated may well be restricted from access to certain venues and from participation in various public events, potentially including entry into some church spaces, including Mass.

Vaccine mandates and the My Vaccine Pass

As a society, we should never uncritically accept the imposition of such restrictions by our political leaders. However, having regard to the current situation, we bishops believe that, on balance, the introduction of vaccine mandates for certain sectors, as well as the use of vaccine passes, are warranted for now.

At the same time, remaining always mindful of state overreach, and anticipating that restrictions we may consider to be warranted now may not be warranted in the future, we urge that the mandates and requirements for vaccine passes be continually reviewed. In other words, our support of these measures is contingent on, and only justified by, the emergency situation as it exists at this point in time.

As an example, identifying other sufficiently sensitive and reliable approaches to Covid-19 testing and detection may, in the future, allow for different ways of managing the risks of transmission and protecting those who are most vulnerable. Options such as rapid antigen testing, not currently included under the incoming 'traffic light' system, could then provide different and less restrictive options within the employment, social, religious, hospitality and recreational sectors for those who are not vaccinated.

Remaining unified and connected

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.

In thinking about what it means to live as the unified Body of Christ, one of the things we have learnt over the past 20 months is that our identity as communities of faith is not ultimately defined by an inability to physically gather. While our churches remain closed in some areas, and while gatherings are subject to number restrictions in other areas, Catholics around Aotearoa have creatively sought to give expression to and celebrate our unity in mind and spirit in many different ways. We must continue to create multiple alternative opportunities to prayerfully and spiritually connect and show care to our fellow Catholics, especially those who are most vulnerable.

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. Such measures, designed to minimise the spread of Covid-19, will, clearly, continue to restrict the way we ideally want to gather and worship. We have heard from many people who say they will feel unsafe and unable to attend their community church if non-vaccinated people are present. At the same time, others have expressed to us that they will feel excluded if non-vaccinated people are unable to attend.

As Church leaders, we have been struggling with how we might best and safely allow for church gatherings to take place without certain 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:

Guidelines for Catholic parishes

- 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.

