



MARONITE EPARCHY OF AUSTRALIA

**PASTORAL MESSAGE FROM BISHOP ANTOINE-CHARBEL TARABAY
TO THE CLERGY AND FAITHFUL
OF THE MARONITE EPARCHY OF AUSTRALIA
REGARDING TEMPORARY MEASURES FOR COVID-19**

24 MARCH 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Holy Spirit is still burning amongst us, Our Lady still cares for us and fills the world with the fragrance of Christ: it is for us to raise our faces and receive the graces which God is always sending. Faith, hope, and love, still abide; and cannot be locked down.

Although it may seem that the world has changed, Christ remains in our midst and that has not changed. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (Hebrews 13:8)

It is with immense sadness that our churches closed their doors from midday 23 March 2020 until further notice, following the directive of the Commonwealth and State Governments to stop all religious gatherings and close all places of worship, as part of the measures to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus.

I know that this causes great hurt and pain to you, as it does to me. I share your pain and suffering. It also broke my heart to hear that tears were shed at the news of the closure of our parish churches. Let us offer this pain as our sacrifice, especially during this Season of Lent, and approach the Eucharist with more fervour and devotion as soon as this is made possible again.

As people of hope, it is our responsibility as Christians to bear witness to Christ through our actions and take the message of Christ to the world. We are made in the image of God and our baptismal promise has clothed us in the robe of glory. Now more than ever we must remember that and remind others of it.

And this will begin at home. Many of you will become more isolated, including children. Love and patience will be essential and as Christians our love comes from God. Let us talk to each other with kindness and check on the spiritual, physical and mental well-being of one another. We thank God for the gift of technology and social media that can keep us connected to our church and our loved ones. Let us use it wisely. Let us create sacred spaces at home and dedicate time for daily prayer. Let us turn our homes into "domestic churches" where God is truly present.

The priests and I are still available for pastoral care, confessions and urgent sacraments. As we are unable to gather as a congregation to pray together, the priests and I will continue to offer daily Mass for your intentions, especially for those who have been infected by COVID-19, and for those who are taking care of them.

Temporary Liturgical and Sacramental Measures

Dispensation from Mass on Sundays and Feast Days

I remind you that all but priests are dispensed from attending Mass on Sundays and Feast Days (*in a dispensation issued on 20 March 2020*): the faithful can keep holy their Sunday by setting aside an hour for prayer at home, reading Scriptures, watching Mass on television or online, and asking God for the grace of spiritual communion. Daily masses and Sunday masses will be livestreamed through most parish Facebook pages or websites, as well as through the Facebook page of the Maronite Eparchy of Australia and website (maronite.org.au). Sunday masses in English will also be broadcast on Tele Lumiere Noursat and Aurora TV. Times will be made available soon.

Funerals and Weddings

Funerals may still be held at our churches, as may weddings, with a limit of 10 people for funerals and 5 for weddings, as directed by the Government. The church will be cleaned after every service. Please check with the clergy as to the latest rules concerning these, for the regulations and directives are always changing.

Baptisms and Confirmations

I strongly recommend that baptisms and confirmations are postponed. If there is an urgency to proceed with the baptism and confirmation, only the child/children to be baptised, godparents and parents are allowed inside the church.

If an infant is in danger of death, a priest can be contacted for an emergency baptism. If a priest is not available, even a layperson can baptise the child, pouring water over the child's forehead, and saying: "This child (*state the child's name*) is baptised a lamb in the flock of Christ, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, for eternal life. Amen."

Sacrament of Reconciliation

Parishes will continue to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confessions will occur in a dedicated room or space where the priest and the penitent can sit at a safe distance. Confession times will be made available from your parish. Prevention measures should be taken at all times.

Anointing of the Sick

As I wrote in my previous message, the priests and I will continue to offer pastoral care and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick to all Maronites who need it whilst abiding by the advice of health professionals.

When anointing the sick, priests are given permission to lay on hands by holding them above, rather than upon, the head and to anoint using a cotton wool ball and a protective glove, which can be disposed of appropriately after a single use.

Other Forms of Worship

Until further notice, no other forms of worship, not even the Holy Rosary, Stations of the Cross, or Adoration, can be attended by parishioners at our churches. The priests and clergy will hold these services in the parish churches and livestream them online. Families are also encouraged to pray these at home. Links will be made available from our website.

Safety of Priests and Staff

The safety and wellbeing of our priests, as well as our diocesan and parish staff is a priority. I am grateful to all the clergy who are continuing their ministry during these extraordinary times. I am also thankful to our staff who are still working at the parish and diocesan levels to ensure that we continue to serve our Maronite community to the best of our ability. We are taking all necessary precautions of social distancing, disinfecting services and isolating those who show any signs of illness.

Over the coming weeks, you will notice that we will be doing things differently, while making use of the technology available to us. I ask that you be patient with us as we work to prepare online resources.

If further restrictions are announced by the Government, I will issue new instructions.

Guidelines for Holy Week will be released in the coming days.

Until our doors are opened again, and we are able to celebrate Holy Mass together, let us unite in prayer for one another. Let us remember that we are people of hope and of the Resurrection. Let us seek the intercession of our Maronite and Australian saints who sought to live only on what was necessary and were consumed by the love of God.

On the eve of the Feast of the Annunciation, let us join ourselves in faith to Our Lady and entrust ourselves and our families to her maternal protection and care.

May the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless and protect you all. Amen.

With all my blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "F.B. Tarabay", enclosed within a large, loopy oval flourish.

+ Antoine-Charbel Tarabay
Maronite Bishop of Australia

For the Maronite Church's messages and prayer resources, you can visit our website maronite.org.au and the social media pages and websites of your local Maronite parish.