



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF AUCKLAND

Bishop's Office – Te Taumata o te Pihopa Katorika

Pompallier Diocesan Centre, 30 New Street, Saint Marys Bay, Auckland 1011
Private Bag 47904, Ponsonby, Auckland 1144

Telephone +64-9-360 3002

Email: bishop-secretary@cda.org.nz Website: www.aucklandcatholic.org.nz

14 May 2020

TO PRIESTS OF THE AUCKLAND DIOCESE

Dear Everyone,

We were all stunned on Monday when we heard that, with the move to Alert Level 2 in our response to the Covid-19 pandemic, religious gatherings would be restricted to a maximum of just 10 people, whereas restaurants or cinemas or malls could host far greater numbers.

The Anglican and Catholic Archbishops wrote to the Prime Minister and Members of Cabinet on Tuesday to share with them the sense of disappointment that was being felt by our priests and people. You will be aware that anger and incomprehension was also being expressed about this on various media platforms.

On Wednesday, Minister Jenny Salesa (Associate Minister of Health as well as Minister for Ethnic Communities and Associate Minister of Education), invited Cardinal John Dew and myself, and a number of other Faith Leaders, to a Zoom conference where we were joined by Dr Ashley Bloomfield, Director-General of Health, and then by the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, who had left a Cabinet meeting for this purpose.

The Prime Minister said she deeply appreciated how difficult these days were for Religious Leaders, and she knew how important Faith was in sustaining people at all times but especially at moments of great crisis, such as a death in the family or a pandemic like this.

We made the point that with social distancing and careful management we could cope with numbers far greater than 10. A Muslim leader said his people pray five times each day in the mosque, and they had felt they could cope safely with 100 worshippers.

The Prime Minister said New Zealand was still at a very 'vulnerable' stage in what she hoped would be a rapid return to normal life. She asked for patience for a little longer and hoped to review the limit of 10 when the next stage of Level 2 was announced on Monday 25 May. She hinted that, unless there was a spike in new infections, the limit of 10 would hopefully be expanded, but probably not initially to 100. This maximum would then be reviewed again after a further two weeks.

The Prime Minister was asked specifically how a restaurant could be permitted to cope with a large number of diners, separated in tables of a maximum of 10 people, whereas religious gatherings were not allowed to do the same.

She said that the difference was that, at a restaurant, people tended still to socialise just within their own 'bubble'. When we go out for a meal we chat with our companions around the table, but we do not engage with other diners at other tables.

Religious gatherings, by contrast, tended to foster fellowship as well as worship. She said she grew up in a small parish of perhaps 50 families, but they all knew one another. She regarded her parish as her extended family. When they got together it was not like a group of 10 going for a meal at a restaurant: they would all chat with one another. This made religious gatherings a slightly higher risk with this very contagious virus.

The Prime Minister said that the Cabinet was taking very seriously the distress being expressed over the restrictions for religious gatherings. She hoped that they would not continue for much longer, and again expressed her gratitude for the support that religious leaders offer for the spiritual lives of our citizens. We, in turn, thanked her and the Government for the measures they were taking to keep us safe at this challenging time.

I hope this update gives some context for the decisions that were made this week. Please God we will soon be able to gather in reasonable numbers.

Yours sincerely in Christ

+ 

**✘ Patrick Dunn
Bishop of Auckland**