

Pastoral Letter I, March 26th, 2020

Hi Everyone

This will be the first of a series of weekly pastoral letters to you all, as we enter into what appears will be an extended period of isolation for us. My purpose in writing to you is to keep you abreast of what is going on, in terms of St Ives Uniting's adaption and activities, to keep you informed as to the latest developments, internationally, nationally, and locally, and finally to advise you, when advice may be necessary.

Let me begin by explaining where we are at in terms of St Ives UC activities. As things stand, you are aware by this stage that services have been cancelled for the foreseeable future in order to ensure the safety of you all and your family members and friends. That said, the challenge before us is to maintain our community of faith as one, as we respond to these strange times. In the first instance, I shall be sending to you the order of service for each week along with the homily or reflection for the week, based upon the lectionary readings. These two documents will be emailed to your email address in the Congregational Directory. It would be good if you can check the accuracy of the email listed and advise Angela in the office, if you need to update it. The idea behind sending you the material for each Sunday, is to enable you to keep up the rhythm of worship that is so important to many of you. While at times I may refer in the homily or liturgy to the current pandemic, I am also conscious that we need to keep thinking about other things, we need to maintain a broader view, if only to engage our minds and hearts, so that not all is reduced to the constant themes of COVID-19. Accordingly, the liturgical material will remain first of all 'theological' in the best sense of the terms, addressing questions of faith.

Beyond this material, I am in the process of organizing a live streaming of a brief service for each Sunday morning, probably through YouTube. For those of you who are acquainted with this technology, this will be a step forward in maintaining our community together on-line. For those of you who are unacquainted, we will address this with instructions as to how to access the YouTube stream when the time comes. I hope to have this up and running by Palm Sunday.

As to pastoral needs; I am available to you via email and also my home number of 91442705. Like you, I shall be home most of the time, and shall respond to your calls through the day and evening. We also have a pastoral team, which has been organized to respond to your needs and is available to talk with you over the phone when needed. Further, we are structured to be able to respond to needs you may have with regard to supermarket products, if you are unable to access them. For your information, Seng Eng Low is the co-ordinator of the PC Team. Her number is.....

Moving to the changing situation, we are now entering 'the tunnel' where the incidence of Corona will increase. Our success or otherwise in stemming the virus will be clear within the next week or so. If the measures taken thus far do not see a decrease in the rate of infection, it seems fairly clear that the NSW government will take further measures approaching what is considered Stage 3, meaning an effective lock-down, as exists in many other countries. On the evidence it appears that Sydney may carry the brunt of the virus, simply because of the size of the population as well as the significance of the city as a hub for social and business interaction. While this may cause you alarm, it is important to keep in mind that central to

this escalating situation is the fact that if 80% of us follow the strict guidelines of remaining at home, apart from a necessary visit to the supermarket, pharmacy or medical services, the virus will be contained within a period of about 13 weeks: in other words, the future is very much in our hands as individuals. With disciplined compliance, this tunnel may be considerably shortened.

Finally, may I indulge in an insight that I think is acutely relevant for our times, as we see people lose their composure and self-control, 'looking after No. 1', whether in supermarkets, pharmacies, medical consultancy offices and the like, and as we run the risk of losing our own. Some 250 years ago, the Christian philosopher, Immanuel Kant, formulated his principle of what he referred to as the "Categorical Imperative". This took three forms, one with which you would be familiar: that we should treat human beings as ends in themselves not just means to an end (the humanity principle). There is another form or explanation that Kant gives for ethical behaviour, called something as obscure as the "universalization principle", but which is really quite simple and very practical. It is,

"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

Put simply, the question is this: is your proposed action conceivable if it were done by everyone, by the mass of the population? If not, if it cannot be done by everyone without causing harm, then it fails the test of what is ethical. As I shopped the other day, and saw people hysterically rushing to grab items, including toilet paper, I asked Kant's question: if we all make a grab for the products our anxiety demands at the moment, will there be any thing left? Is this sustainable? Is it ethical? The answer flashed back in an instant...No!

We are in tough times, but not as tough as many. Let's keep control of ourselves! As psychologists often say to their patients. "This will pass".

Geoff