



Friday 25 September 2020
The Premier, The Hon Daniel Andrews
Office of the Premier
1 Treasury Place
Melbourne VIC 3002
By email: daniel.andrews@parliament.vic.gov.au

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PREMIER FROM THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF VICTORIA

Dear Premier,

It has been very encouraging to see COVID-19 numbers dropping so dramatically in recent weeks. We are grateful for the efforts and commitment of the government and health officials in containing the second wave of the pandemic, and for the clear leadership you have provided personally in your daily communication updates for all Victorians.

Throughout the various changes in restrictions over the last six months, the Catholic dioceses of Victoria have shown themselves to be resilient, well-managed and safe, carefully communicating each set of restrictions and ensuring their implementation, even when this caused much hardship.

However, people of faith across regional and metropolitan Victoria have raised serious concerns about the unfairness and inconsistency in the numbers allowed for religious gatherings by comparison with other sectors in the current 'third step'. We are being asked what the reason is for this dramatic difference, and we are unable to provide an answer, even after several meetings with DHHS in which we have sought explanations.

Over the last two weeks, we have worked cooperatively with members of the government and health authorities, and have resolved a number of inconsistencies and communication difficulties. However, a pressing need remains to address the unfairness of the disparity in numbers.

In the most simple of measures, the current restrictions in regional Victoria literally fail the 'pub test': if people of faith can gather in a restaurant or bar catering for a particular number of patrons (and remove their face covering), they ought to be able to put on their mask, cross the road and worship in their faith community with the same numbers, provided equivalent COVID-19 safe practices are in place.

We ask that this disparity be rectified urgently and that the principle of fairness be applied for each subsequent step on the roadmap to reopening. Catholic communities have shown their commitment to acting responsibly and cooperatively throughout the pandemic, and they will be greatly encouraged in this if they can see that people of faith are being given the same consideration as other sectors of the community.

You remain in our prayers and we look forward to finding a constructive solution to this issue, which is causing unnecessary pain and distress for people of faith across Victoria.

Yours sincerely,

Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE

Most Rev Paul Bernard Bird CSsR MA, DD
BISHOP OF BALLARAT

Most Rev Shane Mackinlay
BISHOP OF SANDHURST

Rev Peter Slater
DELEGATE OF DIOCESAN ADMINISTRATOR,
SALE