



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Walking together in Lent and Covid-19

As Lent commences, I send my prayers to you, mindful of the sorrow so many feel that we are unable to gather for Ash Wednesday due to the restrictions currently in place in the State of Victoria. We commence Lent in the shadow of the epidemic and while we cannot gather for our usual Ash Wednesday Masses and distribution of ashes, may our hearts be well disposed to undertake this journey into the “desert” of this time which prepares us to celebrate the great joy of Easter.

We are thankful for the lifting of the restrictions of the last five days in Victoria, so we will be able to bless and distribute ashes on the first Sunday of Lent, or as prescribed in the Roman Missal with the celebration of the Word and distribution Outside of Mass (pg 236).

We are all mindful of the shared efforts of so many throughout the Covid-19 pandemic who have worked to ensure our safety, care and those who develop our community response. Pope Francis has reflected upon Covid-19 in his book, *Let Us Dream – The Path to a Better Future* (2020) and he explores the spiritual and social dimensions of the crisis. He offers his reflection on how he hopes we may emerge from this time working with others for the betterment of the world. Perhaps this is something we can take into our prayer during this Lenten period.

There has been discussion in the media about the application of the vaccines now arriving in Australia and soon to be distributed. In December 2020 the Holy See prepared a response which grappled with the questions which had been posed from various pastoral, moral and ethical positions.

In exploring the impact of the crisis, the Holy See identified the terrible suffering of many, the deaths of thousands, the strain on health care professionals and the necessity for nations to seek a way together to fight the virus through the development of vaccines. They reviewed the development of vaccines and determined that those who receive the vaccine are not morally complicit or responsible for the manner of their development which was in response to a world crisis. The advice, mindful of the freedom and rights of individuals, is based upon the principle of the common good. They propose that in choosing to receive the vaccine we in turn participate in the reduction of the spread of the virus and the care of our brothers and sisters. You may wish to read the text by visiting: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html

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Similarly the Catholic Bishops' Conference has previously endorsed the distribution of the vaccine to those able to safely receive the vaccine: <https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/a-letter-to-the-faithful-regarding-development-of-a-covid-19-vaccine/#more-8597>

Understandably some people are nervous about the vaccine, while others anticipate with hope its wide distribution. We are asked to trust in the professional skills of our medical professionals and scientists. The freedom of choice to receive the vaccine is ours and we consider the responsibility we have toward others when we make our decision. There are those whose personal health and other issues which should be carefully considered and discussed with their medical advisors.

As the vaccines begin to be distributed, we remain mindful of those front-line health professionals who continue to support the efforts of keeping Australians safe and work toward the eradication of the virus. The Government has outlined the proposed roll-out of the vaccination, and we are mindful that each person who is vaccinated contributes the common good of all Australians, and therefore, our brothers and sister across the world.

Let us accompany one another throughout these days of Lent and keep our gaze upon Jesus who through his gentle accompaniment transforms our sin, suffering and dying into the promise of life.

With every peace in Christ,

Bishop Greg Bennet
Bishop of Sale