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To the Parishioners of St. Joseph's, Oatley

29th April 2020

As the closure of our Parish Churches as a consequence of the present global pandemic and the need for us all to self-isolate, the absence of the spiritual nourishment we receive in the Sacraments, particularly the Sacrament of the Eucharist, is most sharply felt. Many parishes have responded in a number of creative ways by providing Mass through streaming on social media, and many people have been able to participate at home with their computers, iPhones, or iPads. During these presentations we can at least make a spiritual communion, but this makes us hunger even more for the presence of Christ really, truly, and substantially in the Sacrament to the Eucharist by the physical reception of Holy Communion. The Catholic Church, as with the Orthodox Churches, as well as being Evangelical, are also Sacramental, that is the celebration of the Sacraments is the purpose of the Church's liturgical life, and the summit and source of our life is the Eucharist. This pandemic has driven home the importance we place on our Christian Community as the Body of Christ, gathered around the table of the Lord, to offer to God the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and to offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. As St. Paul's says in his first letter to the Christian Community in Corinth "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (*1 Cor 10:16-17*)". For us Catholics it is always the Mass that matters, and our spiritual nourishment is the food that the Lord's provides which we receive sacramentally in the Eucharist. I suppose the adage holds true here that "absence makes the heart grow fonder". When this pandemic is finally defeated and we can once again gather without restrictions in our parish Churches, I suspect that our appreciation of community, Mass, and the Eucharist, will be greatly enhanced and reinvigorated.

Apart from the Eucharist, we have also been separated from the normal opportunities we have of participating in the Other Sacraments the Lord has provided for our sanctification. The gateway to all the sacraments is the Sacrament of Baptism. Since the beginning of the lockdowns all Baptism have been suspended indefinitely, unless extraordinary circumstances prevail (*in danger of death*). Oatley Parish usually has a high number of Baptisms, and this year some have had to be postponed until the Church can reopen again. Sadly, the many parishes who have an RCIA program, those adults who had been prepared for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) to take place at the Easter Vigil Ceremonies on Holy Saturday night, had to be placed in abeyance.

About this time, the Children in our parish and state schools would have been preparing for their first Holy Communion, and later in the year the older children would be prepared for Confirmation. Unfortunately, these are now put on hold until there is a clear indication that our Church can reopen for these special celebrations which the children and their families can fully participate. Several of our children have already expressed to me their disappointment.

While there are no marriages currently booked for the Oatley Church, I do have one wedding later in the year to be celebrated in another Church. Hopefully, the restrictions may have lifted by then. At present marriages can only be celebrated with a few people – such as the celebrant, the bride and groom, and two witnesses, and with no wedding reception afterwards. Over the board, many weddings have been postponed with much inconvenience and sometimes expense to the couples concerned.

Pastoral care of the sick has always been a priority of the parish clergy. Visiting the sick in hospitals, nursing homes, and at home where Holy Communion is given and received, and the administration of the Sacrament of the Sick is of great comfort to those who are incapacitated and unable to participate in the Eucharist with the rest of the Community. At present I can only take Holy Communion to the sick in cases of serious necessity. Our Nursing Homes, as we have seen, can be places of high risk for the Coronavirus, and thus visits from outside are not encouraged. I do have some of our parishioners who cannot attend Mass that I regularly visit for Holy Communion, but at present my visits have been suspended. I look forward, as they do themselves, to a time when I can resume these visits.

Funerals have also been affected. When a loved one dies the whole Christian Community shares in the grief and offers Mass for the eternal repose of their soul. Additionally, it would be the wish of the family to publicly remember and celebrate the life of the one they loved. This has not been possible in the present circumstances. However, Masses are always offered for the deceased, even though not many may be present.

Whilst the Church remains closed, the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation) in its ordinary form (individual confession) is generally unavailable for our parishioners. Nevertheless, if someone wishes to make a Confession this can be arranged privately by contacting me personally on the presbytery number 9580 1864. The Church's teaching regarding the forgiveness of sins is that there must be an acknowledgement of our sin, true sorrow for the same, a firm purpose of amendment, and the reception of Sacramental absolution. We are obliged to confess all serious sins to the Priest in the Confessional but if this is impossible at the time, a good and perfect Act of Contrition will suffice. However, we will need to receive Sacramental absolution from a Priest whenever this is timely and possible. A good practice for all Catholics is to examine their consciences each night before going to bed and making a good Act Contrition for their sins and omissions.

Whilst we are deprived of the spiritual benefits we derive from the Sacraments, we can still draw great strength from the Word of God. I encourage you all to read the Scripture readings set for the Sunday Mass which can be found each week in the bulletin on the parish website (*bulletins*) www.stjosephschurch.com.au and to pray the prayers of the Mass. Also, daily reading of the Scriptures and prayerful reflection is recommended. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the early Christian Community ".....was of one heart and mind".....they devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles, and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." (*cf Acts 4:32, 2:42*) During this time of isolation, we may not be able to gather as a community for the breaking of the bread, we can, at least, be faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, to the prayers and to the Word.

Once again, I would like to assure you of my prayers and best wishes during our separation. I offer Mass every day for you and in all my Masses I pray a special prayer for all those affected by the Coronavirus, for all those working to defeat it, and especially for all those who have died because of it. Please heed the instructions and various restrictions given by Government and Health Authorities and keep well and safe.

Fr. Paul.

If you wish to donate to the Church Account (Second Collection) there is a Bpoint facility on the website www.stjosephschurch.com.au under "Donations" on the menu. Please follow the links. If you do not wish to make an internet or online payment, please email the