

Open Letter to the Parishioners of Lilydale and Healesville

To my dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

How strange and trying are the times in which we live?! In one week, the Church will enter the most sacred time of the year, as we accompany Our Lord through the Holy Triduum, from the darkness of His passion and death, into the dazzling light of His glorious Resurrection. And yet, we know that this will be a Holy Week quite like any other.

For a priest to begin a new parish assignment on the eve of Holy Week would present a real pastoral challenge even in the best of circumstances. To do so in the middle of a global pandemic with a ban on all public liturgies and sacraments looks to me like a Divine April Fool's Day prank. God clearly has a sense of humour, having me start on 1st April! This is definitely not what I envisaged for my first Easter in a new parish. Could any of us have guessed even three months ago that the doors of every church in the country would be closed for Easter? I think we are all justified in nursing a little anxiety in these current circumstances. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by change and uncertainty in these times? Perhaps some of you feel that having to take on the burden of a new priest was the very last thing you needed?!

Understandably, parishioners are always concerned when a new priest arrives. What will he be like? What will he change? Does he understand the way we do things here? All these questions are quite natural, because a parish is a spiritual 'home' – and we don't take kindly to interlopers coming in and rearranging the furniture! But every priest who comes into a parish will bring his own personality: his talents, and (alas) his own short-comings. I beg your forgiveness in advance! Change is always unsettling, but it also provides an opportunity for growth. I am quite confident that God, in His inscrutable wisdom, has chosen me for this parish, at this particular time of crisis. He will want to use this situation to help me grow as a pastor of souls. I pray and hope that God will also use this situation to help each of us more perfectly conform ourselves to the Divine Will. Pandemic or no pandemic, God is still God. He can use everything in His providence to school us in the way of Christian discipleship.

These quiet months ahead will give me an opportunity to settle in and survey the land of these vast parishes, and attend to a range of maintenance and planning matters. More importantly, I will endeavour to make contact with as many of you as possible in this interim period, by whatever means possible. I am eager to meet you, to hear your concerns, share your burdens, and if possible offer real practical assistance. Without the presence of a visible congregation my work as a priest may seem rather limited. In such times one must remember that the Holy Spirit is the principle agent of 'action' in the life of the Church. The working of the Holy Spirit is not constrained by dint of plague, pestilence, war or famine; on the contrary the workings of God's grace continues in the silence of our hearts whenever we come before God, and call upon him from the depths of our souls. The greatest thing the priest can do for the faithful in such times of trial is to intercede in prayer for his people.

With this truth in mind, today, on my first official day in the Parish I made a solemn act of consecration of the two parishes to the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the intercession of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In doing so I consecrated all of you and your families, and placed you under the maternal protection of the Mother of God according to the following Act:

*“O Immaculate, Mother of the Church and Queen of Heaven,
we join together as a parish family to consecrate ourselves to your Immaculate Heart.
We consecrate to you all that we are, all that we have,
all that we love, our bodies, our hearts, our souls.
To you we consecrate our families, our priests, our religious
and all who serve in our parish ministries.
We entrust to you the sick and dying,
and the souls of the faithful departed of our entire parish.
We desire that everyone may come to know you more fully
and share in the benefits of your intercession of love.
So that our consecration may be truly effective and persevering,
and so that it may bear the fruits of a rich interior life,
today we renew our consecrations as Christians through the Baptismal promises.
We promise to follow with joy and humility the truths of the Catholic Church,
always showing fidelity to the teaching of the Holy Father, our Bishop and the Magisterium.
We promise to show you faithful devotion,
to listen to the word of God and to read it attentively,
to obey God’s commandments, to participate in the feast of the Church,
to seek the strength of the sacraments, specially Reconciliation and the Eucharist.
We pray that we may always be ready to offer our prayers, sacrifices and sufferings
to bring about the triumph of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in our souls
and in those of our sisters and brothers, in our parish and the entire world. Amen”*

In writing this letter I want to assure you of my daily prayers. Every day I will continue to offer Mass in the church at St Patrick’s where I will bring to the altar the intentions of all the parishioners. I further pledge to you a daily holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament for the sanctification of the two parishes. May I ask, of your charity, for you to pray for me too? Pray that I may be a faithful shepherd of the flock entrusted to me, that I may help you come to know, love and serve Christ more perfectly. I look forward eagerly to the opportunity to be able to meet you, once this becomes practically possible. In the meantime, if there is anything that I and the parish team can do to support you please don’t hesitate to get in touch. I look forward to meeting each of you!

Yours in Christ,

Fr Francis Denton
Administrator of St Patrick’s, Lilydale and St Brigid’s, Healesville

1st April 2020