

MESSAGE FROM ARCHBISHOP ANTHONY FISHER O.P.

**RE: TODAY'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE NSW GOVERNMENT'S COVID
"FREEDOM PLAN"
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PLACES AND ACTIVITIES OF WORSHIP**

Dear friends in Christ,

Announcements have been made today about Sydney beginning to reopen once 70% of the adult population has had two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, and foreshadowing further easing once we reach 80%. The roadmap states that places of worship will be included in this reopening.

In discussions with the NSW Government and NSW Health, I joined other religious leaders in insisting that worship is an essential service, not mere recreation for many people. We explained that all our faiths are inclined to allow all comers to worship, that many pastors and faithful would be uneasy with restricting worship to the fully vaccinated, and that doing so could prove very divisive. With Anglican Archbishop Kaniska Raffel, I would insist that "Jesus is Lord of all, and his gospel is a gospel for all. A 'No Entry' sign at the door of the church is wholly inconsistent with the Gospel preached inside." Race, gender, ethnicity, age, education, wealth or health status (including vaccination) must not be points of division within the Christian community or barriers to communion with Christ Jesus.

We are working with a leading infectious diseases and risk management specialist to devise a plan that would allow for safe reopening of churches and safe return to worship for all. Some easing of restrictions on both outside and indoor Masses is on the near horizon. Greater numbers will also be allowed at weddings and funerals. And other sacraments (e.g. Baptism and Confirmation) and devotions should also be possible.

We expect that clergy will continue to be allowed to deliver pastoral care in people's homes.

The religious leaders have undertaken to do all we can to ensure that places and activities of worship are safe, to promote reliable information about vaccination and other preventative measures, and to people to avail themselves of these. I repeat my exhortation to clergy to be vaccinated to ensure that they can provide pastoral care in venues such as churches and schools, hospitals and aged care homes going forward.

Many people in recent weeks have communicated their longing for a return to Mass, and I know that our clergy are eager to welcome people back. I will continue to work with other faith leaders to advocate on your behalf. When we have something more concrete, I will let you know. In the meantime, please do not be too concerned or jump to any conclusions over media reports. There is still a long way to go before NSW reaches 70% and then 80%.

Please also pray for your church and civic leaders as we aim to work together to have our churches and community open and functioning again. With the other bishops and priests I am praying daily for you.