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**Pastoral Letter by
The Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

COVID19 Lockdown & Perth Bushfires

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It was during lunch in the Cathedral presbytery on Sunday that I heard the news that a new lockdown for Perth, the Peel region and the South-West would begin that evening at 6.00pm. Like many of you I was disappointed but not really surprised. The COVID19 virus is obviously highly contagious and while we here in WA have managed to keep it largely under control there was always the very real possibility that it would break free and threaten our community.

When the news broke, our thoughts naturally would have turned initially to our own situation, as we began to think about how we and our immediate family and friends would manage the stresses and strains of another period of lockdown. Last year, when we faced a similar situation, although there were reports of panic buying in the shops at first, most people quickly adapted, though not always without difficulty. It will be the same this time. Thankfully the selfish instinct to look only to our own needs quickly gives way to a concern for others, especially those who are most deeply affected. We think, for example, of the sick and elderly who will once again be isolated and cut off from the comfort of family and friends. We think, too, of the “front-line workers” in our hospitals and health-care facilities, those who are working hard to make COVID19 testing as widely available as possible, those who work in our quarantine hotels, those who keep our supermarket shelves stocked and the check-outs open, and so many others. In particular, we think of parents of school-aged children, especially those whose children were preparing for their first day at primary or secondary school. Lots of tears will be shed.

The dreadful fires on the northern and north-eastern outskirts of the city are compounding the already difficult situation we are all facing. At the time of writing over seventy homes are reported as having been lost. Many people have been evacuated and livelihoods are once again threatened. The sense of uncertainty, threat and dislocation, already heightened by the lockdown, must feel almost unbearable for many affected directly by the fires. And yet, once again, we are hearing stories of great courage and self-sacrifice as people, including of course the fire-fighters and other volunteers, do their best, in difficult circumstances, to look after each other.

The situation we are all facing inevitably brings with it significant suffering. In relation to the lockdown in particular, I am very conscious of those who have lost a loved-one through death



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and who are deprived of the chance to attend a funeral and draw comfort from the presence of family and friends. A special prayer for people in this situation would be an act of solidarity and charity.

Isolation and social distancing, important though they are in controlling the spread of the virus, will always run counter to our deepest instincts. *"It is not good for the man to be alone"* says God in the story of creation in Genesis, *"I will make him a helper as his partner"*. Reflecting this understanding the poet John Donne famously wrote, *"No man is an island, entire of itself"*. That we are made for others, and only find our true meaning and purpose in our relationship with others, is absolutely foundational to our Christian understanding of what it is to be human. Ultimately this is what it means to believe that we are made in the image and likeness of God, for God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is a communion of self-giving love. It is in this image that we are made: we can only truly be ourselves when we are caught up in giving ourselves away in love to others.

The challenge, and opportunity, of the present lockdown is precisely this: that it offers us a chance to put into practice this basic truth of our identity. We will be who and what God created us to be when, in the face of suffering, of confusion, and of fear, we look beyond ourselves to the needs of others and do what we can to respond to those needs. *"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies,"* says Jesus, *"it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it produces much fruit"* (John 12:24). As we grapple with the ongoing repercussions of the bushfires, and particularly of the present lockdown, and as we continue to make personal sacrifices for the welfare of our wider community and society, it will at times feel like the "dying" of which Jesus speaks. But he has promised us that our sacrifices will produce good fruit - and the Lord is always faithful to his promises.

We are a people of hope and of trusting faith. We are a people who believe in the power of prayer and in the power of love in action. Because of the lockdown we are largely confined to our homes and our opportunities for showing our love in practical ways may be limited, though they will certainly still be there. Our opportunities to unite ourselves in prayer with our suffering brothers and sisters, on the other hand, may be greatly enhanced. Let us pray for each other, and for all those in need at this time, with constancy and trusting faith. Let us ask the Lord to provide us with opportunities to show the sincerity of our prayer by reaching out to others in any way we can.

May the Lord's peace be with us all at this time.

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