

# A Tale of Two Pandemics: The Impact of Spanish Flu and COVID-19 on Religious Observance

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

COVID-19 is the worst pandemic Australia has faced since the pneumonic influenza pandemic of just over a century ago, commonly referred to as ‘Spanish flu’. Up until 2020, present-day Australians wanting to understand what it was like to live through a major pandemic, such as the Spanish flu, could do so only by browsing old newspaper reports or reading one of the few written accounts of life back then or by watching grainy film footage of men and women wearing masks. Now, it is a lived reality. But how different is the current experience from that of a century ago?

The question can be examined from many perspectives: politics, economics, sociology, medical science, sport, etc. For Catholics, a pertinent area of inquiry is the impact of the pandemic on religious observance. Following the arrival of COVID-19 public health orders were issued in March 2020 prohibiting gatherings for public worship, limiting numbers attending weddings and funerals, and closing churches even to private prayer. Accepted without public protest, these restrictions remained in place for almost three months before being relaxed in stages.<sup>1</sup> Was it the same during the Spanish flu? Did people go without

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 ADB *Australian Dictionary of Biography*  
 CW *Catholic Weekly* (Sydney)  
 GG *Government Gazette* (New South Wales)

Mass? Were they locked out of their churches? And how did they respond?

This article looks at religious observance during the Spanish flu, particularly as it related to the Catholic Church in Sydney, and considers how that experience compares with COVID-19.

### *Spanish Flu Arrives in Sydney*<sup>2</sup>

Australia's first case of Spanish flu outside the nation's quarantine stations was likely admitted to hospital in Melbourne on 9 January 1919, though it was not diagnosed as such at the time. Ten days later, there were fifty to one hundred cases. Commonwealth and Victorian health authorities initially believed the outbreak was a local variety of influenza prevalent in late 1918. Consequently, it was 28 January before Victoria notified the Commonwealth of the presence of pneumonic influenza, as required by a 1918 federal–state agreement designed to coordinate state responses, including border closures, to prevent its spread.

In the meantime, travellers from Melbourne had carried the disease to New South Wales. On 25 January newspapers in Sydney reported that a returned soldier from Melbourne was in hospital at Randwick with suspected pneumonic influenza. On the following Monday, after the soldier's diagnosis had been confirmed, the New South Wales government notified the Commonwealth of the presence of pneumonic influenza in its state.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Government Acts and the Churches Respond*

The next day the governor issued a proclamation under the *Public Health Act 1902* (NSW) ordering all libraries, schools, churches, theatres, public halls, and places of indoor public entertainment in metropolitan Sydney to close and stay closed until further order.<sup>4</sup> This proclamation was quickly followed by restrictions on travel from Victoria, social distancing requirements to be observed in places of assembly, including hotel bars, a requirement to wear a face mask in public, and the closure of the city's racecourses.<sup>5</sup>

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CPS	<i>Catholic Press</i> (Sydney)
DTS	<i>Daily Telegraph</i> (Sydney)
FJS	<i>Freeman's Journal</i> (Sydney)
SAA	Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, box A0562, folder 'Kelly Papers: Influenza Quarantine 1918'
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> .

1. At the time of writing public health orders continue to limit the number of people permitted to attend church services, weddings and funerals.
2. For the advent and course of Spanish flu in New South Wales, see New South Wales Department of Public Health, *Report on the Influenza Epidemic in New South Wales in 1919* (Sydney: Govt Printer, 1920); Robyn Arrowsmith, *A Danger Greater than War: N.S.W. and the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic* (Curtin, ACT: Australian Homeland Security Research Centre, 2007).
3. *Sm*, 25 January 1919, 6; 27 January 1919, 5.
4. *GG*, 28 January 1919, 591.
5. *GG*, 30 January 1919, 593, 594; 30 January 1919, 737.

Generally, the Sydney restrictions were received without demur, even from church authorities whose churches and schools (due to go back after the summer holidays) were ordered closed. In fact, church leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, welcomed the measures and recommended the public comply with them. The Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Michael Kelly, wrote to the Minister for Health, J.D. Fitzgerald, assuring him that the archdiocese was 'prepared to regulate Church functions in accordance with public orders [and] to assist in every way called for'.<sup>6</sup> A grateful minister thanked the archbishop for 'the splendid patriotic lead you gave your fellow citizens in respect of the offer you made to conform to all rules laid down for safety of the people'.<sup>7</sup> In obedience to the government's proclamation, and with the approval of the minister, the churches put in place arrangements to hold their Sunday services in the open air.

This was a minor inconvenience compared to the closure of schools, which presented a particular problem for the Catholic Church. Its schools were mostly staffed by nuns and teaching brothers dependent on school fees for their sustenance. Parents were therefore urged to pay their children's fees even though the schools were not open, and later a special collection was held throughout the archdiocese.<sup>8</sup>

Remarkably, the closure of churches does not appear to have affected the holding of weddings and funerals. Family notices and gossip columns in the press indicate they continued to be held inside churches.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Testing Times: Paganism and Public Health***

The initial atmosphere of cooperation between church and state soon evaporated, however, following a meeting of the Cabinet on Saturday, 1 February. On the advice of its expert advisory body, the Consultative Medical Council (CMC), the Cabinet decided to prohibit forthwith both indoor and outdoor church services in metropolitan Sydney. Curiously, hotel bars, restaurants and tea houses were permitted to remain open, though subject to social distancing rules, and no restrictions were placed on the free use of the beaches.

Reports of the Cabinet meeting were published in that evening's newspapers and large-print government advertisements publicising the changes appeared in

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6. FJS, 30 January 1919, 23.

7. Letter, 1 February 1919, J.D. Fitzgerald to Archbishop Kelly, SAA.

8. FJS, 20 February 1919, 14; 27 February 1919, 21; 27 February 1919, 22. In May 1919 the archdiocese lodged with the Department of Education a claim for compensation totalling £21,850 for ten weeks of lockdown, which it claimed affected 30,000 children and 746 teachers in 119 primary schools plus 5300 children and 301 teachers in 36 high schools. The claim noted that 892 of the teachers were religious and 155 were lay (Copy letter, 14 May 1919, to Peter Board, Director of Education, SAA).

9. Weddings: SMH, 15 February 1919, 12; 25 February 1919, 6; 15 March 1919, 18; FJS, 6 March 1919, 24. Funerals: SMH, 10 February 1919, 5; 17 February 1919, 5.

the Sunday papers.<sup>10</sup> Protestant Churches for the most part complied with the new restrictions. However, open-air Masses went ahead at St Mary's Cathedral and in some suburban parishes. The cathedral administrator, Fr John O'Gorman, told the press that the last-minute notice of the government's change of mind was insufficient.<sup>11</sup>

Patrick Minahan, president of the Catholic Club and a former Labor member of the Legislative Assembly, described the government's decision as 'the latest piece of stupidity', adding, 'It is just as well for the Government to know that there is no human organisation competent to interfere successfully with Catholics hearing Mass in the open air'.<sup>12</sup> John Meagher, a leading Catholic from Bathurst and a member of the Legislative Council, said he was glad that Mass had been celebrated at St Mary's Cathedral and claimed that with its proclamation the New South Wales government had raised 'the flag of paganism in the face of the impending epidemic'.<sup>13</sup>

The *Catholic Press* took up the cudgels, reprinting Minahan's protest under the headline, 'The Act of a Pagan Government'. In its editorial entitled, 'The Mass and the Epidemic: Is Paganism to Triumph?', it claimed that the 'positive and hearty cooperation' of the Catholic body as promised by Archbishop Kelly could be relied on only 'so long as the arrangements proposed are not antagonistic to the natural or divine law'.<sup>14</sup>

One of the paper's regular columnists described the government's announcement as 'the most asinine decree ever issued by a responsible body' and questioned the logic of allowing people to dine in restaurants and to ride in crowded trains, trams and ferries to thronged beaches, where masks would be discarded, while prohibiting masked churchgoers, observing physical distancing, to assemble out of doors for worship.<sup>15</sup>

The *Freeman's Journal* was also scathing in its criticism of the government's 'extreme and panic-stricken action', which it claimed had 'occasioned considerable surprise and resentment'. It reported that on Tuesday (4 February) Fr O'Gorman had interviewed the Minister for Health seeking change, but without success. In its editorial headed, 'The Pagans and the Plague: Our Health Department's Attack on Religious Worship', the newspaper let its anger be known, drawing a comparison with the 'spirit of paganism which manifested itself when the Federal Quarantine authorities determined to bar

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10. *Sun*, 1 February 1919, 5; *Sunday Times*, 2 February 1919, 7.

11. DTS, 3 February 1919, 4; CPS, 6 February 1919, 27; FJS, 6 February 1919, 19. The CPS reported that 'the clergy could not accept a mere statement such as this, appearing in an evening newspaper, as definite, official or binding' (CPS, 6 February 1919, 27).

12. *Sun*, 3 February 1919, 5.

13. CPS, 6 February 1919, 27.

14. CPS, 6 February 1919, 19, 26.

15. CPS, 6 February 1919, 23.

ministers of religion from the sick and dying at North Head some little time back'.<sup>16</sup>

This was a reference to an incident in early December 1918 when federal authorities refused to permit a priest to enter the Sydney quarantine station to administer the last rites to Annie Egan, a Catholic nurse who had contracted Spanish flu while caring for patients from overseas who on arrival had been diagnosed with the disease. The affair had caused a major political controversy when Archbishop Kelly had then attempted to enter the quarantine station to minister to dying patients, only to be turned away. In the end the government relented and permitted clergymen to enter on strict conditions.<sup>17</sup> At that time Catholics and Protestants had complained of the influence of paganism in the federal government; now the charge was being directed at the New South Wales government.

Notwithstanding Archbishop Kelly's forthright public leadership during the quarantine station affair, he was relatively quiescent when the church-services issue arose. At the time, he was on vacation, but was staying at Manly, having cancelled a planned trip to Tasmania due to restrictions on travel. Even so, he agreed to a request by Health Minister Fitzgerald to call on him to explain the government's position.<sup>18</sup> That was on Wednesday, 5 February. Although Kelly told the minister that the Catholic people were upset by the government's prohibition of outdoor Masses and explained his reasons for deprecating such action, he issued a public statement in the most anodyne terms: 'We shall, as promised, conform to public order. The people, it appears from letters posted to us, would be encouraged by the Mass, and on the contrary will be saddened by any hindrance to their assisting at it'.<sup>19</sup>

The Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Dr John Wright, who too was on leave, stranded in Tasmania, also remained silent on the church-services issue, even though his absence did not prevent him from publicly opposing the Royal Agricultural Society's plan to open the Easter Show on Good Friday.<sup>20</sup> However, his vicar general, Archdeacon d'Arcy Irvine, did write to the government asking for the removal of the prohibition on open-air services and the *Church Standard*

16. FJS, 6 February 1919, 19, 21.

17. The affair is recounted in Jeff Kildea, 'Archbishop Kelly and the Quarantine Station Incident of 1918', *Australasian Catholic Record* 75, no. 3 (July 1998): 326–34.

18. Fitzgerald was a Catholic in good standing with the church. He had publicly supported Kelly's stand in December. Curiously, the Catholic papers did not target him or resort to shaming him over the government's decision to close the churches, perhaps accepting he was just a single voice in the Cabinet. See Bede Nairn, 'Fitzgerald, John Daniel (Jack) (1862–1922)', ADB.

19. Letter, 3 February 1919, Fr O'Gorman to Archbishop Kelly, SAA; Copy letter, 6 February 1919, Archbishop Kelly to J.D. Fitzgerald, SAA; FJS, 6 February 1919, 19.

20. *Sun*, 30 January 1919, 8; DTS, 8 February 1919, 7; *Evening News*, 21 February 1919, 4. During the epidemic Wright contracted pneumonic influenza and suffered bouts of respiratory illness for the rest of his life (Stephen E. Judd, 'Wright, John Charles (1861–1933)', ADB).

complained about the one-sided regulations which closed the churches for worship but allowed hotel bars to open.<sup>21</sup>

In the wake of the protests, the government let it be known that Cabinet was giving the church-services matter further consideration. It also ordered the closure of licensed premises. However, by Thursday (6 February) the government again changed tack, with Fitzgerald announcing that the question of church services on Sundays had been definitely settled and that there were to be no services either indoors or in the open.<sup>22</sup>

After some priests indicated they intended to defy the order and celebrate Mass, Kelly issued an instruction to observe the prohibition, which was obeyed.<sup>23</sup> This followed the intervention of the apostolic delegate, Archbishop Bartolomeo Cattaneo, whom Fitzgerald had approached on Friday night. Cattaneo sent Kelly an urgent letter warning of ‘the tremendous responsibility you would bear if in the wake of the infringement of the government prescription, God forbid, there occurred a considerable increase in cases of influenza’.<sup>24</sup> The Protestant denominations also complied with the regulation.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps for the first time since the founding of the colony, no church services were held in Sydney that Sunday. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, ‘the absence of the cheerful clamour of church-bells and the patter on the pavements of church-going feet was a source of concern to thousands to whom Sunday devotional gatherings are more than a mere matter of form’.<sup>26</sup>

Not all Catholics agreed with Kelly’s compliant approach to the government’s edict. A letter to him signed ‘One of the Flock’ declared, ‘We Catholics of Sydney were shocked to learn that you had given in to the laws of a Pagan Government’. The author contrasted Kelly’s current position with his ‘noble stand’ in the Egan affair. Another correspondent, Kate Pierce, compared the situation to the penal days, adding, ‘Truly this may be called “Black Sunday” for the Catholics of Sydney’.<sup>27</sup>

Although the law was obeyed that day, churchmen continued to lobby the government to amend the order to permit religious services in the open air. Even Archbishop Cattaneo saw fit to enter the public debate, sending a strongly worded letter to the minister that was published in the press:

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21. SMH, 10 February 1919, 6; Arrowsmith, *Danger Greater than War*, 51. The *Church Standard* added a sectarian barb, reporting that “‘The Roman church, which has never been conspicuous for loyalty and obedience to properly constituted authority” had defied the regulations’ (ibid.).
  22. DTS, 3 February 1919, 4; 4 February 1919, 6; 7 February 1919, 6; GG, 3 February 1919, 779. The prohibition on church services, notified in the preceding weekend’s newspaper advertisements, was then promulgated (GG, 7 February 1919, 907).
  23. DTS, 10 February 1919, 4.
  24. Letter, 7 February 1919, Archbishop Cattaneo to Archbishop Kelly, SAA.
  25. SMH, 8 February 1919, 9.
  26. DTS, 10 February 1919, 4.
  27. Letter, 10 February 1919, ‘One of the Flock’ to Archbishop Kelly, SAA; Letter, 9 February 1919, Kate Mary Pierce to Archbishop Kelly, SAA.

I must strongly insist upon and beg of you to bring before the Cabinet the necessity of considering and finding some means which—all due precautions being taken—will succeed in satisfying the highest and noblest sentiment of the people, religion. ... [I]t seems inconsistent to allow so many other gatherings, probably more dangerous, whilst forbidding [religious services].<sup>28</sup>

Fr O’Gorman echoed those sentiments: ‘It was quite evident that the Government were more concerned about sport than about religion’.<sup>29</sup> In an editorial castigating the government, the *Freeman’s Journal* concurred.<sup>30</sup>

On Tuesday, 11 February, the Cabinet met to consider relaxing some restrictions, including the one prohibiting open-air church services. However, upon receiving news that returned soldiers from the troopship *Argyllshire* had broken quarantine at North Head and had made their way into Sydney, the Cabinet deferred the discussion.<sup>31</sup>

By Thursday, with no indication of a change of government policy, O’Gorman called on the apostolic delegate to brief him on a plan that Kelly had devised to deal with the matter. O’Gorman reported to Kelly that Cattaneo thought the plan was right, though he did not want his name associated with it. According to O’Gorman, ‘His views have undergone some modification since Saturday as now he feels the dangers arising from leaving people without mass and the injustice and inequality of their action in forbidding it’. O’Gorman advised that the priests of the archdiocese would follow the cathedral’s example if Mass were celebrated there. If not, a great many parishes would have it, while many would not. He concluded, ‘If Government fails to keep its word it would do great good if you celebrated 7 o’clock here in the open air Sunday’.<sup>32</sup>

A confrontation between church and state seemed inevitable. However, it was avoided later that day when the Cabinet decided to relax the restriction on open-air church services, subject to certain conditions as to masking, duration and social distancing.<sup>33</sup> It was not only Catholic protestation that had forced the government’s hand. That morning a petition signed by most of the Anglican clergymen in Sydney seeking modification of the prohibition had been submitted to the Minister for Health.<sup>34</sup>

That Sunday, large numbers attended open-air Masses in the grounds of St Mary’s Cathedral, held each half-hour from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. The *Daily Telegraph* reported, somewhat lyrically, ‘And so, throughout the city and suburbs God was once more worshipped, not in temples built by hands, but in

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28. DTS, 11 February 1919, 6; FJS, 13 February 1919, 22.

29. FJS, 13 February 1919, 22.

30. FJS, 13 February 1919, 20.

31. SMH, 12 February 1919, 9; *Sydney Mail*, 19 February 1919, 18.

32. Letter, 13 February 1919, Fr John O’Gorman to Archbishop Michael Kelly, SAA.

33. SMH, 14 February 1919, 7; GG, 15 February 1919, 1045.

34. SMH, 14 February 1919, 6.



His great universal temple roofed by the blue sky'.<sup>35</sup> According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Protestant services were poorly attended 'largely owing to the heat', though it noted that in the suburbs those held at night were generally well attended.<sup>36</sup>

While the religious denominations in Sydney marched to the same tune on the issue, in Melbourne sectarianism interposed a discordant note. In February 1919 the Melbourne press reported that the Minister for Health, John Bowser, had accepted an offer by Archbishop Mannix to replace the nursing staff at the emergency hospital at the Exhibition building with nursing sisters from St Vincent's Hospital. The next day Rev. Henry Worrall condemned the proposal at the Wesley Church in the city with disparaging remarks about the sisters. The government then informed Mannix his offer could no longer be accepted, leading to a public stoush and an exchange of correspondence in which Mannix accused the government of conceding to anti-Catholic pressure.<sup>37</sup>

With open-air church services now permitted, the controversy between church and state in Sydney subsided. Other sections of the community, however, continued to lobby the government to ease restrictions that affected them, particularly the horseracing and liquor industries.

### *The Epidemic Subsides*

The government's swift action in imposing restrictions limited the spread of the virus. During February the number of hospital admissions in Sydney was just 139, while the total deaths for the month across the state was 15. This was in stark contrast to Victoria, which had delayed for three weeks before introducing a more limited range of restrictions. There the number of deaths in February was 489, in addition to 56 in January.<sup>38</sup>

Satisfied with its achievement, the New South Wales government revoked the orders prohibiting meetings and assemblies and those requiring the wearing of masks in public places, except that masks were still to be worn on public transport. Religious services could now be held indoors.<sup>39</sup>

Soon the government came under attack from the Labor opposition and from other quarters, including the *Freeman's Journal*, for having overreacted to the outbreak and imposing unnecessary economic and social burdens on the people.<sup>40</sup> The government defended itself by reference to medical advice, quoting the endorsement by Dr D.A. Welsh, Professor of Pathology at the

35. DTS, 17 February 1919, 4.

36. SMH, 17 February 1919, 8.

37. As Fr Brendan Hayes has explained, the genesis of the row was a breakdown of communication between the chairman of the Board of Health and the matron at the Exhibition hospital. But at a time when ethno-religious conflict was rampant, such blunders easily led to an outbreak of sectarian strife. See Brendan Hayes, 'Archbishop Mannix and the Spanish Influenza: A Week in 1919', *Footprints* 22, no. 2 (2005): 17–44.

38. NSW Dept Public Health, *Report*, 147.

39. GG, 27 February 1919, 1242.

40. *Sun*, 21 February 1919, 5; FJS, 27 February 1919, 20.



University of Sydney, of the strict social distancing measures.<sup>41</sup> Welsh, who wrote articles about the epidemic for the *Sydney Sun*, well understood the government's predicament:

It is the irony of the situation that, whatever happens, all who have taken a part in trying to control the epidemic will be blamed. If they cannot be blamed for failure, they will be blamed for the means they have taken to achieve success.<sup>42</sup>

### ***The Epidemic Returns***

Unfortunately, talk of success proved to be premature. In mid-March the number of new cases began to rise into double figures. On 22 March, in what the *Sun* described as 'Sydney's Worst Day', 51 new cases and 5 deaths were reported. But it was not to be the worst day by a long chalk. Soon the number of new cases were into triple figures. In the first week of April more than 760 new cases were admitted to hospital, then in the next fortnight it was more than 1000 each week, resulting in the 2000-bed capacity of the hospitals being exceeded for about a fortnight. Deaths in Sydney also rose: 10 in February, 58 in March, 1161 in April, with the peak of 315 deaths in the middle week of April.<sup>43</sup>

If some thought the government had been too quick to impose restrictions in February, the pace of the epidemic's resurgence from mid-March led others to criticise the government for relaxing them too early. As if to prove Professor Welsh right, the *Catholic Press* complained, 'Owing to the abolition of the restrictions at a time when the medical faculty had the disease well in hand, the pestilence has been allowed full play'.<sup>44</sup>

But in truth, the government delayed too long in reimposing them, waiting until early April when once more it prohibited public assemblies and amusements, including race meetings, and ordered schools to close.<sup>45</sup> It also introduced prohibitions on travel from Sydney in order to protect the country

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41. *Sun*, 21 February 1919, 4; 23 February 1919, 4.

42. *Sun*, 1 March 1919, 4. Welsh found himself in trouble with the Sydney branch of the British Medical Association, who censured him for writing in the press articles on medical subjects to be read by 'ill-informed members of the community' (*Sun*, 19 June 1919, 1).

43. NSW Dept Public Health, *Report*, 147, 174–6.

44. CPS, 3 April 1919, 26. Catholic opinion was divided. The *Freeman's Journal* maintained its sceptical position, accusing the government of panicking, inquiring rhetorically, 'Is it plague or scare which is afflicting the community, and which sends [Premier] Holman to a high mountain whilst the common fold stew in the city?' It then quoted statistics suggesting the number of deaths in Melbourne during the first quarter of 1919 was not much different from previous years (FJS, 24 April 1919, 21). When similar figures for NSW were published the *Catholic Press* warned against minimising 'the deadly character of pneumonic influenza' and urged its readers to endure and tolerate the restrictions (CPS, 1 May 1919, 23).

45. GG, 2 April 1919, 1985, 1986; 4 April 1919, 2101.

areas, but that came too late, and the restrictions applying to Sydney were soon extended to regional cities and towns.<sup>46</sup>

Significantly, church services were not prohibited. Chastened by its earlier experience, the government opted for regulation: the wearing of masks, social distancing, and a 45-minute time limit.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, there were complaints in some ecclesiastical quarters that the restrictions, which effectively limited the number of persons who could enter a church, were introduced without sufficient notice.<sup>48</sup>

Due to restrictions on time and numbers, some of the more elaborate Easter ceremonies, especially in Catholic churches, were either dispensed with or curtailed.<sup>49</sup> The *Methodist*, which criticised the restrictions as unnecessary and ineffective, remarked, 'Favoured with exceptionally fine weather, the Easter season of 1919 will go down into local history as one of the quietest and saddest that Sydney has known'.<sup>50</sup> The restrictions did not prevent Anzac Day Masses being celebrated at St Mary's Cathedral, but the monthly procession of the Blessed Sacrament was cancelled.<sup>51</sup>

When the epidemic was first reported in January, Archbishop Kelly had offered to place at the disposal of the government the resources of the church, including its schools, buildings and helpers. After the spread of the disease accelerated in March, he gave approval to nuns in the archdiocese, including those freed from teaching duties due to closure of the primary schools, to visit the sick and dying in their homes in the poorer areas of the city.

According to the *Catholic Press*, 'During the sad months when so many families were paralysed for help, the black-robed figures could be seen in every street, going from house to house, regardless of class or creed, and carrying food and clothing to the sufferers'. Many of the sisters fell ill with pneumonic influenza, and two of them, Sister Mary Isidore and Sister Mary Gregory, both of the Little Company of Mary, died. The priests of the archdiocese were also heavily engaged in ministering to the sick in the hospitals or in their homes.<sup>52</sup>

### ***The Epidemic Subsides Again***

From the peak in mid-April the numbers of new cases and deaths began to decline. From early May hospital admissions fell below triple figures, giving rise to the hope that the epidemic would soon run its course. Even so, unlike February, the government did not immediately relax the restrictions applying in

46. GG, 4 April 1919, 2102; 9 April 1919, 2107; 11 April 1919, 2201, 2202; 14 April 1919, 2226; 16 April 1919, 2230; 17 April 1919, 2353; 24 April 1919, 2355, 2356.

47. GG, 4 April 1919, 2101.

48. DTS, 7 April 1919, 4.

49. SMH, 19 April 1919, 11.

50. *Methodist*, 26 April 1919, 7. As well as cut-down church services, the Easter Show was cancelled.

51. CPS, 1 May 1919, 27.

52. FJS, 24 April 1919, 14, 18; 1 May 1919, 21; 8 May 1919, 18; CPS, 8 May 1919, 19, 22; 31 July 1919, 22.

Sydney, though it did so on a case by case basis in other parts of the state. At the end of the second week of May, with hospital admissions and deaths continuing to fall, the government acted, lifting the prohibition on open-air meetings and race meetings. This was a cautious move as the CMC had also recommended removal of the other restrictions.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, troubled by the gravity of its responsibilities, the Cabinet meeting the following week postponed a decision on the lifting of the remaining restrictions, instead calling another meeting of the CMC. Finally, on the advice of the CMC, the Cabinet decided on 15 May to lift all remaining restrictions across the state, except in areas beyond Sydney declared to be infected. Social and economic life could now return to normal, which for the churches meant that their religious services could be conducted free of any restrictions.<sup>54</sup>

### *The Epidemic Returns and Runs Its Course*

After ten weeks the epidemic seemed to have abated but, as May gave way to June, the number of new cases began to rise again. The increase sparked concern that the wet weather and a cold snap might have caused ‘a slight recrudescence of the pandemic’, a fact acknowledged by the minister, though he added that the disease was less severe than before and there were no grounds for alarm.<sup>55</sup> He was wrong on both counts. The resurgence of the disease came with a virulence that soon exceeded the worst days of April.

Despite a mounting death toll, the Cabinet at its meeting on 19 June 1919 declined to reinstate the prohibitions and restrictions.<sup>56</sup> After two unsuccessful attempts to defeat the epidemic at great cost to the community and the treasury, the government this time decided the better option was to let it take its course, a view which the *Sydney Morning Herald* endorsed:

There is a stage at which governmental responsibility for the public health ends. ... By now the general public has been educated in the method of infection and the seriousness of the malady. It should be sufficient now to warn them against the voluntary acceptance of risks which can be avoided.<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, the public were left to put in place their own restraints. While some social events were cancelled or postponed, other activities including political meetings, sporting competitions and racing continued without restraint, limited only by the loss of some participants to the disease. The annual Labor

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53. DTS, 9 May 1919, 6; GG, 9 May 1919, 2724.

54. DTS, 14 May 1919, 6; 15 May 1919, 4; 16 May 1919, 5; GG, 15 May 1919, 2733, 2734; 16 May 1919, 2832, 2833.

55. *Sun*, 1 June 1919, 2; *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 7 June 1919, 2.

56. DTS, 20 June 1919, 5.

57. SMH, 18 June 1919, 10. The editor did, however, suggest that compulsory masking should be reintroduced.

Conference went ahead at the Sydney Trades Hall minus fifty to sixty delegates who were absent due to influenza.<sup>58</sup> A mid-June report on the weekend's rugby league competition, after giving the scores for the games, noted that the 'influenza epidemic played havoc with nearly every team on Saturday'.<sup>59</sup>

As with other institutions, the churches remained free to make their own arrangements. While the annual Corpus Christi procession at St Patrick's Manly went ahead in late June, the event was scaled back after Archbishop Kelly directed that school children, who usually made up a large part of the procession, should not take part.<sup>60</sup> Some Masses at St Mary's Cathedral were curtailed, but that was because many of the priests had fallen ill with influenza.<sup>61</sup>

The peak of the second wave of the epidemic came in the third week of June with 1315 hospital admissions and 600 deaths, resulting in the capacity of the hospitals being exceeded for about a fortnight. A month later the weekly numbers were 292 and 91. By early August, when the epidemic was officially declared over, they were 76 and 28. Cases continued intermittently for months but by the end of September 1919 admissions and deaths were in single figures. Like its predecessor this latest wave had lasted about ten weeks. But this time the epidemic did not return.<sup>62</sup>

More than 12,000 Australians had died, about 6000 in New South Wales.<sup>63</sup>

### ***The Church's Response to COVID-19***

Returning from the past to the present, we can see many similarities and differences in the way COVID-19 and Spanish flu have affected religious observance. Like his predecessor, the current Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Anthony Fisher, promptly pledged the church's cooperation with public health authorities 'to ensure the safety of all'. But, in implementing that pledge, he went further than Kelly. In a pastoral letter, Archbishop Fisher announced that 'following the new commonwealth and state restrictions on public places, all public Masses and other communal devotions, whether inside churches or outdoors, are suspended in the Archdiocese from [*sic*] Sydney' and that 'all churches must be closed, even to private prayer'.<sup>64</sup>

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58. *Sun*, 17 June 1919, 8.

59. *Sun*, 17 June 1919, 2.

60. *FJS*, 19 June 1919, 24; 26 June 1919, 25; *CPS*, 26 June 1919, 19. Even so, thousands of people attended the event.

61. *CPS*, 26 June 1919, 27.

62. NSW Dept Public Health, *Report*, 147, 174–6; *GG*, 8 August 1919, 4416. These figures relate to the Sydney metropolitan area. In other parts of the state the wave was about two weeks behind that of Sydney. The official report refers to two waves only, apparently regarding the initial outbreak in January–February as not a wave (NSW Dept Public Health, *Report*, 141–2).

63. Estimates of the total death toll vary. See Jeff Kildea, 'How Many Australians Died of Spanish Flu? Take Your Pick', 2020, <https://johnmenadue.com/jeff-kildea-how-many-australians-died-of-spanish-flu-take-your-pick/>.

64. 'Pastoral Letter to the Clergy and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Sydney regarding the Latest Restrictions in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', 23 March 2020. It is reproduced in the *CW*, 29 March 2020, 6–7.

The immediate and indefinite suspension of all church services in 2020 is in stark contrast to what happened during the Spanish flu, as the narrative above shows. In 1919 Sydney's churchgoers were denied the opportunity to attend public worship on one Sunday only. And, even then, that singular occasion provoked such a storm of protest and planned civil disobedience that the government quickly revoked the order, thus permitting outdoor services, and then, a few weeks later, allowing churches to open again, albeit with social distancing requirements.

In many ways the COVID-19 restrictions have provoked a different response from the institutional church compared to 1919. This is most apparent from a reading of the Catholic press. Instead of being a voice of angry protest, as its predecessors were, Sydney's current Catholic newspaper, the *Catholic Weekly*, has provided helpful suggestions on how the closure of churches might offer ways for the faithful 'to be creative—and grow'.<sup>65</sup> One full-page article published in April reproduced an editorial from an American Catholic newspaper arguing that Catholics who had called on their bishops to push back against restrictions were wrongheaded.<sup>66</sup>

This acquiescence by the modern church in the curtailment of religious observance during COVID-19 is due to many factors, not least being a commendable willingness to accept the need for all to make sacrifices for the public good. Nevertheless, it is also the case that the churches' influence in today's Australia is not what it was a century ago. With a large observant base, they were then a force to be reckoned with politically, such that they had a significant influence on public policy.<sup>67</sup> Today, with a much smaller base and diminished moral authority, particularly following the sexual abuse scandal, the churches have to a large extent become passive recipients of public policy rather than its shapers. Secular community institutions have taken their place. An example is the National Rugby League, whose influence is such that governments conformed public health orders to accommodate its sectional interests.

Technology might also help explain today's relative submissiveness. The faithful can now attend religious services virtually, with Mass being live streamed into their homes from their parish church or, if they prefer a papal Mass, from St Peter's in Rome.<sup>68</sup> While live streaming is not equivalent to personal participation in public worship and cannot satisfy the faithful's spiritual hunger for the Eucharist, the current workaround enables a form of religious observance beyond contemplation during the Spanish flu.

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65. See, e.g., CW, 29 March 2020, 3, 8, 17, 20.

66. CW, 19 April 2020, 18.

67. See, e.g., Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910–1925* (Sydney: Citadel Books, 2002).

68. CW, 5 April 2020, 2, 3.

Furthermore, personal attitudes to religious observance, even among churchgoers, are not what they were back then. Few today would feel as strongly as Patrick Minahan or John Meagher, who were moved to condemn publicly the actions of the ‘pagan government’. How many today would think, as Kate Pierce did, in terms of a ‘Black Sunday’ for the Catholics of Sydney? But today’s relative quiescence might not be due to indifference on the part of the faithful. A petition protesting the failure to include churches in the 1 June relaxation of restrictions received 20,000 signatures in less than 48 hours, forcing the government to rectify the omission.<sup>69</sup>

An episode in Melbourne in September also suggests that the churches might yet retain some influence. Reminiscent of Archbishop Kelly’s argument with the federal government in December 1918, the press reported that the Victorian government had banned ministers of religion from visiting patients at home or in hospitals or care facilities ‘for the last rites or to perform other religious ceremonies in person’. The report quoted a Catholic priest who commented that providing the sacraments to the dying was one of a priest’s most serious obligations—it can only be done in person, not virtually. Archbishop Peter Comensoli took his protest to the premier, who publicly acknowledged the government’s mistake and assured the archbishop that the restriction would be overturned.<sup>70</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Perhaps this is a good point at which to finish. It ill behoves an historian to expound too much on current affairs. At the time of writing, COVID-19 is showing no signs of abating and the regulation of religious observance is still in flux. With the benefit of temporal distance and archival access, future historians will be better placed to offer a comprehensive comparison of the relative responses of the Catholic Church to COVID-19 and Spanish flu. Nevertheless, for the present at least, our examination of the church’s response to Spanish flu permits us to concur with the oft quoted observation of L.P. Hartley, ‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there’.<sup>71</sup>

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69. CW, 31 May 2020, 1.

70. *The Australian*, 11 September 2020, 5; 12 September 2020, 5; Letter, 11 September 2020, Archbishop Comensoli to the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

71. L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).