

With new COVID rules, New Zealand bishops to have Masses for unvaccinated

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (CNS) – New Zealand’s bishops said they will ensure that people who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19 can safely attend Mass under a new system, while warning that unvaccinated priests will be limited in their ministry.

Under the government’s orange and green traffic-light settings that will soon be in place, all parishes will be asked to provide Mass for people with the proof of vaccination required for unrestricted gatherings, the New Zealand Catholic Bishops’ Conference said in a Nov. 18 statement.

Parishes should also provide the opportunity for people to attend a separate numbers-restricted Mass without providing proof of vaccination, it said.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the Cabinet would confirm on Nov. 29 its decision to move the island country of 5 million people into the traffic-light system – where red, orange and green signify the spread of COVID-19. The system will end lockdowns and use social distancing and other measures to limit the virus’s spread.

“We have been struggling with how we might best and safely allow for church gatherings to take place under this system without people feeling alienated,” the country’s six bishops said in a pastoral letter to New Zealand’s 470,000 Catholics.

“We bishops are vaccinated. We renew our call for those of you who are not yet vaccinated to do so,” they said.

Unvaccinated priests will be “significantly constrained in

their ministry,” the bishops said, noting that they will be unable to exercise pastoral care in hospitals, schools or homes for the elderly. They also “will not be able to attend and preside at vaccinated-only church events.”

Laypeople such as ministers of the Eucharist will need to be vaccinated for stipulated vaccinated-only work, the bishops said.

“We believe that churches should be safe places for all people, physically, emotionally and spiritually,” the bishops said. “In the spirit of the Gospel, we also want our churches to be places of hospitality and inclusion, open and welcoming to all without prejudice or discrimination.”

While noting that society should never uncritically accept the imposition of restrictions by political leaders, the bishops said they “believe that, on balance, the introduction of vaccine mandates for certain sectors, as well as the use of vaccine certificates, are warranted for now.”

According to the Reuters COVID-19 tracker, infections are increasing in New Zealand, with an average of 192 new infections reported each day. There have been just over 9,450 infections and 35 COVID-19-related deaths reported in the country since the pandemic began.