



SSPX

Fr Ian Andrew Palko, Acting Principal

28 December 2021

Dear Parents

Early this year, we learned of the imminent transfer of our long-time principal and prior, Fr François Laisney, to an assignment in France as soon as his replacement, Fr Pierre Chrissent, would arrive. Due to borders, visas, and other exigencies, Fr Laisney remained and has managed the school and parish in very difficult circumstances. A significant part of his priestly life has involved Whanganui, and we owe a deep debt of gratitude as he moves on to his new assignment in January.

To facilitate that, Fr Daniel Themann, our District Superior, has decided that the role of Pastor/Prior will be separated from that of Principal of the school. This is frequently done in our schools in the United States and elsewhere, such as Manila and Tynong, so it is not a unique system. As I am the only priest who is a registered teacher, I will be taking up this second role as Acting Principal, at first under Fr Laisney while we transition things, and then under Fr McNamara, who will take up the role of prior/pastor until Fr Chrissent arrives, possibly mid-year 2022. We are also hoping to have another Australian priest, Fr Todd Stephens, join us as soon as possible, and he would take up my present role as Dean of the Boys' School, with an aim towards following the same teacher registration programme I did and being registered as a teacher in New Zealand.

Seeing how much effort and work Fr Laisney constantly offers, is humbling, so both Fr McNamara and I will depend on your assistance and support in trying to fill his shoes.

Given the uncertainty that this introduces, Fr Themann and I thought it appropriate that I write and detail for you what is planned for the next year, and explain a bit of why we plan this.

Planning for the 2022 Academic Year

This past year has ended with some tumult especially with vaccination mandates for educational staff. Divisions over choices made there have shown unfortunate fissures in the parish and school, including a great deal of assumptions. The priests have emphasised the fraternal Charity needed to stay unified in our supernatural goal. We recognise that faithful will take different prudential decisions on the vaccines or the education of their children, but I will echo that same point Fr Laisney has made many times: we must avoid making impassioned, rash statements and judgements about the prudential decisions others take. We must avoid saying or suggesting by words or actions that others are guilty of sin or "compromised" by the prudential decisions they make. Each must make the best moral decision possible given the situation in which he finds himself and his family, without judging others by his own opinion.

Concretely, though this affects the planning for the school year next year.

Government mandates require the Board of Trustees/Principal to maintain a register of all staff who interact personally with students and record their vaccination status vis-à-vis COVID-19. Those who the register shows as not vaccinated cannot work with students in person, or even in a place where they regularly come in contact with students during school hours.

I wish to make very clear that it is not our will to enforce unjust mandates. If we do this, it is only because we see no reasonable alternative. We would rather find some means to avoid this, and where exceptions or alternatives exist and can be legally and reasonably pursued, we will pursue them, as Catholics, even in the great persecutions, have always done. Nevertheless, when presented with outwardly enforcing unjust mandates, we must—as far as possible—avoid the greater evil of losing

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the apostolate that is our school. To abandon 27 years of work and sacrifice to build a traditional Catholic school over a matter that is not one of Faith, is not reasonable. To do this simply because of an unjust mandate means handing a great victory to the enemies of the Church in losing access to traditional Catholic education, perhaps somewhat permanently.

None of the staff, religious or priests in the school are advocates of the vaccine. Some staff have chosen, begrudgingly, to accept the vaccine to continue teaching and do so as a virtuous sacrifice. Some have decided this is a line they are unwilling to cross, and if they do so mindful of the Catholic doctrines and principles of morality, they also can draw this line virtuously. Others may find ways to obtain exemptions, thus appearing to comply, and could also act virtuously. Each of these groups, however, could act sinfully by lacking Charity towards others, making judgements, or speaking and acting in a condemnatory manner towards others. These are matters of conscience. Nevertheless, those choices do have external impacts, especially on those whom we are legally permitted to have on-premises at the school.

The Boys' college and Primary school seem to have sufficient staff to continue operating as they have for the past number of years. A reduced staff, though, will impose significant burdens on us, and so we would ask your patience and generosity. In particular, while we already expect you will assist us, we would beg you to be especially diligent to ensure your children stay focused on their studies, respectful of their teachers and the priests, well-disciplined, that homework and proper study take priority over games, entertainment, sport, or other extracurricular activities. This would be a great assistance and relief if the children come well-prepared and well-disciplined to class.

Vaccine Mandates for Students

Many families have expressed fear that vaccination mandates will be expanded to include students. In some cases, this has prompted some families to consider withdrawing their children.

Such mandates for children in education are an outside possibility, but remain only a possibility. The *probability* of this continues to decrease. Vaccines are now approved for ages 5–12, but in late November, the Ministry of Education revoked the mandate to keep a vaccine register for children, and top officials spoke in strong terms contrary to such a mandate, saying all children have a right to education no matter vaccination status. On 21 Dec, 2021, the COVID-19 minister said mandates for children were not in the works. We are prudently hopeful no mandate is forthcoming, but if it does happen, we will cross that bridge at that time, without any will of enforcing an unjust mandate and spending every effort to still provide a proper education for your children.

The Girls' College

As you will note, the Girls' college is not listed above. This is a question nagging many since while it is an SSPX school, it is also entirely staffed by the Dominican Sisters. Their assistance in teaching is the only way we can afford to offer education at a reasonable tuition for all schools. They provide at least six full-time teachers without salary. The stipend which the sisters receive amounts to only about one-third of the cost of hiring lay staff for those positions. The Sisters have provided years of unwavering and invaluable support of our school.

The Sisters are a group of consecrated religious. Their vocation involves a contemplative life, but also the work of education. Few of the laity can understand the exigencies of religious life, and the importance of unity in such a community. Unity is extremely important, else the whole foundation is risked, so on divisive issues, time is needed to figure out what to do. This is why such institutions, like the Church herself, naturally move extremely slowly.

On the matter of vaccinations, if in our parish we have rifts forming over the issue of vaccination, the superiors in the convent have to take even more prudent care to ensure that there is not division among the Sisters, and with the uncertainty of further legal requirements, and fear of parents pulling children out of school over the possibilities of future mandates, the Sisters have not had sufficient time to consider what they can do without great disturbance to their religious life. Thus, the Sisters have made no decision on what to do as of yet. In speaking with parents, many have the impression



that the Sisters have made a decision contrary to the priests and lay staff. Rather, they are withholding a decision for now while considering what to do. *De facto*, the result is that they cannot be listed as vaccinated or exempt on our register, and so could not engage in face-to-face teaching.

There are several solutions to this problem. Some have suggested that lay staff be hired to replace the Sisters, but this would not be an appropriate reaction to 20 years of excellent support which makes the other schools financially viable. Such a solution would cause immense disruption and division, the large number of good Catholic teachers are not available, and further, it is simply not affordable without the Sisters.

Another solution is to shut the girls' school entirely and have the girls rely on home schooling curricula, but again, this is extremely disruptive, and should the school reopen, returning to our curriculum would be disastrously difficult.

The solution Mother General proposes is instead a temporary solution while the convent considers what to do. Mother assures me that their intention is to make a decision soon, and they would expect to reassess during the first half of the year. If exemptions or other solutions were found, they are not unwilling to begin the year as normal, and certainly we are going to work towards this if we can.

This temporary solution would be to keep the girls enrolled in our school and run a correspondence programme to begin the year, as was done during the 2020 lockdown. Added to this would be extracurricular meetings and activities to supplement the learning off-campus at a parochial level, but not part of school. Study groups might be possible, and the Sisters' would assist in organising these and finding venues. Packets would be provided weekly.

Neither I, nor Fr Themann, nor Mother General see this as an ideal solution. Nevertheless, among the options considered, it seems the best to maintain stability and continuity, and minimise disruptions.

The Sisters assure me that this would not be online teaching, so screen time would not be an issue, nor conflicting use of computers, or the need to purchase equipment. Instead of multiple curricula which do not match the programme in our school, the Sister's temporary solution keeps the girls on our rolls studying materials that, once in-person teaching resumes, match what they would study in class, and be by the same teachers who would teach them then.

While I will admit that initially, I was not in favour of such a proposition, and still hope to find a solution to begin the year normally, the Sisters' planning so far does provide a workable stop-gap and even a possibility for the international boarding girls to continue in some fashion.

We will announce soon an open house for parents to discuss these plans with the Sisters and get details, likely after the Sisters' retreat and women's retreat.

Parents withdrawing children

In the breach, however, fear of further mandates and concerns over other matters have prompted the withdrawal of several children from the school in order to, instead, seek an exemption for home schooling or some similar family cooperative. We have previously endorsed home schooling when there is a serious reason to do so, but naturally, the Church's practice has been to encourage proper Catholic schools. Our venerable founder, Msgr Lefebvre, put this task of schooling in our statutes just after seminaries, which were the most important work of the SSPX.

As such, those parents who fear what may come to pass, I would urge them to reflect on whether this fear justifies withdrawing students immediately, or if the possibility they fear is likely. I would also urge them to obtain all the facts, for it does seem some are acting on misinformation about home education, deadlines for exemptions for this, what is permitted, whether vaccine mandates apply, or such matters.

There might be long-term consequences for a child's education to be shifted out of a structured programme to home school, only later to be put back in the school environment having missed out on the curriculum that is followed in that school. That can disrupt a child's educational progress significantly.



There is also the issue of re-enrolment, should a child be officially withdrawn. We cannot guarantee that children who do not begin the year will be permitted to enrol midway through the year, and any withdrawn student would legally need to go through the whole process of re-enrolment, this might require tests to determine their progress and if they could be placed into their previous class. As such, I ask you to carefully consider if withdrawal is prudent, and if it will serve the formation of your children before you act.

Should you have legitimate and significant concerns, please come and speak to me about these before seeking exemption for home school or withdrawing your child.

Discussing COVID and controversy

A great deal of the division in the school and parish comes from discussing complex and controversial subjects around children. If these subjects are difficult for the developed and well-formed reason we adults should have, they are incredibly difficult for the children.

Sadly, during this last school year, children heard a great deal about the controversies surrounding COVID-19. Discussion around even Primary children was commonplace. The source may have been home, staff or other students. Imprudently, some teachers discussed vaccination with students. Also, some parents seem to have suggested to their children to distrust the priests and teachers over the issue of vaccination. Thus, we had, at one point, children telling peers they should refuse to go to school, or to not follow the teachers or priests, or various hyperbole. All of this discussion puts children, who do not possess the tools and developed reason, in the centre of a controversy they cannot solve and can cause great damage to their formation, especially their spiritual lives.

I would, therefore, urge you to not discuss the controversy over these matters around your children. Give them the confidence that you will take care of them and have their best interest at heart. If there is difficulty with other adults, discuss with those adults and leave the children to deal with problems which more directly affect their salvation, such as their duty of state, discipline, respect for authority, homework, staying peaceable at home, etc.

Conclusion

No matter what we do, this next year will be challenging for the school and parish. If we all try to act with charity, and foster patience, we can minimise the disruptions and maintain our school as the only traditional Catholic school in New Zealand. Seeing the sacrifices made and work done also may foster many vocations, a fruit we sorely need from our schools.

Msgr Lefebvre said in 1987, “[t]he future of the Catholic Church and her mission lies in teaching, especially in schools run by priests and religious who preach by word and example,” adding that “[f]or society to be converted, we need Catholic schools.” In 1982 he wrote, “We need Catholic schools where young people will learn to love the Liturgy, Latin and chant, and where they will be formed in a manly and Christian fashion by sacrificing themselves for the love of Jesus Christ under the care and guidance of their heavenly Mother.” We hope to provide you and your children the best Catholic schools we can, especially with the chance to have the perennial Liturgy of the Church given them and learn the sacrificial spirit of Our Lord, even in these challenging and trying circumstances.

In the face of all of these challenges, we beg your assistance, trust, and your support, especially supernaturally. Be assured we will do whatever we can to support you and your children.

Sincerely in Our Lord,

Fr Ian Andrew Palko, FSSPX
Acting Principal