



Diocesan e-News

TIMES OF SORROW AND TIMES OF JOY

In the opening lines of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens paints a picture of an era that was a mix of light and darkness, a time of hope and yet also a time of despair.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

It was the era of the French Revolution, a period of hope for a more just world and at the same time a period of terrible brutality. Dickens then observes that it was a time “like the present period”. He was describing the turbulent era of the eighteenth century but he saw a similar mix of light and darkness in his own nineteenth century. We might well recognise the same kind of mix of good and ill in our own twenty-first century. I find this mix as I look back on my experience in the diocese of Ballarat over the last few months.

There have been some particularly tough times but also some occasions to lift the spirits.

On the tough side, we have had two further hearings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse that have focussed on our diocese of Ballarat. I attended both hearings. There were harrowing stories of abuse. There were agonising questions as to how such crimes could have happened. Yet, even in the midst of such distressing hearings, there were some positive steps. Those who had suffered were listened to with respect. They felt support from family and friends who attended with them. There were expressions of sorrow from a number of people in leadership roles for the failures to respond properly. These are stepping stones along the path towards some healing for those who have suffered directly and for our whole community which has shared their pain.

During the Royal Commission hearing in December, our Catholic community joined with communities around the world to mark the start of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Pope Francis opened a Holy Door in St Peter’s in Rome and we opened a Holy Door in our cathedral in Ballarat. It was a reminder to me that we are not alone as we face the difficult times of our lives. At each moment God is with us – God who is full of mercy and compassion. We can call on God for the gift of healing for all who have suffered. We can ask God for the gift of a compassionate heart for ourselves, that we might learn more and more to be merciful to one another.

The day after the hearing in February I travelled to Mercy Regional College in Camperdown. There I joined the local community to celebrate the opening of a new section of the college. I met delightful young people who were thrilled to have such fine new facilities for their studies. I met dedicated teachers and people from many walks of life who are doing what they can to provide the students with great opportunities. The Royal Commission hearings that week had been among the tough experiences of life. The gathering at the college was an experience to lift the spirits.

The days and weeks and months ahead will most likely continue to be a mix of bright times and dark times. I give thanks that God is with us in times of joy and in times of sorrow. I pray that the God of Mercy will bring us the healing we need. I pray that Christ will give us light to know the right path. I pray that the Holy Spirit will give us strength for the journey.

Bishop Paul Bird CSSR