



Last week I attended a gathering of the staff of Centacare, an agency of our Ballarat diocese that provides care for people with various kinds of need. Centacare staff had come from the Ballarat office and from all around the diocese, from Warrnambool in the south to Mildura in the north. They met to share reflections on their experiences in 2018. Some staff focus on housing issues, helping people find a suitable place to live. Some help with employment, offering guidance and encouragement to those looking for work. Some provide a listening ear to people who are struggling with the pressures of life, whether at home or at school or in the workplace. Some offer marriage and family counselling to foster good relationships. In all these situations, Centacare staff are responding to needs. It was inspiring to hear their stories and to sense their dedication to helping people address challenges in their lives.

A few days later, I joined members of the Exodus Community in Wendouree for an Advent Mass. The Exodus Community is a group of people who respond to needs at the parish level. They offer simple but very practical help. They have a “bread run” through which they provide bread to families that are short of food. They support people who are sick by taking them to the doctor’s surgery or to a hospital. Again, it was inspiring to be among people who show such down-to-earth care for anyone in need.

In between the meetings with the Centacare staff and the Exodus Community, I was involved in meetings to finalise our diocese’s participation in the National Redress Scheme.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recommended that there be a national scheme to respond to claims from those who had suffered abuse in the context of an institution, such as a school or orphanage or sporting club. The Commonwealth government set up the National Redress Scheme to respond to survivors of abuse who seek redress from responsible institutions. According to the wishes of the survivor, the redress could include a financial payment, counselling, and a personal apology on behalf of the institution. The redress would be determined by a government agency, with the payment to be made by the institution involved.

The National Redress Act allows institutions to form a group and nominate a representative to act on their behalf to liaise with the Commonwealth government about claims. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has set up a company called Australian Catholic Redress to liaise with the government regarding claims relating to a diocese.

I have signed a deed of participation on behalf of our Diocese of Ballarat. This means that when anyone contacts the Commonwealth government’s redress scheme with a claim relating to our diocese, the government would contact Australian Catholic Redress who would then contact our diocese to respond to

the claim. We would provide whatever information the government redress agency requests. Then we would make whatever response to the claim that the government agency decides is appropriate in each case.

Payments will come from diocesan funds rather than from funds belonging to any parish. This has been the case with claims from survivors up till now and it will continue to be the case with claims that come through the National Redress Scheme. While we cannot predict what the total payments will be, I am hopeful that the diocese will be able to meet all the payments that will be required of us. If we do need help in this, we will be able to call on help from other dioceses. All the dioceses that are participating in the Australian Catholic Redress company have agreed to support one another as needed. This means that if our diocese did not have sufficient funds, the other dioceses would assist. If another diocese did not have sufficient funds, our diocese would join with the rest in providing assistance. The amount of support would be proportioned to the Catholic population of each diocese. The larger archdioceses would provide the greater part of the assistance. We would provide support according to the size of our Catholic population.

Over this past week, I was glad that I could attend the gatherings of the Exodus Community in Wendouree and the Centacare staff from around the diocese. It was great to hear of people responding to needs at the local parish level and at the diocesan level. I was also pleased to finalise our participation in the National Redress Scheme. This is a way of responding to the needs of survivors of child abuse at a national level and I am pleased that our diocese is part of this national response.

*Bishop Paul Bird CSSR*