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Dear Friends,

I write following last month's hearing of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. In his opening remarks, the Chair of the Commission, Justice Peter McClellan indicated that the hearing in Ballarat would be conducted in two parts. The May session was the first stage of the inquiry. The second stage is likely to occur towards the end of this year.

The evidence in the first stage of the hearing included personal accounts from a number of survivors, describing the gross violations of individuals by priests and brothers of the Catholic Church – shocking stories of the betrayal of children and failings in the Church's response. The hearing confirmed the scale of the abuse that has occurred in the Ballarat region and the great suffering of many people. That suffering extends beyond the individual survivors to their families and friends who have been deeply affected by what has occurred. Indeed the impact has been felt throughout the community. While the Commission has not specified areas for examination during the second stage of the hearing later this year, that might include further consideration of the community impact of these crimes.

Whether we were in the courtroom during the hearing or followed the proceedings online or read the reports in the newspaper, it was extremely distressing to hear of such offences against children. However it is necessary that we seek and face the truth if we are to find healing. In this regard, Justice McClellan drew on a reflection of Pope Francis. "Unless the truth is revealed and known publicly the prospect of effective healing for survivors and institutions is diminished. When he recently visited Sri Lanka Pope Francis said of the suffering brought by civil war in that country 'the process of healing also needs to include the pursuit of truth, not for the sake of opening old wounds, but rather as a necessary means of promoting justice, healing, and unity'. The Pope's words have relevance to the task we are about to undertake in this hearing."

I express my admiration for the survivors who spoke of the crimes committed against them and the impact those crimes have had on their lives. I also express my appreciation for those who provided personal support for survivors and their families throughout the stressful days of the hearing.

In these months between the two parts of the hearing in Ballarat, the diocese will continue to cooperate with agencies such as the Centre Against Sexual Assault and Relationships Australia to provide support for those who have suffered. I encourage all the members of the diocese to do all we can to offer personal support to survivors and their families in our local communities.

In my statement to the Royal Commission I referred to the diocese's *Code of Conduct for Caring for Children*. This is a document that gives directions for activities involving children in our parishes and schools. For example, the Code notes that all those engaged in Church activities that involve children must undergo the necessary checks according to Victorian law. The Code also highlights the need for children to be properly supervised at all times. The provisions of the Code are intended to promote the wellbeing of children involved in Church activities and to give confidence to parents that their children are safe and are being cared for as they should be.

In February this year, Pope Francis published a letter urging that everything possible be done to rid the Church of the scourge of the sexual abuse of children and to promote the proper care of children everywhere.

He recalled a meeting he had in July last year with some people who had suffered abuse. He wrote, "I was deeply moved by their witness to the depth of their sufferings and the strength of their faith. This experience reaffirmed my conviction that everything possible must be done to rid the Church of the scourge of the sexual abuse of minors and to open pathways of reconciliation and healing for those who were abused."

Pope Francis also urged that we take all steps necessary to ensure that the Church is a safe home for children. "Families need to know that the Church is making every effort to protect their children. They should also know that they have every right to turn to the Church with full confidence, for it is a safe and secure home."

May God guide us all to ensure that our Church community is indeed a safe and secure home, especially for those who are most vulnerable.

God bless you all.



Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat