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## **2017 JOYS & SORROWS**

I write these reflections on the evening of Sunday, December 10. For the past few days, over a hundred young people from our diocese of Ballarat have been in Sydney for the Australian Catholic Youth Festival. I have been delighted to be there with them as they joined more than 18,000 young people from all around Australia in days of fun and faith.

The celebrations began with the Lights of Christmas at Sydney's St Mary's Cathedral on Wednesday evening. The open space in front of the cathedral was a sea of faces as the building was lit up with laser lights, beginning with a kaleidoscope of colours drawn from the cathedral's stained glass and concluding with some classic paintings of Mary and the Child Jesus. Over the following three days, the young people converged on Sydney's Olympic Park. They sang along with a great range of music, sometimes very bright and very loud, sometimes hushed. They waved the lights on their mobile phones like thousands of candles. They knelt and prayed in silence in the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. They met with bishops from all around the country to share their views about life and about the church. They enjoyed meals with their friends and made new friends. On the final evening, they celebrated a Mass under the stars in the heart of Sydney.

I give thanks that I was able to be there with so many young people from our diocese and beyond. It was for me a time of great joy.

By contrast, I felt a deep sadness in the days before the festival, when I read reports from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. These included a report in relation to the Diocese of Ballarat. The Commission found grave failures in the way the diocese had responded to complaints of child sexual abuse, failures that led to unnecessary suffering for many victims and their families and brought distress to communities throughout the diocese.

This recent report was in addition to the report in February that put before us the extent of abuse in our diocese and throughout Australia over the decades. This tragic history of crime and the failure to respond properly to complaints have caused anguish to people in our diocese for many years and this year has brought further sadness as we have reflected on the findings of the Royal Commission.

As we come to the close of any year and look back on what the year has brought, we will usually find a mix of joys and sorrows. As I reflect on 2017, the joy and sorrow that I have mentioned loom large for me – the joy of a wonderful youth festival in the last few days and the sorrow of the crimes and failures in earlier times.

As this year comes to an end, I hope we can draw lessons from both the joys and sorrows we have known. From the failure to protect children in the past, may we learn to place the welfare of children at the centre of our concerns. From the witness of the young people who took part in the youth festival, may we learn to treasure the gift that young people are to our church and our world.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Bird".

Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat