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Dear Friends,

Over the past few years, we have all been keenly aware of the proceedings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Commission has highlighted the need to respond with justice and compassion to those who have suffered abuse and to do all we can to ensure that children are safe now and in the future. I would like to share with you some points about what our diocese is doing in this regard.

For those who have suffered abuse we offer ongoing support by way of funding counselling to help them address the impact of abuse in their lives. We also seek to respond as quickly as possible to claims for compensation.

We realise that court proceedings can be a traumatic experience. So we endeavour to find simpler ways to resolve claims. Once the necessary basic information is available, we seek to negotiate prompt settlements through meetings that are less formal than a court. To assist claimants while claims are being addressed, we offer to fund counselling and psychological care of their choice.

If we are not able to resolve the claim through this less formal process, and the claimant begins litigation, we seek to cooperate fully as indicated in the guidelines from the Church's Truth Justice and Healing Council. For example, we do not require a claimant to prove a matter which we know to be true or have accepted as true. We also respond without delay in providing documents required in the process of litigation. Throughout this time we take every opportunity to resolve the dispute by negotiation so as to avoid the need for a court hearing.

In earlier years, those wishing to make a claim against a diocese have found it difficult to identify someone to respond to the claim. To help claimants in this, I have made myself a defendant as a representative of the diocese of Ballarat. I have also made myself available as a defendant on behalf of the bishops of Ballarat before me. I am currently named as a defendant in cases relating to the years when Bishop O'Collins and Bishop Mulkearns were Bishops of Ballarat.

For those who have suffered abuse I offer an apology as well as financial compensation and the funding of ongoing counselling if they wish. For children and young people in the Church's care today, we have put processes in place to keep them safe, in our parishes, in our schools and anywhere they are in our care. Our policies and procedures for safeguarding are on our diocesan website at www.ballarat.catholic.org.au under the heading "Professional Standards". Child safeguarding officers have been appointed throughout the diocese and we are providing face-to-face and online training so that those with the care of children know their responsibilities well. May Christ, who cared for young people so much, guide us in our care for those who have suffered child abuse and help us to keep the young members of our community safe now and always.

Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat