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Easter Message 2023

I write these words on March 30, 2023, exactly a year before we celebrate a special jubilee, the 150th anniversary of our Diocese of Ballarat. It was on March 30, 1874, that Pope Pius IX issued a decree establishing the western part of Victoria as a distinct diocese, with the Murray River as the northern boundary and the sea as the southern boundary. We continue to echo the Pope's decree in our diocesan vision statement, beginning with the words "We are a community of communities from the Murray to the sea."

Our 150th anniversary next year will be an opportunity for each community throughout our diocese to remember those who have gone before us, those who have laid the foundations of our parish and school communities and the social services and health care in our diocese today. The anniversary will also be an opportunity to review our history, acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses, celebrating the achievements and recognising the failures to live our Christian faith to the full. It will be a chance to take stock of where we are now and look ahead to how we can live as a truly Christian community, sharing the good news of Christ, in the years to come.

Since my last Easter message, the Australian Plenary Council has met to consider a wide range of issues of concern to our Catholic community throughout Australia. The Council encouraged us to find ways in which all the members of the Church might be engaged in the life of the community and share in the mission to spread the gospel. In a similar vein, Pope Francis has called us to develop a "synodal" way of living in which the whole community walks together. He has highlighted the value of listening to one another as we all seek to discern what the Holy Spirit wishes us to do in response to the many challenges facing the world in our time.

In line with the calls of the Plenary Council and Pope Francis, I propose some steps for us as a diocese in the next few years.

First of all, I ask each parish to make 2023 a year when you focus on the leadership in the local community, through forming or developing further a parish pastoral council or leadership team according to your local circumstances.

In 2024, as well as celebrating the 150th anniversary of our diocese, we will hold a Diocesan Assembly, bringing together representatives of the leadership teams in our parishes and schools, to consider how we might develop the leadership in our communities in the future.

Following the 2024 Assembly, we could form a Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Council to help us fulfil our mission to share the gospel with the wider community, as well as helping us develop the pastoral services we provide throughout the diocese.

Then, in 2025, the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Council would lead the preparations for a Diocesan Synod to be held in 2026-2027. That Diocesan Synod would consider how we are to implement the various decrees of the Australian Plenary Council in our diocese.

I hope that all our parishes and schools and all the organisations in our diocese will walk together in these steps over the next few years.

As we approach the great feast of Easter, I take confidence in the promise of the Risen Christ, that he will be with us as we gather in his name and as we seek to fulfil the mission he has entrusted to us. As we look to the 150th anniversary of our diocese, I give thanks that Jesus has guided our communities through the years so far and I pray that he will continue to guide us in the years ahead.

May the peace of Christ be with you always.



Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat