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Dear Parish Family,

The Australian Catholic Bishops' Social Justice Statement, *Living the Gospel in Times of Social Division (August 2026)* encourages us and challenges us to reflect on how we bring the values to the Gospel into our daily lives, especially when we face disagreement and misunderstanding in our encounters with others in our communities. Among the suggestions about how to overcome divisions is *the call to "a culture of encounter."*

This concept arises from the teachings of Pope Francis, especially in two of his encyclicals, *Laudato Si' (2015)* and *Fratelli Tutti (2020).* In Pope Francis' words a culture of encounter means *we as a people should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone.... What is important is to create processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences.*

Inspired by Pope Francis' teaching and motivated by the recent Social Justice Statement, I have been reaching out to some of the local abuse survivor groups, especially LOUD Fence and the Ballarat and District Survivors Group. We are working together on a Memorandum of Understanding which has as its goal the establishment of a permanent memorial to victims, survivors and their families and associates at the Cathedral and at St Alipius, Ballarat East.

This initiate began while Bishop Paul Bird was Bishop of Ballarat. For various reasons it came to a stalemate, but I believe it is important to continue the work that has already begun and to look to establishing these memorials. The MOU proposes establishing a working group to co-ordinate the project. This group would be made up of representatives of the parties involved. The representatives of the diocese would be drawn from the Cathedral Parish and St Alipius' Parish.

Any collaboration between groups, especially groups who haven't always been in agreement demands a spirit of generosity and a readiness to give ground. I believe that the Church community is called to a spirit of humility in its encounters with abuse survivor groups. Trying to control the agenda is what has got the Church into so many difficulties over the years with regard to our response to our brothers and sisters who have experienced abuse at the hands of Church personnel.

I am inviting you to join with me in reaching out to victims, survivors and their families. I am asking you to join with me in making generous and humble efforts at reconciliation.

There will be times when survivor groups will want to tie ribbons to the fences at the Cathedral, St Alipius and other places around the diocese. When this happens, I ask that the ribbons are not cut down or removed. Let the ribbons remind us of the victims whose lives have been taken from them by the scourge of abuse. And let the ribbons remind us of our commitment to safeguarding, ensuring that every child, teenager or vulnerable adult will always be safe from harm in their engagement with the Church.

When we are prepared to give of ourselves after the example of Christ and the Gospel, we will always come to a place of reconciliation, healing and peace. We owe it to our brothers and sisters in Ballarat and beyond to work together in a spirit of encounter.

Sincerely in Christ,

+ Mark Freeman

Most Rev Mark Freeman
Bishop of Ballarat