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Responding to the Royal Commission

Last December the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse issued its final report. As we know, the recommendations of the Commission were made after careful consideration following an inquiry that spanned five years. The recommendations that relate either generally or specifically to the Catholic Church require an active response from our Catholic community throughout Australia and from our diocese of Ballarat.

One of the key actions for us as a diocese will be to sign up to the Commonwealth Redress Scheme, which is due to come into effect on July 1. An independent, national redress scheme for survivors of child sexual abuse was one of the main recommendations of the Royal Commission. It is also an initiative endorsed by survivors, their families and advocates. The Catholic Church has long supported such a scheme. Now that the scheme is becoming a reality, we are able to join.

It is vital that survivors of institutional sexual abuse have fair and consistent access to financial redress, counselling as needed, and, if they wish, a personal apology for the abuse they have suffered. The Commonwealth redress scheme will provide these elements.

Following the Royal Commission Report, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia have set up two groups to take forward the Commission's recommendations.

Catholic Professional Standards is an independent company, with a board of directors comprised of lay men and women. Its role includes establishing national safeguarding standards that provide a framework for all Catholic entities to build child-safe cultures. In addition, this company will monitor how dioceses and religious orders are complying with the standards in practice.

There is also an Implementation Advisory Group, which will advise Catholic entities about implementing the whole range of Commission recommendations, such as those referring to ongoing care for survivors, improved forms of governance of parishes and schools, and the training of Church personnel.

In the diocese of Ballarat, a range of measures is already in place to ensure the safety of children and the ongoing support of survivors of abuse. These include:

- the review, improvement and implementation of child protection policies and procedures across parishes, schools and Catholic agencies;
- the appointment of a diocesan professional standards coordinator;
- the appointment of safeguarding officers for all parishes, schools and agencies;
- the review of past settlements with survivors to ensure the settlements are fair;
- developing a more professional and holistic approach to supporting survivors;
- implementing a school curriculum that seeks to empower children and young people to have a voice in their education and to enhance their personal safety.

The next stage of responding to the findings of the Royal Commission for the diocese of Ballarat will include:

- participation as a diocesan community in an audit by Catholic Professional Standards of how we are implementing the safeguarding standards they have established. This audit is likely to be held before the end of 2018.
- engagement with local survivors and their health professionals, seeking their feedback on how we are responding to the Royal Commission Report recommendations;
- trialling of a new approach to the governance of parish schools;
- continuing to explore ways in which we can provide pastoral and practical assistance to survivors and their families.

While no one can undo past wrongs, we have an opportunity as a Church to demonstrate that we are attentive to the recommendations of the Royal Commission and that we will hold ourselves accountable to the high standards expected by the broader community.

In presenting the final report, the Chair of the Commission said, “the sexual abuse of any child is intolerable in a civilised society” and “we must each resolve that we should do what we can to protect them.”

May Christ guide us in our efforts to assist those who have suffered and in the care we provide for children today.

God bless you all.

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

Paul Bird CSsR
Bishop of Ballarat