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November 20, 2015

Dear Friends,

In the coming weeks, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse will be continuing the public hearing begun in May in regard to child abuse in the diocese of Ballarat.

This will again be a difficult time for all involved but particularly difficult for the survivors of abuse and the members of their families who have shared their suffering. It will be a trying time for people throughout our region. In various ways, the crimes of abuse have affected our whole community.

I am deeply conscious of the pain that has been caused as a result of sexual abuse by Catholic Church personnel. To the victims, whose lives have been affected so terribly by the abuse, I renew my heartfelt apology. I also apologise to their families and all those who have shared in their suffering.

I encourage anyone with a complaint of abuse to report it to the authorities. If the complaint is of a criminal nature, it needs to be reported to the Victorian Police through your local police station or on 1800 333 000. You may also wish to contact the Royal Commission Support Line on 1800 099 340.

Anyone feeling in need of personal support could contact Relationships Australia. This is a counselling service that provides free support for survivors of institutional child sexual abuse and others who engage in or are affected by the Royal Commission hearings. The phone number for Relationships Australia is 1800 052 674.

I would like to assure people that our diocese has in place policies, procedures and training in the area of child protection for all Catholic Church personnel. We will continue to work to ensure that everyone, especially the young and vulnerable, is safe and well cared for within the Church and our schools and that those who have been hurt through sexual abuse are supported.

I pray that this next stage of the Royal Commission's hearings will be fruitful in shedding light on what has happened in the past, in providing help for those who have suffered as a result of the abuse and in assuring safety for children now and for the future.

God bless you all.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Paul Bird'.

Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat