

MEDIA STATEMENT
by Bishop Peter Connors concerning
Father Brian Coffey

Bishop Peter Connors said he felt great sorrow for the victims of sexual abuse and offered his sympathy to them and their families on behalf of the Church.

The Bishop made the comments following the sentence handed down by the County Court in Ballarat on Friday, 26 February 1999 where Father Brian Coffey was found guilty of several allegations of sexual assault.

Father Coffey was stood down from his position as Parish Priest of the parish of Stawell in December 1997 when he was arrested by the Police following a number of complaints against him.

Bishop Connors is very much aware of the hurt which is experienced by young people who are subjected to sexual offences. This trauma is compounded when those who commit such offences have ministered to them as Church officials.

He said that the Church has now adopted a national approach to this problem and appropriate measures have been put in place in the recruitment, training and pastoral care of its ministers.

"The needs of the victim are a priority in our national approach" he said.

"The Church wants an open environment where the victims of abuse are encouraged to talk openly, and begin the long journey to complete healing with the help of professional counsellors, family and friends."

"It is very important that any sexual abuse that has happened in the Church should be openly and honestly addressed because of the destruction it causes to people, and because it betrays Christ whose Gospel the Church preaches."

The Bishop said that the *Towards Healing* program, after five years of development, began operating nationally in Australia in 1997. Its essential features are its independence from the Church, its confidentiality and the assessment of the complaint by professional people experienced in such matters.

The Church is also discussing a document that defines ethical standards and the code of conduct expected of clergy and religious in pastoral situations. As well it has established a treatment program, not only or even primarily for offenders, but also for any clergy or religious who may have psychosexual problems.