

### **Advent 3c at Stawell**

It is with a touch of sadness that my first visit to Stawell should occur when I had least expected it to happen. However, I have promised that I shall always be a Bishop who works for communion throughout the diocese. It is also my determination to be faithful to the assurance of the Australian Bishops that they will work towards the healing of communities, families and by no means least those who are the victims of sexual assault by Catholic Church Personnel.

For ten years I was a member of the National Committee for Professional Standards. Looking back over the years I am amazed at the highs and the lows in producing a programme which would take in all the experience which we have gained from dealing with situations in which we now find ourselves.

You are no doubt aware that Father Brian Coffey readily agreed with my request that he stand aside from all ministry as a priest in the diocese. He is required to assist the Victorian Police in their enquiries into certain serious allegations which have been referred to them.

Until the enquiries are complete, we must neither rush to judgment nor make any judgement concerning Father Brian Coffey. I invite you to join me in praying for a speedy and satisfactory resolution of this matter.

Over the past twelve months, we have made it clear that those who wish to register a complaint about any Catholic Church person whose conduct amounts to sexual or physical abuse, can make contact directly with the police. They are also at liberty to seek assistance by phoning a 1800 number

which will put you in contact with a person who will be able to provide you with expert advice. This offer is available to all parishes and persons and schools throughout Victoria. Brochures entitled "Hurt or Distressed" are available at the door of the Church.

As a Church we wish to offer financial assistance with the cost of counselling and or therapy for those who are victims of sexual assault. And if there is any way in which we can be of assistance to this or any other parish who are confused at the present time we shall do everything possible to do so.

Already expert advice and assistance has been offered to the staff and the pupils at the Parish Primary School. And I do wish to meet with those who are the leaders in this parish, so that I can ascertain what needs to be done to assist this parish community of Stawell to deal with your feelings of sadness, confusion and even perhaps anger.

As always the word of God provides us with nourishment, inspiration and consolation at times when we do not know what to do and how we might respond to what the Lord is asking of us. John the Baptist had made a deep impression on those who wished to find real meaning in their lives. He had told them to have a change of heart and of attitude. So they say "What are we to do? He does not tell them to go off to a monastery to learn how to pray, or to the desert to get away from sinful temptations. He simply tells them to be what they should be to their neighbour. Tax Collectors are to do their job and not take advantage of people. Soldiers are not use their power to be able to take advantage over people.

That is why the teachers at your parish primary school acted in such a responsible manner yesterday morning. I congratulate the Principal of the School and his advisers in helping the pupils to deal with their own feelings and concerns.

We must all develop a sense of belonging to others and being responsible for one another. It was the plan of God from the very beginnings of the human family as told in the reason why we are created man and woman so that we might of assistance to one another. And then we turn our attention to Jesus, we notice how he provides us with a pattern of love which is totally self giving for the sake of others.

Yes there will times in the coming weeks and months when we will have many calls on us to be supportive to those who are finding it hard to cope with what has happened. Be calm and act in a responsible manner. There are those who are able to assist us if we do not know what to do.

John then goes on to tell us that things will be more difficult for us who are the followers of Jesus than it was for his followers. If we wish to accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, then we will have to accept the challenge of living in a Christian community. That will often call for doing something which is both demanding and even painful.

Last week, I spent time with the people of Quambatook who had lost their Parish Priest who had decided that no longer did he feel called to live the life of a priest. You have heard that Father Geoff Peck came to tell me the same sad news several weeks ago. Then only last Tuesday, we grieved with the

parish of Ballarat North at the loss of their dearly loved Pastor, Father John Martin.

What are we to do? Surely, we have to support one another and be generous in accepting the need for change and for putting up with inconveniences, and with situations which will challenge and affect us. We might feel that the whole world is against us. But the hostility and the indifference which we might experience are but the chaff which will eventually be destroyed. The life and the death of Jesus seemed to be a failure, a total disaster. But in the Christian way of looking at things, it is counted as glorious victory. Let us take heart and never be dispirited no matter how difficult the situation might seem to be.