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Dear People of the Diocese,

Today the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse announced it would be holding a public hearing in May which will hear of the experience of survivors of child sexual abuse within our region. It will also examine the damaging impacts which the abuse has inflicted on the social fabric of our community and the families within the community.

The Commission has approached our diocese to provide it with documents relating to a number of former priests of the diocese. Naturally, we are fully cooperating with the Commission's requests and all the documents it has asked for have now been provided.

If the hearing follows the pattern of similar hearings in other parts of Australia, survivors of sexual abuse will present their evidence to the Commission and then institutions will be required to give an account of their response to the abuse.

This will be a difficult time for all involved but particularly difficult for the survivors of abuse. Our prayers should be with them. I hope and pray that through the Royal Commission those who were abused as young children and whose lives have, in many cases, been devastated have the opportunity to be heard and experience some healing.

I am deeply conscious of the pain that has been caused as a result of sexual abuse by Catholic Church personnel. To those victims whose lives have been hurt and damaged by the abuse, I offer 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.

I would like to assure you that our diocese has in place policies, procedures and training in the area of child protection for all Catholic Church personnel and volunteers and I give you my commitment that I will continue to work to ensure 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 the Royal Commission's visit to Ballarat will be very 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.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Bird

Bishop of Ballarat