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Dear Friends,

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse will begin public hearings in Ballarat next Tuesday, May 19. The hearings are expected to continue for up to three weeks. The Royal Commission will hold further hearings in Ballarat later this year. The Royal Commission will hear from survivors of abuse and from church authorities and also from some of those who have been convicted of child abuse. There will be evidence from various people about the impact of child abuse on individuals and on families and on the community generally.

Those who have suffered through the abuse inflicted on them as children and young people will relive their experience as they give evidence to the Royal Commission or hear others tell their stories. In doing so, they will be showing great courage. They deserve our admiration and our support. They also have a right to know that the Church recognizes their suffering and apologizes for the pain they have endured, both at the time of their abuse and through all the years they have carried their burden with them.

The hearings will be very stressful for survivors and their families and for people across our region. People will be deeply upset by the accounts of crimes against children and by the failings of church leaders in responding to these crimes. I encourage you to support one another through these difficult days. If you feel that it would help you to have some extra support, you may wish to contact the Royal Commission Support Line on 1800 099 340. Assistance is also available through Relationships Australia on 1800 052 674.

I am hopeful that the Royal Commission's sessions in Ballarat, difficult though they will be for many, will provide an opportunity for people to have their voices heard. It is my hope too that when the Royal Commission finishes its work, it will be able to put forward recommendations that will help all Australians, including the Catholic Church, to deal more justly, more compassionately and more effectively with the scourge of sexual abuse of children and young people.

As we live through the Royal Commission's hearings, I invite you to pray for those who will step forward to tell their stories. We pray that they will be able to continue the journey and find peace and hope for the future. We pray too for those who are assisting them and for the members of the Royal Commission who are undertaking such an important task on behalf of the Australian community.

Let us pray also for our Church community. We need repentance and healing to become the community we are meant to be - the community of Christ's disciples. God offers us the Easter gift of hope and newness of life through the Holy Spirit. In the coming weeks, during the Royal Commission's time in Ballarat, we will be celebrating the feast of Pentecost. I invite you to offer the prayer from that feast in the weeks ahead: "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of your love."

God bless you all.

+ Paul Bird

Bishop of Ballarat