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Dear Parishioners and Parents of Students in Catholic Schools

What a distressing week it has been after we all heard of the guilty verdict against Cardinal George Pell. I cannot remember such a national media frenzy since the guilty verdict against Lindy Chamberlain!

The facts

The facts are that a jury chose to accept one person's word over another; that the Cardinal continues to insist strenuously his innocence; that his case has been referred to a Court of Appeal. What more can be said sensibly as the legal process has yet to be completed?

The questions

It is a fact too that there has been much controversy. Some argue that he is guilty as though the legal process has been completed. Then there are experts in various areas of law who are reported as asking: 'How can a person be convicted simply on the word of another?' 'How can a jury decide a verdict beyond reasonable doubt in such circumstances?' 'How can juries be free of negative media influence against a public figure?' 'Why does Victoria not have the option of trials by judge alone like other states for controversial figures – the option available to Lloyd Rayney?' We ordinary people can be left only scratching our heads.

The suffering

For me personally, I have been moved by reports of survivors' wounds being reopened. Survivors of past abuse in families and other institutions, as well as the Church, have shared with me the pain of constant media reporting.

I have been moved too by the tearful distress of Catholics and the sheer bewilderment shared by so many. Some have expressed shock at the depth of feeling against Catholics in the media.

I feel for our young people trying to cope with anti-Catholic peer ridicule. Then there are Catholics in rural towns experiencing embarrassment and asking me: 'What can we say to our friends and local communities?' Media articles ask: 'What has the Church done to address abuse problems of the past?' but seem disinclined to publish the answers.

What has the Church done?

The Australian Catholic Bishops began facing the issues related to child abuse in 1987 – 32 years ago. At the time, no other body or government institution was taking similar steps. Though the Church's pioneering steps were limited, but they were a start.

Between 1987 and 2013, there were many developments: the adoption of a uniform approach across Australia to prevent cover-ups and the movements of criminal priests and religious; the *Towards Healing* process, which sought to assist the healing of survivors; the *Integrity in Ministry* and *Integrity in the Service of the Church* documents, which related to the professional behavior required of priests and laity working in the Church.

Professional Standards offices were established to investigate allegations of abuse at arms length from Bishops. A national professional standards body was established to keep improving Church structures and propose new initiatives.

I have skipped a great deal of history because the real focus now is people's questions today.

How do we know a priest has not offended against the young or vulnerable?

Priests and Deacons across Australia today are registered on *The Australian Catholic Ministry Register*. When a Priest or Deacon from another place comes to a parish, the Parish Priest must ask for his Register number and check on line that the visitor is approved.

Second, every Priest must have a West Australian government *Working With Children Card* to work in a parish or Catholic schools.

How do we know a Diocese or Parish is following the required protection standards for children and the vulnerable?

The Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, with Catholic Religious Australia, has established *Catholic Professional Standards Limited*, a company which operates independently of the Church. Its Board is headed by a retired judge. Its directors are distinguished in law, education, human services, safeguarding and regulation. No Bishop, Priest or Religious Brother or Sister is on the Board.

This company's task is to audit compliance with the *National Catholic Safeguarding Standards* and to publish audit reports. Also it is to provide training, support, resources, and advice to all Church leaders, ordained and lay, in the areas of its responsibilities.

Is the Church addressing the findings of the Royal Commission?

The Australian Bishops, with Catholic Religious Australia, have adopted all recommendations for the Catholic Church made by the Royal Commission, except in regard of the Seal of Confession, which is not a matter the Church has the power to change.

The *Implementation Advisory Group* has been established to advise and monitor the Church's continuing response to the implementation of Royal Commission recommendation.

Is the Church part of the national redress scheme?

The Australian Bishops, with Catholic Religious Australia, have established *Australian Catholic Redress Limited*. This is the vehicle which relates to the Commonwealth authority administering the *National Redress Scheme*.

Is there a parish structure for the protection of children and the vulnerable?

Any parishioner concerns can be reported to Parish Safeguarding Officers or the Diocesan Safeguarding Coordinator. The Coordinator will report any potentially criminal behavior to the police, and other non-criminal matters to the relevant Church Office. The Safeguarding Handbook assists parishes with all matters regarding the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

What changes have been made in the training of future priests?

No one can enter a seminary now without thorough psychological screening. Also, their continuing human development is part of their formation, along with periodic individual assessments.

What about Catholic schools?

Our schools already implement the State Government's child safety and well being procedures for all schools in the State, but in addition fulfil all the Church's requirements as well.

What should each of us do now?

I turn now to suggestions about what we as Catholics can do in our current situation.

Support survivors

As painful as negative media portrayals of the Church may be, let us never forget our commitment to the well being and healing of survivors of sexual abuse anywhere.

As well as praying for their healing, we need to encourage any we may know personally. Let us be especially understanding towards those whose wounds are weeping as a result of the events of this past week.

Keep contributing to the Community

Let us not withdraw into ourselves but continue boldly to contribute to the wider community. Depending on their size, our parishes contribute to the care of the sick and elderly; the poor and troubled; to those living alone and young people; to those in prisons and other situations of need. If you are not part of a parish ministry, perhaps this is a good time to join.

Many individual Catholics contribute too as members of community organisations. Let us keep contributing in our towns and cities, despite any embarrassment or questions other may ask.

Tell the full story

People have the right to know the full truth about the Catholic Church. Catholics must tell it, for it is hard to see how the wider community will learn the whole truth otherwise.

While we need to acknowledge that, over a 60 year period, 5 of the 119 priests who served in this Diocese were found by the Royal Commission to have been accused of crimes against minors. One instance is sacrilege. But the ministry of the other 114 cannot justly be ignored. We need to tell others too what the Church is doing today for the protection of children.

Remember Jesus' words

Many have told me that they feel the Church is facing a kind of persecution. Catholic people and priests are being tarred by an exclusive focus on the crimes of a few by sections of the community and the media.

Let us remember Jesus' words: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' [Matthew 5:44] and 'Blessed are the persecuted for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' [Matthew 5:10].

Let us care for ourselves

Finally, let us care also for each other. The two disciples on the Journey to Emmaus were shocked, downcast and discouraged by the death of Jesus, in whom they had placed all their hopes. The Risen Jesus joined them and helped them to understand. 'Did not our heart burn within us' they asked after this experience of the Lord [Luke24: 13-35].

Let us remind each other to also share our hearts with the Lord at this time – *really* share our feelings, our thoughts and our questions.

And, let all talk with each other about how we are feeling at this time, encouraging each other, including our priests, school principals and parish leaders who are seen as the local face of the Church.

God bless you all
Bishop Gerard