

Searching for justice and peace in Ballarat

Arriving in Ballarat last week I was impressed by the beauty of the town and the grand architecture, evidence of the wealth and prosperity from the famed 1850's gold rush. What was not so obvious was the deep and painful history of child sexual abuse, which is also a part of this town's history.

Ballarat has experienced some of the most serious clerical sex abuse in Australia. That is why I chose this city to give my first public forum since the release of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry report earlier this month. There is a lot of pain and suffering in the town, and I wanted to listen and hear the concerns of the community. I also thought people deserved an explanation about exactly what the Catholic Church is doing to assist victims and prevent this misery happening again.

I watched as about 100 people gathered in the St Patrick's Cathedral hall. Victims, victim support groups, senior members of the dioceses, the Vicar General, Rev Justin Driscoll, Ballarat Bishop, Paul Bird and media representatives all sat together in the one room. To me, this was an example of the Church in action with everyone wanting to pull together to 'heal the wounds'.

Discussions were open and honest with a number of participants expressing their deep concern about the Church's lack of transparency and accountability. There seemed to be general support for the Church to provide victims with pastoral support, while leaving the vexed issue of compensation to an independent body to investigate abuse and determine payments to victims. I spoke of the Church's legal responsibility but also importantly the Church's moral obligation to care for victims for the long term.

The culture of clericalism in the Church was examined. The clear message from the meeting was the need to recognize that both the laity and clergy are complimentary and interdependent and both vitally important to the faith community. The Catholic laity wants to play a part in determining the Church's future. Working together with the Church leadership, supporting and respecting each other will build the platform for reform.

With the Ballarat community still absorbing the findings from the Victorian inquiry, questions were raised as to whether the Church will ever truly recover from further shameful stories that will be revealed at the Royal Commission early next month. Will people ever put their faith and hope in the Church again?

In response, I spoke about the 'Francis Effect' - the impact of Pope Francis engaging and encouraging people back to the Church. The Pope has been promoting a Church that doesn't set itself apart, that doesn't see itself as different from anyone else. He is putting aside the pomp of the Church and reaching out to all people and encouraging all Catholics to do the same.

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My belief is that despite our varied background we all have the same inner yearning for truth, beauty and for love. The Pope recognizes that the Church must connect with all people and is calling on Catholics to open our hearts and welcome and care for everyone without any judgment.

Local churches, like St Patrick's in Ballarat, are crucial to building bridges with victims. In our parishes throughout Australia we need to provide safe, supportive and welcoming environments for people who have been damaged by the Church. We need to talk, we need to start the conversations and find out how we can make victims feel supported.

As I said in my speech, as the community of believers who make up the Church, we were not responsible for past crimes and cover-ups, but we are responsible for how we respond and react to them now.

I left Ballarat feeling encouraged by the hard work and dedication of many in the community to assist victims. There was definite outrage and concern about the past, but a positive, optimistic feeling about the future.

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