



*Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv.*

More than ever before, the Catholic Church in Australia needs to recognise the dark crimes of sexual abuse against children and vulnerable people under its care, and the untold damage done to them and their loved ones. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has delivered a shameful indictment not simply on the perpetrators and their enablers but the Church's collective and systemic betrayal of the Gospel.

Nevertheless, I believe firmly that the Church must be grateful for the work of the Royal Commission. More importantly, we must seize this Kairos, this moment of grace, this opportunity as a catalyst for change and not treat this period as a temporary aberration. It can never be business as usual again. We must have the courage to see how far we have drifted from the vision of Jesus, repent of our sins, and face up to the task of reclaiming the innocence and the powerlessness of the Servant-Leader.

We the custodians of the Church have woefully failed you and especially God's little ones. Instead of demonstrating that fundamental ethos of care for those who have been harmed and are vulnerable, we the bishops, the leaders, have been shown to have cared primarily for the Church's own security, reputation and interests. In many ways, we have behaved like the Prodigal Son. We have squandered the Church's patrimony; we have betrayed your trust. And so it is time for us to come home to the heart of the Gospel. We need to convert to the radical vision of Christ and let it imbue our attitudes, our actions and our pastoral practices.

I have been a learner in how to be a leader after the example of Christ in the Diocese of Parramatta. I want to thank the survivors of abuse who have participated in the Royal Commission and who have personally allowed me the opportunity to hear your stories and to enter into the depth of your painful experience. I have much to learn from you.

I want to thank the faithful parishioners, religious and priests who continue to witness and serve generously in spite of the label of 'guilty by association'. I can only pledge to walk with you through this 'valley of darkness' where our 'sins have been laid bare' to the hope of a Church which is purified and humbled, and yet more of a sacrament of God's love in the world.

So dear friends, dear people of the Diocese of Parramatta,

The paschal rhythm summons us to a discipleship of humility, weakness and vulnerability, of dying and rising in Christ. We are challenged by the words of Ezekiel to remove the heart of stone from us and to have a heart of flesh instead.

As the Church, we must die to the old ways of being Church, which is steeped in a culture of clerical power, self-protection and cover-up. We must learn to rise to a Christ-like way of humility, inclusivity, compassion and powerlessness.

Lent leads to Easter glory. It is Jesus Christ who changes our darkness to light, our sorrow to joy, our suffering to glory and our death into life. May we have the courage and faith to live the paschal rhythm as it unfolds, even through one of the darkest chapters in our history. Let us pray that the Lord may give us a new heart and a new spirit as we enter into the season of renewal in the Church.