



Friday 13 March 2020

**OPEN LETTER from BISHOP BILL WRIGHT to the PEOPLE of the DIOCESE in
PREPARATION for the AIRING of the ABC DOCUMENTARY *REVELATION***

Dear People of Our Diocese,

You may well have seen or heard promotional material for a documentary series entitled *Revelation*, hosted by Sarah Ferguson, that will screen on ABC television over three weeks, beginning this Tuesday, 17th March. The series will certainly feature this diocese and particularly matters related to the convicted paedophile Vincent Gerard Ryan, with whom Ms Ferguson secured an interview. I also gave a long interview to Ms Ferguson on Ryan and related matters.

I agreed to be interviewed for the documentary in the belief that it was intended to be a serious, in-depth and considered exploration of the child sexual abuse crisis in our church and what we have done and continue to do, to address those truths. However, based on Ms Ferguson's promotional interviews and the brief preview posted online, I am concerned that the documentary has taken a more sensationalist approach. If that is the case, the program may be disturbing to you as Catholics, or it may cause difficulties for you in your relations with family members, friends or colleagues. It could cause further distress to survivors of abuse and to those who share their lives and struggles. Therefore, in these coming weeks, I believe we will all need to strive to be gentle with ourselves and those around us. We should, I believe, hold in prayer all those who have been harmed and their families, those who have been lost to us as a result of the abuse they have suffered, and those who grieve for their lost ones.

Believing that it may be of some assistance, I have prepared a detailed communication on the diocesan website (on the '*press release and statements*' web page) that provides more information on the issues canvassed in my interview with Ms Ferguson. In brief summary:

1. I was asked why Vincent Gerard Ryan has not been 'defrocked'. The short answer is that the case is in Rome and we await the decision.
2. Bishop Leo Clarke was bishop at the time Ryan's abuse was discovered. Ms Ferguson questioned the appropriateness of a plaque citing Bishop Clarke's achievements that was on a wall of St John's Chapel, Maitland, with those of the other deceased bishops. We have repeatedly and publicly acknowledged Bishop

Clarke's failures to protect children by allowing Ryan to continue in ministry. Now, in line with that, the plaque at Maitland has been permanently removed.

3. Ms Ferguson cited Ryan as "almost the perfect example" of the risk to children from the 'seal' of Confession. In fact, Ryan had admitted to abusing children as early as 1974, and not in sacramental Confession. It was not confessional secrecy that prevented Ryan from being reported.
4. Ms Ferguson then questioned me on whether I thought it more important to protect children or to protect the seal of Confession. I do not believe that this issue can be reduced to a simple 'either/or' proposition. Both things are incredibly important, but they apply to different spheres of life. We had a long discussion on this matter, which probably cannot be captured in the documentary format.
5. Andrew Nash was a 13 year old student of Marist Brothers Hamilton who died in 1974. The Marist Brothers and this diocese have accepted that Andrew committed suicide after being sexually abused by Br. Romuald. Andrew's mother, Audrey Nash, gave evidence that her family did not receive pastoral care from the local parish priest after Andrew died, and Ms Ferguson raised it with me. This is a matter of deep regret and shame. It is one of the reasons that the Diocese has established a comprehensive parish leadership framework of professional supervision, coaching and counselling and an appraisal cycle including '360 degree' performance reviews.
6. Rev. William Burston is a retired priest whom Ms Ferguson interviewed. He is alleged to have said to her that Andrew Nash had not been abused nor had he committed suicide. Ms Ferguson also put it to me that Rev. Burston believes that Ryan's recent conviction was unjust. If these are accurate reflections of Rev Burston's private opinions, it was utterly inappropriate that he, as a priest of the diocese, stated them in a form likely to become public and cause distress. The Diocese accepts that Andrew Nash was abused by the criminal 'Br. Romuald' and tragically took his own life. Further, I retain full confidence in our criminal justice system, its administration and its proper checks and balances.

Whether you choose to watch all, part or none of the documentary, you may be affected by it. It is likely that there will be media coverage and public discussion about it.

If you are distressed by any of this, I encourage you to seek support. The Office of Safeguarding [P. 4979 1390] can provide you advice about how we safeguard children today and Healing and Support (Zimmerman Service) [P. 4923 0636 during office hours] can talk to you about the services the Diocese provides survivors of sexual abuse and their families. You can access detailed information about the Diocese's commitment to safeguarding children at the Office of Safeguarding website.

Finally, I am sorry if this letter has itself caused you distress. It is important that we as a diocese, all of us, remember the terrible things that were done here and the failures that allowed them to go on. But there are ways of remembering, ways of caring for survivors and ways of ensuring the safety of children and vulnerable people, which help keep us committed, from which we get better as a church, through which we contribute to a better society. Unfortunately not all ways of re-visiting the past are so constructive, but for our part, we must always enter into the conversation with patience, understanding, fairness and compassion. As Lent reminds us, we are always called to be changing and growing, whatever may come our way.

Most Reverend William Wright
Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle