Statement by Bishop Les Tomlinson on the film Spotlight

The Australian release of the movie Spotlight, which details the uncovering of the sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, and in the United States of America more generally, tragically has many parallels for the Catholic Church in Australia. The film is riveting and challenging and makes for uncomfortable viewing, especially in its portrayal of the betrayal of trust and the loss of faith in the Church of ordinary, good people.

In Australia, as in the US, many innocent children and young people were sexually abused by priests, religious and other Church personnel. Their faith and their lives were profoundly damaged, if not destroyed, by this terrible betrayal. When they found the courage to tell their stories they were often not believed, or treated with dignity, or offered any assistance to deal with the legacy of the abuse. Too often the Church was perceived as protecting its own interests first. Sometimes victims had to endure the pain of seeing their abusers moved from place to place, putting more innocent young people at risk.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continues its vital work of investigating this terrible scourge which is, to our great shame as the Catholic community and as the Australian nation, far more widespread in institutional settings than any of us have previously believed.

In our Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst, we are fully committed to a number of key tasks and actions in response to this horrifying reality. These measures include:

- the Professional Standards Committee of the Diocese which meets regularly to review practices and processes relating to professional standards, and offers compassionate and just treatment for those persons who come forward with a complaint about sexual abuse;

- professional psychological assessment of any person seeking to enter the seminary as a student for the Diocese, prior to their acceptance into the seminary, as well as on-going, recorded induction into the principal documents and processes associated with professional standards of clergy in Australia, and specifically psycho-sexual development, during their seminary formation;

- our Catholic schools have clear policies in relation to the well-being and protection of children under their care, and very clear protocols for dealing with complaints or concerns. In conformity with recent Victorian Government legislation, our CEO has put in place in our schools policies concerning working with children, mandatory reporting, failure to disclose, failure to protect and grooming, all of which form an integrated whole, the principal and primary focus being always the protection of the child; and

- all clergy and others in our Catholic Community who work with children are required to have a current Working With Children Card (WWCC). For clergy this requirement is monitored by the Bishop; for persons employed in Catholic education, by the CEO. A WWCC is of course a requirement for non-teaching staff employment in our schools and teaching staff are cleared through their registration process.

We await the final recommendations of the Royal Commission and stand ready to change or augment our safeguarding policies and processes where necessary.

In light of the terrible suffering inflicted on innocent children and young people by members of the Church in the past, we are determined to do everything we can to ensure that no one suffers in this way again, now or in the future.
The screening of Spotlight, even as it reveals a terrible and painful story, is an opportunity for all of us in the Church to acknowledge the extent to which some of our brothers and sisters, including our leaders, have failed so badly, also here in Australia, to be the signs and bearers of God’s love and compassion they were expected, and appointed, to be.

More importantly it can be an opportunity to re-double our efforts to assist those who have been the victims, and now survivors, of this terrible abuse and for whom the screening of this movie might well open up painful wounds. It reinforces our shared determination to make our parishes and other institutions and agencies of the Diocese of Sandhurst places of absolute safety for our children and young people.

I would encourage anyone who has a complaint about child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church to immediately contact the police (details of the SANO task force below). If you need help to do so, you can contact our Professional Standards Committee for advice and assistance (contact details below). If you do not wish to go to the police at this time, our Professional Standards Committee can explain the protocols of Towards Healing, the process the Church follows in Victoria to deal with such matters if the complainant does not wish to go the police.

As the current Bishop of Sandhurst, I want to conclude by once again offering a sincere and deeply felt apology to all those who have suffered sexual abuse as children by members of the clergy, religious orders or other Church workers or representatives of this Diocese. You were betrayed in the most terrible way possible by those from whom you had a right to expect nothing but goodness and fidelity.

So many of you have lost so much, including perhaps your faith in the Church.

Please do not give up on God.

You are carried in the hearts, the memories and the prayers of the Catholic community of Sandhurst.

Most Rev. Leslie Tomlinson, DD,
Bishop of Sandhurst.
February 7, 2016.

Professional Standards Committee
c/o Diocesan Chancery Tel. (03) 5441 2544

SANO Police Taskforce 1800 110007

National Committee for Professional Standards
P.O. Box 7132, Alexandria NSW 2015 Tel. (02) 9669 6218

Victorian Director of Professional Standards 1800 816 030.

(Adapted for the Diocese of Sandhurst from a statement by Most Rev. Timothy Costelloe SDB, Archbishop of Perth. Used with permission).