

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” Romans 12:12

To the Catholic People of the Diocese of Parramatta

Dear friends

We, the members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) of the diocese of Parramatta - the forum through which the laity exercise co-responsibility with the Bishop and clergy - express our deep sadness in relation to the recent circulation of an anonymous petition by a person or group claiming to be the ‘Heart of Parramatta’ on Change.org, calling for the removal of Bishop Vincent Long from the See of Parramatta. Vincent is accused of creating turmoil, loss of faith, and disregarding Church teachings, although these are not specified. As the DPC we are compelled to express our deeply felt shock at the appearance of the petition on a widely accessible social advocacy website. Its claims are premised on untruths, its anonymity is potentially sinister and the distinct absence of evidence for its assertions consigns it to the dubious category of ‘fake news’ rendering it mischievous.

We also express our deeply felt concern at what seems to be an attempt to create division and animosity within our Church and more particularly within our diocese. We believe that these assertions and its delivery, both on the internet and in the press, are not an acceptable way to address issues of differing viewpoints. Instead, the DPC is committed to fostering deep listening and respectful dialogue as these are the cornerstones of a discerning Christian community through which the Holy Spirit speaks. We readily recognise that deep listening does not mean that we will always agree; by the same token, we also recognise that there is no place in our Church for taking matters into the public forum without respectful dialogue.

Bishop Vincent’s endorsement of the current **Draft Religious Education** curriculum - which has given rise to the unacceptable public criticism of him - flows clearly from Pope Francis’ words to his brother bishops in 2015: *“Christian doctrine is not a closed system incapable of generating questions, doubts, interrogatives — but is alive, knows being unsettled, enlivened. It has a face that is not rigid, it has a body that moves and grows, it has a soft flesh: it is called Jesus Christ”*.

During the last 6 years, the curriculum has undergone a vigorous review and is now being trialled. Understandably, as with many forms of change, some of what both Pope Francis and Bishop Vincent promote in our Church creates differences of opinion on some Church matters, which run the risk of creating conflict and tension. Pope Francis invites us to expand our horizons beyond conflicts – counselling all of us that it is a mistake to try and resolve polarisation of opinion in the Church **by allowing one side to defeat the other**. Instead, as a united Church, Francis encourages us to be seeking a *“third way”*, one that the Holy Spirit offers: *Conflict is overcome at a higher level, where each group can join the other in a new reality, while remaining faithful to itself*.

In light of this current controversy one is left asking, is this current wave of opposition to our bishop a reflection of the cost of his courageous discipleship - his stance against clericalism, his unapologetic call for all of us to walk lovingly with our poor and marginalised, the homeless, our indigenous sisters and brothers, our minorities, the needy, the refugees amongst us, those with mental illness, those victimised for their sexual identity, the divorced and separated couples who have suffered broken relationships, our sexually abused survivors, our priests and religious who have left active ministry ... all of whom are a part of the Body of Christ?

As a united Council we are proud to walk with Vincent in pursuit of his vision as he seeks a *‘Gospel-inspired Church’* in the Parramatta diocese. This diocese is blessed in a leadership of radical inclusivity, accompaniment and dialogue, mission and ministry reflected in the imperatives of our Catholic faith tradition and the call of Jesus. May we stand and encourage support not just of Bishop Vincent Long but of all the leadership and its members across our diocese: in parishes, schools and all our ministries, as one voice in the name of Jesus Christ.

We encourage you to stay hopeful, have patience, and draw strength from Galatians 6:9 “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

Respectfully,

Diocesan Pastoral Council of Parramatta.

NB: Employees of the Diocese of Parramatta have not in any way contributed to this statement.