



Idol Talk? In the Image of the Disabled God: **Disability, the Imago Dei and Practical Consequences**

Conference Program

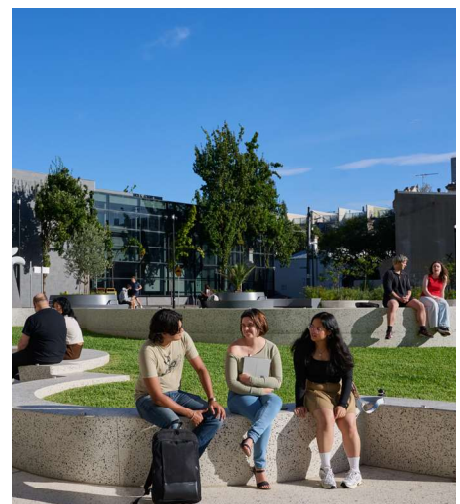
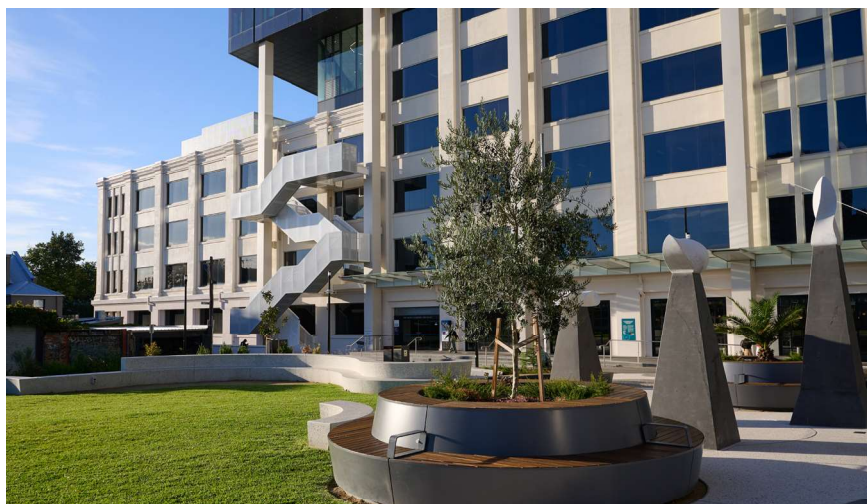
22 – 23 May 2025
Australian Catholic University
St Patrick's Campus, Melbourne

Idol Talk? In the Image of the Disabled God: Disability, the Imago Dei and Practical Consequences

Conference Program

Conference Schedule

| TIME | THURSDAY 22 MAY 2025 | |
|----------------|---|---|
| 8.30 – 9.15am | Registration and Tea/Coffee | |
| 9.15 – 9.30am | Welcomes and Introductions | |
| 9.30 – 10.30am | Plenary Keynote 1: Archbishop Peter Comensoli, 'Human Life: Created not Made' | |
| 10.30 – 11am | Morning Tea | |
| 11am – 12.30pm | SESSION A Welcoming, Friendships, and Inclusion Maria Scharnke, 'Behold my hands, and be not faithless' David Treanor, 'Friendships – Make a Difference' Neal Murphy, 'Living with Honour – Sharing the Fruits of Encounter' | SESSION B Aging, the Image of God, and Eschatology Rev Martin Scharnke, 'Elders as fully the imago dei' Rev. Ben Boland, 'Dementia and the New Creation' Debra J. Philips, Cristina Lledo Gomez, Melissa Cain, 'Unlimited Joy: A Story of David, Confirmed that he is Made in the Image of God' |
| 12.30 – 1.30pm | Lunch | |
| 1.30 – 2.30pm | Plenary Keynote 2: Fr Justin Glyn SJ, 'Idol Talk? In the Image of the Disabled God' | |
| 2.40 – 3.45pm | SESSION C Rights and Public Policy in Catholic Perspective Samantha Connor, "'Sacred, Not Suffering": Reimagining Catholic Protection of Disabled Life Beyond Martyrdom Narratives' Josh Lourensz, 'Current Assumptions of the NDIS and the Disability Support Pension Betray their Intent of Effective Contribution to the Common Good' | |
| 3.45 – 4.15pm | Afternoon Tea | |
| 4.15 – 4.45pm | SESSION D Plenary Discussion and Reflection Sandie Cornish, Justin Glyn, and Louise Gosbell | |



| TIME | FRIDAY 23 MAY 2025 |
|----------------|--|
| 8.30 – 9am | Tea/Coffee |
| 9 – 10am | Plenary Keynote 3 (by zoom): Daniel P. Horan: The Dignity of the Particular: <i>Haecceitas</i> , Disability, and the Renewal of Theological Anthropology |
| 10 – 11am | SESSION E Belonging Together: L'Arche Australia Panellists: Claire Lawler and members of L'Arche Australia |
| 11 – 11.30am | Morning Tea |
| 11.30am – 12pm | SESSION F Theology, Linguistics, and Access in the Church: Is it Enough for Deaf Parishioners? Panellists: Teresa Paulet, Katrina Mynard, and Gail Finn |
| 12 – 1pm | SESSION G Perceiving, Including, Encountering Julmar Lofranco, 'Healing Presence: Evangelising Love: Pastoral Care for Persons with Physical and Mental Disabilities in the Diocese of Malaybalay' Zachariah Duke, 'Witnesses of Hope in the Image of God: Practical Tools for Building Stronger Communities of Belonging for People with Disability' |
| 1 – 2pm | Lunch |
| 2 – 3pm | SESSION H It Takes More than a Ramp to Belong Panellists: Sr Geraldine Larkins RSJ, Daniel Giles and Colleagues |
| 3 – 3.30pm | Plenary Keynote 4 (by zoom): Vittorio Scelzo, Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life |
| 3.30 – 4pm | SESSION I Plenary Reflections and Close of Conference Sandie Cornish, Justin Glyn, and Louise Gosbell |



Presentation Abstracts

| DATE | TIME | PRESENTER |
|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 11am – 12.30pm | Rev. Ben Boland |

Dementia and the New Creation

Eternity without tears, provides many Christians with great hope. Yet, interpreting the apocalyptic language of Revelation is challenging with a diversity of views being held. So, how should we understand Revelation 21 with reference to dementia?

Historically Christian theology presented disability as starting because of the fall and ending with the new creation where there would be no disability and therefore no dementia. Some disability theologians have challenged this view and argued that disability is a good part of the diversity and limited nature of being human and will therefore be present on the new earth. This presentation asks if either of these positions is viable with specific focus on Revelation 21 and dementia.

Dementia is an acquired, degenerative and isolating disability, which is often typified by tears, mourning and death. Therefore, the suggestion that dementia will be present in the new creation is hard to reconcile with Revelation 21. Further complicating a Biblical understanding of heaven is Scripture's multiple examples of God mourning and crying both pre and post incarnation. Additionally, Scripture calls God's people to lament, sorrow and weep under both covenants. Therefore tears, mourning and lament are good and holy activities.

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 11am – 12.30pm | Neal Murphy |
|--------------|----------------|-------------|

Living with Honour – Sharing the Fruits of Encounter

The mission of Accord Disability Services, to *continue the healing mission of Jesus*, invites and engenders transformational moments of encounter, liberation and healing for both service provider (the support worker) and service recipient (the person with intellectual disability). Lives become interwoven and produce many healing moments of gifted opportunity. Within such moments those who stand before us in profound limitation and need become the expert teacher and mission leader who teach how to encounter and embrace the limitations of existence, to re-evaluate life priorities and re-imagine innate dignity and worth through shared presence and hospitality.

Accord has created a two day formation experience for its Managers and Directors in partnership with people with intellectual disability entitled *Living with Honour*. This formation explores the subject of innate dignity, human flourishing and wholeness, experienced particularly in the lives of people with intellectual disability, and challenges the perception that disability is a diminishment of a person's character. The fruits of this formation has transformed participants understanding, demonstrating that people with intellectual disability live complete and purposeful lives just like our own, and participants become liberated enough to embrace their own personal limitations and challenges and see at a deeper level a renewed understanding of their own dignity and worth.

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 11am – 12.30pm | Dr Debra J. Phillips |
|--------------|----------------|----------------------|

Unlimited Joy: A story of David, Confirmed that he is made in the image of God

The 20th and 21st centuries' Disability Movement increased the participation and visibilisation of people with disabilities. By 2022 The Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life and the General Secretariat of the Synod recognised the "*apostolic capabilities of people with disabilities*". As Catholic schools' teachers and academics, our proactive action towards agentising students with disabilities shifts society's behaviours and attitudes. One initiative is to partner with students with disabilities and their families to realise "*active participation in parish life, Church life and societal life*". As Catholic educators, we are called to counter the established, idealised, Euro-centric perception of Imago Dei. By adopting a human rights model of disability, we move towards acknowledging frailty, difference and disability as natural to the human condition and celebrated as Imago Dei.

Our presentation

1. To contextualise, a vignette of David's school-based Confirmation is presented (Dr Debra J. Phillips).
2. An outline of how The DLFL enriches an understanding of traditional Ecclesiology to influence and shape a more holistic understanding of Imago Dei (Dr Cristina Lledo Gomez).
3. An overview of socio-cultural underpinnings of schooling practices and philosophies that fetter authentic inclusive educational practices. An examination of how a human rights model of disability embedded within Imago Dei can assist Australia's Catholic schools to adopt strategies that enable students with disabilities to become agents of change. (Ass Pr. Melissa Cain and Dr Debra J. Phillips).

| DATE | TIME | PRESENTER |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 11am – 12.30pm | Maria Scharnke |

Behold my hands, and be not faithless

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. **John 20:27, King James Version**

“Put your finger here and look at my hands! Put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and have faith!” Thomas replied, “You are my Lord and my God!” **John 20:27b-8, Contemporary English Version**

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” **John 20:27-9, New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition**

Like Thomas, we each are shown that our Lord God has what, in the context of this time and society, would be classified as disability (impairment, deformity, etc). How accessible would our churches be to God, using the Scripture to discern His likely access needs (eg, wheelchair access and Augmentative and Alternative Communication).

Scenarios to consider:

- How do you think someone with five chronic open wounds, one in each hand, one in each foot, one in their side, would move? Could they get into your church building? Could they take the Eucharist?
- Could someone who prays in “groanings that cannot be uttered,” as the Holy Spirit does (Romans 8:23, NKJV quoted), participate in your service, or would they be hushed for being a distraction?
- Could someone in a chair of wheels (or otherwise moving chair -) come in to the church building with everyone else, or would they be separated and required to use a side door? Could they make it up to the altar? (The curtain was torn open, and altar rails are built with gaps to symbolise that there is no longer a barrier between us and the holy place. There should not be a barrier to the altar.)
- Could these people be in church leadership?
Could they be parish priests? Bishops?
Popes?
This is the Lord God.
There was “nothing in His form that we should desire Him”.
- Christ is the one concrete, scriptural example we have of a body perfect in the Resurrection, and this body has open wounds. It is not merely an abstraction, an extrapolation from the imago dei, to say that God is Disabled. He is Disabled. He also states that what we do for the least of ‘these brothers and sisters of mine,’ we do also to him. He stands at the door and knocks. So, how are we going to make sure he can come in, and then participate equally?

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 11am – 12.30pm | Rev Martin Scharnke |
|--------------|----------------|---------------------|

Elders as fully the imago dei

Aged Care in Australia has come a long way. From the growth in aged care institutions in the 1960s, through numerous legislative changes, and with a much-publicized Royal Commission, there has been an important shift away from a medical model to a person-centered model of care. This shift does not deny the considerable need for support of elders from the medical sciences, but moves it away from the foreground of life for elders, emphasizing, the personhood of each older person, irrespective of the limitations they experience.

It is my contention that, notwithstanding the progress that has been made, our society still makes “internal exiles” of many older persons. Whether their limitations be physical (reduced mobility), sensory (reduced or failing eyesight or hearing), or cognitive (dementias), it is the prophetic role of the Church to remind our society that our elders are every bit as much imago dei as any other person. The Church must especially advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves, and the life of every older person. I wish to present a series of scenarios of the form: instead of / why not? – and to challenge some of the objections that are frequently raised, as well as highlight examples of successful challenges to status quo.

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|------------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 11am – 12.30pm | Dr David Treanor |
|--------------|----------------|------------------|

Friendships – Make a Difference

‘*Nothing about us, without us*’ developed as a mantra following Charlton’s manuscript and calls persons without disabilities, communities and institutions, to rely on this as a fundamental principle to achieve the full participation and equalization of opportunities for, by and with persons with disabilities. This call or requirement is echoed in the recent publications by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life[2]. The principle, however, for many persons, communities and institutions, remains aspirational. At the personal level, it remains a hope to be fully embraced as a person, to be listened to, heard, valued and offered opportunities to participate and belong to a parish community, ministry, and/or institution. In the community or institutional sphere, it often remains, albeit good intentions, as a strong desire to include everyone in activity. We can speculate on reasons why we are in this predicament.

This presentation proposes one reason, and possibly the most critical one, for this dilemma, it follows from our inability or create, sustain and nurture appropriate friendships with persons with disabilities. Our friendships are of the most value to us precisely because they are constituted by appreciation – our friends choose us for who we are and not out of some moral or social role obligation. It is through friendship that we recognize the gifts of our friends, and we affirm and support them to deepen and use it for their own, their family and community benefit. The presentation focuses on what we can do: how we can create friendships and how they can make a difference to our own lives, communities, ministries and parishes.

| DATE | TIME | PRESENTER |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 1.30pm – 2.30pm | Fr Justin Glyn SJ |

Idol Talk? In the Image of the Disabled God

I have previously argued that a theology of the *imago Dei* that sees it as fundamentally relational and takes human limitation seriously will necessarily conclude that the Incarnation itself, and not just the Crucifixion, declares the presence of Eiesland's Disabled God. The Christ who became one with us necessarily assumed the limitation of the human condition as a whole – even if, in practice, he had to be incarnated as *an* identifiable human, with some traits and not others. This included all the limitations that come with infancy, ageing and being tortured to death and possibly (depending on how one reads Matt 8:16-17), the conditions he cured as well. In this paper, I suggest that to avoid this being mere “Idol Talk”, this realisation needs to be modelled in the theology and praxis of the Church as a whole. To see why, we should probably remind ourselves of what an idol is...and why it is such a term of contempt for monotheists.

| | | |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 2.40pm – 3.40pm | Samantha Connor AM |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|

Sacred, Not Suffering: Reimagining Catholic Protection of Disabled Life Beyond Martyrdom Narratives

This presentation examines the intersection of secular disability rights and Catholic pro-life positions in understanding human limitation, arguing for a theological framework that moves beyond both martyrdom and autonomy narratives. Through disability rights perspectives on human dignity, it challenges religious framings of suffering as redemptive while analysing how Church institutions can be powerful allies in affirming disabled lives.

Using case studies from COVID-19 responses, euthanasia debates, and healthcare rationing, this paper demonstrates how disability rights frameworks align with Catholic teachings on human dignity to address the “internal exile” of disabled people. It proposes practical responses for Church institutions to advance disability rights through:

- Protection of life without romanticising suffering
- Advocacy for healthcare access and comprehensive disability support
- Opposition to euthanasia while supporting disability justice
- Challenging healthcare discrimination while affirming inherent dignity

This framework offers a prophetic model for Church engagement that centres disabled people's right to both life and quality of life, responding to society's failure to recognise limitation as intrinsic to human nature.'

| | | |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Thurs 22 May | 2.40pm – 3.40pm | Josh Lourensz |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------|

Current Assumptions of the NDIS and the Disability Support Pension Betray their Intent of Effective Contribution to the Common Good

The NDIS has become, alongside the Disability Support Pension, the predominant funded modes of support for people with disability/different abilities in Australia. The NDIS, being an individualised-needs model, attempts to utilise market principles for efficient and choice-driven service/support delivery. This has worked very well for some, but simultaneously failed to deliver the kind of promised supports many people hope and need, while eroding social service organisational infrastructure.

This presentation will draw on Considine's (2022) critique that - where services are concerned - the strengths of market operations do not hold as they do for static products/commodities. This critique will be contextualised by an analysis of the evolution of social services in Australia, and how Catholic social services, and actors more broadly, have failed to challenge fundamental neoliberal assumptions about human organising and person-ness, which have contributed to failures of our current funding/support systems. This presentation will look to deeper and more radical configurations of community, funding and services that have the possibility of attending to the richness of human experience and essence, effectively contributing to the base conditions and considerations by which all in our society can have the possibility of flourishing, together.

| | | |
|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Fri 23 May | 9 – 10am | Daniel P. Horan |
|------------|----------|-----------------|

The Dignity of the Particular: *Haecceitas*, Disability, and the Renewal of Theological Anthropology

In his December 2019 message on the occasion of ‘*International Day of Persons with Disabilities*,’ Pope Francis called for the formation of consciences ‘capable of recognizing each of us as a unique and unrepeatable person.’ This is a theme he has repeated often over the years, exhorting Christians and other people of good will to see that, among other dimensions, ‘the dignity of each person... does not depend on the functionality of the five senses.’ It appears that the pope is specifically responding to the widespread tendency to categorize, evaluate, dismiss or downgrade the dignity and value of persons with disabilities on the grounds that such persons do not conform to preconceived notions of ‘normalcy’ or ability. However, he does not elaborate on what fundamental theological sources inform this anthropological assertion. While this positive claim about the intrinsic dignity of the human person, whatever their social location or ability, is admirable (and I would argue incontrovertible), too often the received theological anthropologies that ground much of the Church's moral frameworks and theological imaginaries presupposes a primacy of the ‘common nature’ of humanity and an individual's conformity to a presumed quidditas (‘whatness’) or essence over the particular or singular individual. Such a paradigm is found in the thought of Thomas Aquinas among others and it has been used in deleterious ways to justify the exclusion (ecclesially and socially), dehumanization, and even violence against persons with disabilities and other minoritized populations over the centuries. This lecture proposes a preliminary foundation for a renewed understanding of the human person within the Catholic Christian context that draws on the medieval insights of John Duns Scotus and his distinctive approach to the principle of individuation known as *haecceitas* (‘thisness’). While other scholars have drawn on different aspects of Scotus's thought in conversation with disability studies, the principle of *haecceitas* as a foundation for theological anthropology and its relevance for persons with disabilities has yet to be substantively developed.

| DATE | TIME | PRESENTER |
|------------|-----------|---------------|
| Fri 23 May | 10 – 11am | Claire Lawler |

Belonging Together: L'Arche Australia

For almost Fifty years L'Arche Australia has been creating communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together. This shared life has grown and evolved over time as have our members, but at the heart a shared radical commitment to mutually transforming relationships has remained.

In this panel presentation members of L'Arche Australia, with and without intellectual disabilities, will speak about their individual and collective journeys and some of their learnings about what it means to be truly human in a world where we are increasingly alienated from each other. Members will share some of the “highs” and “lows” of their life in community as well as offering how these experiences have shaped their theological understandings of a spirituality that is incarnational, grounded in their day-to-day reality. With revelation that L'Arche has not remained untouched by the abuse crisis in the church, members will also explore how they have grappled with the abuse perpetrated by their founder Jean Vanier and the implications this has had for their communities.

| | | |
|------------|----------|----------------|
| Fri 23 May | 12 – 1pm | Zachariah Duke |
|------------|----------|----------------|

Witnesses of Hope in the Image of God: Practical Tools for Building Stronger Communities of Belonging for People with Disability

The *imago Dei* is one of the foundational cornerstones of Christian theological anthropology. The *imago Dei* acts as the basis for all mutually enriching relationships with people with disability. The notion of creating communities of belonging is central to the Image of God. The late Pope Francis stressed this when he was quoted saying: “Promoting recognition of the dignity of every person is a constant responsibility of the Church: it is the mission of continuing over time the closeness of Jesus Christ to every man and woman, especially those who are most fragile and vulnerable.” This paper offers some practical and tangible tools to build stronger communities of belonging for people with disability at the grassroots level. These tools will lead communities (whether it is a diocese, parish, school, and so on) from being a place where people with disability are merely included, to a place where people with disability belong. John Swinton stresses the importance of moving beyond mere inclusion, to creating communities of belonging: “for a person to be present, they need to be missed.”

| | | |
|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Fri 23 May | 12 – 1pm | Julmar Lofranco |
|------------|----------|-----------------|

Healing Presence: Evangelising Love: Pastoral Care for Persons with Physical and Mental Disabilities in the Diocese of Malaybalay

Evangelization lies at the heart of the Catholic Church's mission, grounded in Christ's command to “make disciples of all nations.” This call goes beyond preaching to include concrete acts of mercy and compassion, particularly toward the most vulnerable. Among them are persons with physical and mental disabilities, whose presence invites the Church to make the Kingdom of God visible through a healing and inclusive pastoral response.

This paper explores how the Diocese of Malaybalay - shaped by its distinct socio-cultural and pastoral landscape in Northern Mindanao - responds to the realities of disability within its evangelizing mission. Drawing from the diocese's lived experience, its rootedness in Basic Ecclesial Communities, its engagement with indigenous populations, and its pastoral outreach in underserved areas, the study examines how the local Church addresses the needs and dignity of persons with disabilities. Guided by the See-Judge-Act method, it begins by assessing the challenges of marginalization, invisibility, and limited access that many persons with disabilities face in both ecclesial and social life.

In light of the healing ministry of Jesus, and guided by *Catholic Social Teaching*, the Second Vatican Council, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Fratelli Tutti*, and the pastoral vision of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, the paper offers a theological and pastoral discernment of disability as both a site of vulnerability and a locus of grace.

By highlighting ongoing diocesan initiatives - particularly in education, healthcare, and social ministry - it calls for a renewed pastoral framework that recognizes persons with disabilities not only as recipients of care, but as co-evangelizers. It envisions a Church that listens, accompanies, and is transformed - a Church that truly “smells like the sheep.”

Participant Biographies



REV BEN BOLAND

Rev Ben Boland holds a BSc (Hon), Master of Divinity, and a Graduate Diploma in Ageing

and Pastoral Studies. For the past 15 years, he has served as an aged care chaplain and has been actively engaged in advocacy around ministry with older people and those living with dementia. His advocacy includes speaking, writing, and teaching on the spiritual and pastoral needs of ageing communities.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR MELISSA CAIN

Dr Cain (SHFEA) is Associate Professor in the National School

of Education at Australian Catholic University. Melissa is an established profile in Inclusive Education centering on supporting students with blindness and low vision in mainstream educational contexts to access the full curriculum. Extending this focus, Dr Cain examines a currently unaddressed area of literature – the impact of cultural, religious, and spiritual conceptions of disability on the advance of inclusive education. Melissa is active in the low vision community, collaborating with Next Sense, Vision Australia, and the South Pacific Educators of Vision Impairment. She is the recipient of the Callaway Doctoral Award.



MOST REV PETER A COMENSOLI DD STL MLITT PHD

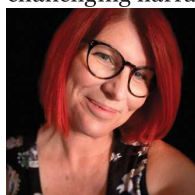
Born in the Illawarra region of NSW,

Archbishop Peter Comensoli has served as Archbishop of Melbourne since 2018, following previous roles as Bishop of Broken Bay and Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney. Nationally, he chairs

several key commissions, including the Bishops' Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement. He holds degrees in theology, moral philosophy, and theological ethics, including a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *In God's Image: Recognizing the Profoundly Impaired as Persons*.

SAMANTHA CONNOR AM

Samantha Connor is a nationally recognised disability rights advocate, strategist, and former President of People with Disability Australia. Based in Western Australia, she has led major campaigns including the establishment of the Disability Royal Commission and reforms to the NDIS. A frequent media commentator and former UN delegate, she is known for challenging narratives that devalue



disabled lives, particularly in debates around voluntary assisted dying. Appointed a Member of the Order of Australia

in 2024, Connor continues to speak and write on human rights, radical inclusion, and systemic justice.



DR SANDIE CORNISH

Dr Sandie Cornish is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Theology at the Australian

Catholic University and a member of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. She holds a PhD in Practical Theology, a Licentiate in Catholic Social Doctrine and Ethics, a Master of Public Policy, and a Bachelor of Economics. Sandie was an expert facilitator at the Synod on Synodality and is coordinator of Study Group 2: hearing the cry of the poor and the earth. She was one of the periti for the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia and a member of the Drafting Committee. Sandie has worked in

faith based social justice and human rights organisations at the diocesan, national and Asia Pacific levels where her roles have included organisational leadership, strategic planning, policy analysis and advocacy, social research, mission integration and formation for mission. She was the Director of the Office for Justice, Ecology and Peace of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and played a significant role in the Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace's consultations in the 1980's and 1990's.



CAMERON CUTTS (L'ARCHE AUSTRALIA)

Cameron has been a member of L'Arche since 1997, joining

the L'Arche Sydney community as a live in Assistant. Cameron is a former Community Leader of L'Arche Melbourne and is currently a senior Assistant in one of the households. In his spare time Cameron is a Spiritual Director.



DR ZACHARIAH DUKE

Zach is a senior lecturer in the National School of Theology, Faculty of Theology

and Philosophy, Australian Catholic University. Zach has previously held senior academic leadership positions at BBI-The Australian Institute of Theological Education, Jesuit College of Spirituality and Te Kupenga - Catholic Leadership Institute (Aotearoa New Zealand), as well as affiliate lectureships with the University of Wollongong, the University of Tasmania and the University of Newcastle. He is known internationally for his research in disability theology and has published numerous articles and presented around the world on this and related topics. He is an active member of several academic and professional

associations including the Australian Catholic Theological Association, the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (where he is the immediate past president), the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, and People with Disability Australia. Zach has been invited to advise the Australian Government and the NSW Department of Disability and Ageing on the National Disability Insurance Scheme and other disability policy matters.



**FRAN EXELL
(L'ARCHE
AUSTRALIA)**

Fran is a founding member of L'Arche Melbourne. Fran and her husband

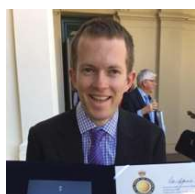
Ted have four adult children, the eldest of whom lives in a L'Arche Melbourne household. Now retired, Fran does volunteer work and in her spare time is an Iconographer.



GAIL FINN

Gail Finn is a retiree and has been totally deaf since birth. Gail has a Diploma of Pastoral Ministry

from Melbourne and a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Catholic University in the USA. Gail is fluent with both Australian Sign Language (Auslan) and American Sign Language (ASL). She is very involved with the John Pierce Centre (JPC), Prahran, where the Catholic Deaf community regularly gather. She worked at the JPC for many years and continues to volunteer as the Liturgy Co-ordinator to prepare the JPC monthly Masses and other Church services, including Easter, Christmas and funerals held at the John Pierce Centre.



**DANIEL GILES
OAM**

Daniel is proudly Autistic. Daniel has had the pleasure of being involved with

the Harrietville Family Weekends as a student, volunteer and an employee of Catholic Education Sandhurst Limited. Daniel started attending the Harrietville Family Weekends when he was in Grade 6. Since then he has

enjoyed many activities including Go Karting, skiing and tobogganing. Daniel is grateful for the opportunity to serve as a one-time altar server when he was in Year 7 and as a data projector operator. As an Autistic self-advocate, he was also invited a couple of times to present to the parents attending the weekend on his personal Autism journey. These included topics such as my school journey and self-advocacy. Daniel appreciated the opportunity to support families in supporting their own children on their journey. Since 2013, Daniel has been employed by Catholic Education Sandhurst Limited as a graphic designer. Part of his role included designing materials such as logos, liturgy slideshows and visual social narratives for the Harrietville Family Weekends. Daniel is now actively involved in his local parish and is a member of the parish liturgy team at St Therese's Parish in Bendigo.



FR JUSTIN GLYN

Justin Glyn is a blind Catholic priest, (civil and canon) lawyer and Jesuit who grew up in South

Africa and migrated to New Zealand in 1998 before joining the Jesuits in Australia in 2009. He has worked as a lawyer in all three countries and has a doctorate in international and administrative law from the University of Auckland. A fellow of the Loyola Institute and honorary fellow of ACU, he has written on law and theology - especially the theology of disability, is the General Counsel to the Australian Jesuits, in 2023, was appointed a consultant to the Dicastery (Vatican department) for Laity Family and Life.



**DR CRISTINA
LLEDO GOMEZ**

Cristina Lledo Gomez is Senior Lecturer and Presentation Sisters Chair

at BBI-The Australian Institute of Theological Education (TAITE). Cristina is also a Research Fellow for the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University. Her role at BBI-TAITE is directed toward promoting women's spiritualities, feminist theologies, and ecotheologies. She is the author of the *Church as Woman and Mother*

(2018) and co-editor of *Vulnerability and Flourishing* (2025) with John Sheveland. Cristina is Co-Convener of the Women's Consultation for Constructive Theology at the Catholic Theological Society of America and Board Member for the College Theology Society and Ecclesiological Investigations Network.



**DR LOUISE
GOSBELL**

Dr Louise Gosbell is the Research Manager at the Australian University of

Theology. Louise's research focuses on disability and the bible, as well as disability in church practice. Louise served for over 10 years as the Sydney co-ordinator for CBM Australia's Luke 14 program and has recently worked with them again to create some new disability resources for churches. Louise also worked with Social Issues Executive of the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church to create a resource for disability inclusion in Sydney Anglican Churches. Louise has a lived experience of disability and is passionate about seeing church communities become places of belonging for people with disability.



**DANIEL P.
HORAN, PHD**

Daniel P. Horan, PhD is Professor of Philosophy, Religious Studies and Theology and

Director of the Center for the Study of Spirituality at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. He is also Affiliated Professor of Spirituality at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. A columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, he is the author or editor of sixteen books, including *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, *A White Catholic's Guide to Racism and Privilege*, and *The Way of the Franciscans: A Prayer Journey Through Lent*. Prof. Horan's most recent books are titled *Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism* and *Fear and Faith: Hope and Wholeness in a Fractured World*. He is currently working on a book on Christology tentatively titled, *Not Because of Sin: Reconsidering the Reason God Became Human*.

His academic research, writing, and teaching focuses on medieval and contemporary spirituality, theological anthropology, Christology, antiracism and LGBTQ issues, and theologies of creation. Prof. Horan regularly lectures around the United States and abroad; and serves on several university, academic, and publication editorial boards, including the Board of Directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. He is recipient of numerous awards for his writing and service and is co-host of *The Francis Effect Podcast*.



CARMEL HOUSE

Carmel is a Catholic primary school teacher with a deep commitment to inclusive education. She is currently pursuing a Master of Learning Interventions at the University of Melbourne. Raised in Bendigo as the youngest of six children in a faith-filled Catholic family, Carmel now lives with her husband, two of their three young adult children, and a collection of beloved pets. Two of her children have been diagnosed with ASD and/or ADHD, shaping her personal and professional passion for supporting diverse learning needs. She is also a proud grandmother, caring for her granddaughter one day each week. Carmel's greatest joy is spending time with her family.



SR DR GERALDINE LARKINS

BEd, Grad Dip Psych, Grad Dip Ed Psych, MEd Psych, PhD (U of Melb), Grad Cert Higher Ed, Grad Cert Lead and Catholic Culture, MProf Studies Theology. Geraldine Larkins is a teacher, psychologist and leader in Catholic Education with experience at school, higher education and system levels. Geraldine has held leadership positions including Religious Education Leader, Deputy Principal, Principal, Deputy Head of School of Education ACU Melbourne and Deputy Director: Catholic Mission and Identity in a rural Diocese. Geraldine's current responsibilities include consultant work in formation

and sessional teaching at ACU. Geraldine is a Sister of St Joseph and a member of the Vic/Tas Regional Leadership Team.



CLAIRE LAWLER

Claire has been a committed member of L'Arche since 1984, making her home in numerous communities across Australia over the decades. She currently serves as the National Leader of L'Arche Australia, is the Federation Representative on the L'Arche International Extended Leadership Team, and remains an active member of the L'Arche NSW community. My dedication reflects a deep commitment to the values of inclusion, community, and shared life that define L'Arche around the world.



JULMAR R. LOFRANCO, MA., STHB.

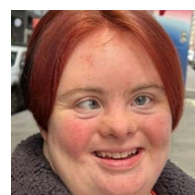
Julmar Ramos Lofranco is a Lecturer in Theology and Philosophy at Xavier University – Ateneo de Cagayan. Born in Malaybalay City, Philippines, he earned his BA in Philosophy (cum laude) from San Isidro College and his Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology (cum laude) from Loyola School of Theology. After discerning a vocation to married life, he wed Regine Mary Castro in 2025. He is completing a Master of Arts in Theological Studies at Ateneo de Manila University, with a thesis on the evangelization vision of the Diocese of Malaybalay. Julmar also leads retreats and conducts formation programs throughout Mindanao.



JOSH LOURENSZ

Josh Lourensz is the Executive Director of Catholic Social Services Victoria, the peak body representing more than 40 Catholic community service organisations across the state. With a background in social theory and anthropology, he brings a strong commitment to social justice, policy advocacy, and community engagement. Josh is also a member of the Australian Services Union.

He holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Social Theory and Anthropology, along with a Diploma in Languages (French) from the University of Melbourne.



ROSE MCLACHLAN (L'ARCHE AUSTRALIA)

Rose has been a member of L'Arche Melbourne since 2015 and decided to join a L'Arche Melbourne household in 2019. Rose is an actor, small businesswoman and loves to dance. In 2024 Rose travelled to France where she represented L'Arche Australia at a L'Arche International meeting.



KATRINA MYNARD

Katrina Mynard is profoundly deaf and has grown up in the John Pierce Centre (JPC) community. She has been working with the Deaf for more than 20 years. Katrina is the Pastoral Care Coordinator at the JPC and her passion is to educate Deaf people about their choices, help them to understand their rights and help them to feel empowered, especially those struggling for access in the "hearing" world. Katrina is dedicated to the Deaf Catholic community of Melbourne, encouraging people to participate in Auslan mass, special religious ceremonies and social gatherings and community activities. Katrina also teaches Auslan at Melbourne Polytechnic and works as a Deaf Interpreter. She is extremely proud of Australian Sign Language and her Deaf culture.



NEAL MURPHY

Originally from Wales, Neal has held a number of professional roles including teaching, counselling, and chaplaincy. Married with two children, having moved to Australia in 2001, Neal has worked exclusively for St. John of God Health Care in the area of Mission Integration. In his private life Neal is a Mental Health First Aid facilitator and founder of That Speaks of Peace.

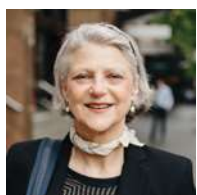
Important principles that drive Neal in his professional and private life is the belief in the profound dignity and worth of each individual and the obligation to create better in this world especially for those who find themselves on the margins of opportunity and acceptance. Neal holds undergraduate studies in Systematic Theology, Master's Degree in Social Science majoring in Pastoral Counselling, Master's in Business Administration and is a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Neal is also an accredited counsellor through the Australia Counselling Association and is currently studying to become a Clinical Supervisor.



TERESA PAULET

Teresa Paulet is a certified Auslan-English Interpreter and has worked in the interpreting

industry for over 20 years. She has a passion for accessibility for the deaf community and the rights of Deaf people to access information in Auslan (Australian Sign Language). Teresa has worked at the John Pierce Centre (JPC) for over 5 years as the Communications Coordinator and In-house Interpreter, supporting the provision of vital information and workshops for the deaf community to support empowerment and service accessibility.



DR DEBRA J PHILLIPS

Dr Phillips is an ACU Education lecturer in the National School of Education with

a focus on inclusive practice subjects. Prior to ACU she worked with students who have a disability and their parents across education sectors in a variety of schools. Building from the PhD interdisciplinary research (theology, sociology, visual arts, narratology), her current research and writing concerns itself with teachers' mental health, inclusive of teachers in special schools and satellite classes at a national and international level. Debra is a practicing artist referencing fairy tale and biblical themes.



VITTORIO SCELZO

Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life. Vittorio Scelzo was born in Salerno on 27

October 1975. Since the mid-1990s he has participated in the experience of communicating the Gospel to people with disabilities of the Community of Sant'Egidio. From 2004 to 2011 he was in charge of the Disabled Sector of the Catechetical Office of the Italian Episcopal Conference. From 2022 he animated, on behalf of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life of the Holy See, the synodal listening sessions dedicated to the faithful with disabilities that led to the publication of the documents "The Church is our Home" and "A Joy without Limits". The first fruit of the consultation was the participation, for the first time, of a faithful with disabilities in the two synod sessions on synodality.



MARIA SCHARNKE

Maria Scharnke is a young disability activist. She is a former board member of Women

With Disabilities Australia, a graduate of the Queenslanders with Disability Network's 2022 Emerging Leaders Program, and an access consultant. In 2024 she founded the AAC Image Library, or AACIL, a nonprofit accessibility project with a team of more than 80 Disabled volunteers worldwide. A regular church lector since before her confirmation, Maria is a part-time AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) user with 'complex communication needs,' who reconciles, by necessity, church function and disability equity. She believes in a Disabled God and in His Disabled people.

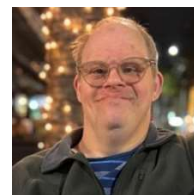


REV MARTIN SCHARNKE

Martin is an autistic Lutheran Pastor who had ministry experience in

congregations and church school, before a period of 13 years in aged-care chaplaincy. A significant part of this work informed his master's dissertation: "Bonhoeffer's Seelsorge

as model for aged-care chaplaincy in Australia." After working in overseas aid and development, he is now providing pastoral care in aged care once again. Prior to the ministry, Martin worked in banking and Management Information Systems. Though residing in Queensland, Martin describes himself as a German-descended, NZ-born, Australian-residing citizen of heaven. Martin is passionate about justice, and is a keen amateur photographer.



DOMINIC SIETZEMA (L'ARCHE AUSTRALIA)

Dominic is a founding member of L'Arche

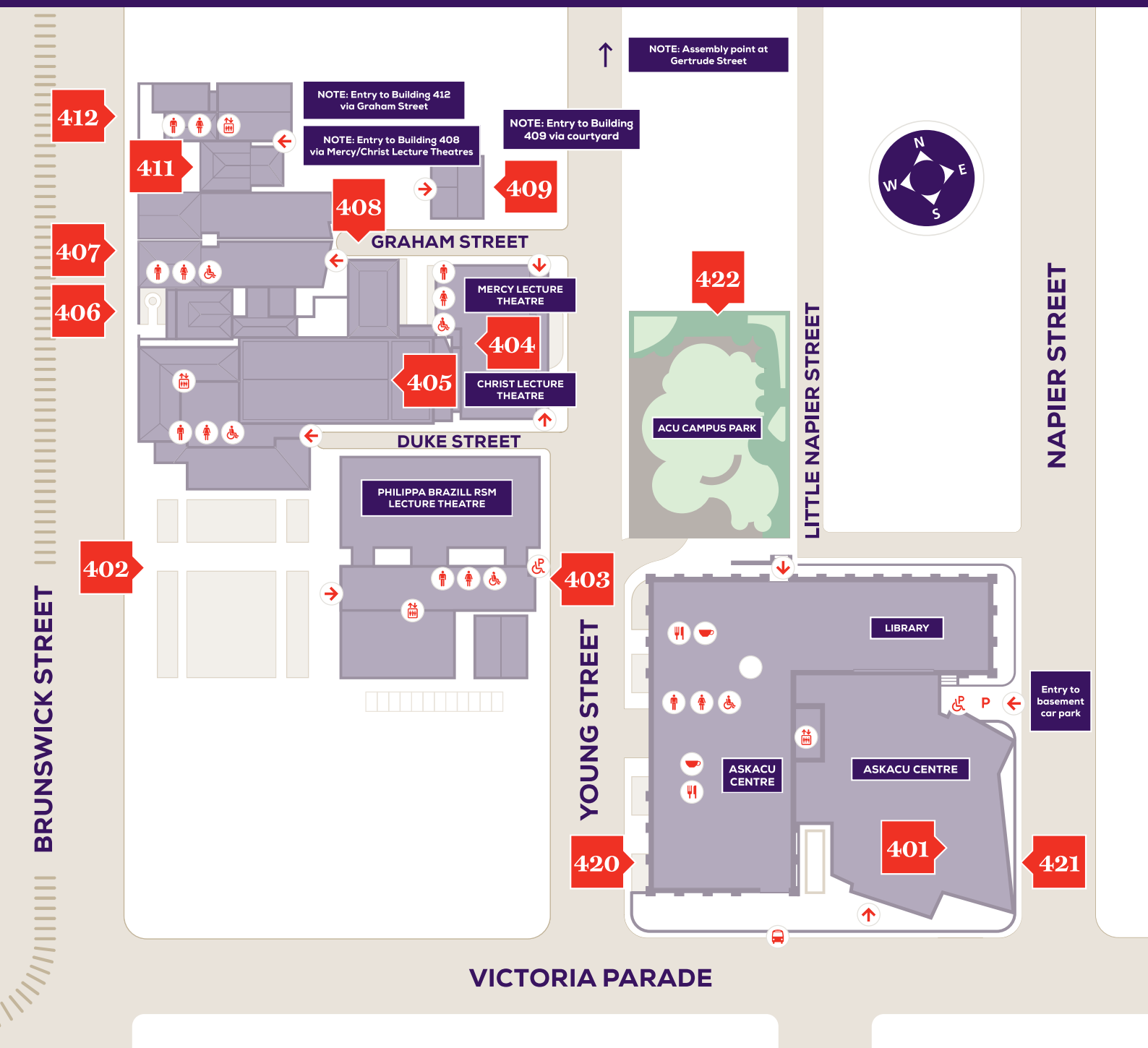
Melbourne, moving into a L'Arche Melbourne household in 2013. Dominic enjoys working as a gardener, volunteering at a local op-shop and is a jigsaw solving champion.



DAVID TREANOR

David P. Treanor Ph.D. (Philosophy) and is an University Associate in

the Philosophy & Gender program at the University of Tasmania, Australia. David's area of research is in Disability, Ethics and Friendship. David's dissertation presented a revised and richer understanding of friendship; he also considered the notion of whether mutually meaningful friendships are possible between persons who might be considered unequal to each other. His contemporary research projects focus on virtue ethics and the philosophy of personalism - the concept of persons in relation and human relationality (or personal friendships). David argues these constitute the fulcrum or essence of human nature. David has published in a number of articles in philosophical and human sciences journals. He has also recently published a critical commentary focused on the failure of community integration programs in western neoliberal societies. David is an active member of many professional associations.



Melbourne Campus (St Patrick's)

115 Victoria Parade,
Fitzroy, VIC 3065

The University respectfully acknowledges the Wurundjeri people as the traditional custodians of the land on which this campus is situated.

401 The Greg Craven Centre

402 St Mary of the Cross Square

403 The Daniel Mannix Building

404 Christ & Mercy Lecture Theatres

405 Cathedral Hall

406 Drake House

407 Art Gallery

408 Recital Hall

409 Visual Arts Building

411 32 Brunswick Street

412 Arts Precinct

420 The Mary Glowrey Building
(115 Victoria Parade)

421 Saint Teresa of Kolkata Building

422 ACU Campus Park



The Greg Craven Centre

Level 7,
St Teresa of Kolkata Building
115 Victoria Parade
Fitzroy

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Idol Talk? In the Image of the Disabled God: Disability, the Imago Dei and Practical Consequences

22 – 23 May 2025

Australian Catholic University
St Patrick's Campus, Melbourne



*ACU is committed to sustainability. This document is printed on
paper sourced from PEFC-certified, sustainably managed forests.*

*Disclaimer (May 2025): Information correct at time of printing. The university
reserves the right to amend, cancel or otherwise modify the content without notice.*