

OFFICE OF THE
VICE PRESIDENT

The Catholic
University
in a Plural,
Global World

A
conversation
at ACU

 **ACU**
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY





THE ACU MISSION

Within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and acting in Truth and Love, Australian Catholic University is committed to the pursuit of knowledge, the dignity of the human person and the common good.

A message from the Vice President

At ACU, our mission is our difference. It is what compels us to pursue knowledge, advance the dignity of the individual and seek the common good. Our mission defines who we are, what we do and the outcomes we strive to achieve for our students and staff.

As an Australian and Catholic university, we are stewards of both our Catholic tradition and our unique Australian heritage. Through the lens of the Catholic intellectual tradition and faithful to the norms of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, we actively support the living out of our mission in a variety of ways and invite all our staff, students, and collaborators to join us on this journey.

I hope that this reflection about ACU's identity as a Catholic university in our Australian context, will deepen your understanding of our mission and strengthen your contribution to it.



Fr Anthony Casamento CSMA

Fr Anthony Casamento
Vice President
Australian Catholic University
July 2021



ACU - A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

Uniquely, Australian Catholic University is a public Catholic university. It is a product of constructive co-operation between the Commonwealth of Australia and the Catholic Church in Australia.

This potential for co-operation began early in Australia's history. In May 1820, the first two officially approved Catholic chaplains, Fathers John Joseph Therry and Philip Conolly, arrived in New South Wales. In October 1821, Governor Lachlan Macquarie, a Freemason and member of the Church of Scotland, was invited by Fr Therry to set the first stone of St Mary's Church, Sydney: 'Vowing to keep the trowel in remembrance of the day, he promised to support the religious liberty of Therry's flock. The assembled crowd cheered mightily.'¹ During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the relationship between Australian state and federal governments and Catholic education became a fraught and complex one. While many schools in the early Australian colonies were sponsored by the churches, the development of public education systems meant the cessation of funding to Catholic and other church schools. From the 1960s, federal governments



led by Robert Menzies, and in the 1970s, Gough Whitlam, extended federal funding to the Catholic education system, including Catholic colleges of teacher education, the 'predecessor colleges' of ACU, which by the 1980s were also engaged in health care education.

Beginning in the 1850s, the predecessor colleges in Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Ballarat were founded by religious congregations, including the Brigidine Sisters, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of the Good Samaritan, Josephite Sisters, Dominican Sisters, Presentation Sisters, De La Salle Brothers, Marist Brothers and Christian Brothers. There were also unsuccessful attempts to found a Catholic university. The end of the 'binary system'² of higher education in Australia in the 1980s posed a critical challenge for these colleges, to retain their Catholic identity while meeting the funding requirements of the federal government in terms of size and scope.

This crisis became an opportunity: through the work of representatives of the different dioceses and colleges a proposal was developed, and accepted by the Hawke government, for the foundation of a public Catholic university in Australia.³

ACU's public character gives it a role and responsibility in relation to the Australian government and the Australian community. It is chartered and funded by government specifically to be a Catholic university and has a responsibility to fulfil that mission as well as it can. Part of that mission is to serve the Australian community and to offer a university education to any Australian, of any creed or none, who meets formal enrolment requirements.

Equally, it has a responsibility to the Australian Catholic community to build on the work begun by the predecessor colleges and their founders, and to expand and develop it in new contexts and in response to new challenges.

A UNIVERSITY

A Catholic university is, in the first place, a university. Since their foundation in medieval Western Europe, the relationship between teaching and research in universities displays significant variation. However, what is central to a university is the search for truth and the dissemination of truth through teaching. Universities have always served as institutions which train and form students for various professions, such as medicine, law and church ministry. Particularly through the reforms initiated by Wilhelm von Humboldt in early nineteenth-century Germany, this training was fused with intellectual enquiry through research for the sake of broadening and deepening human knowledge. Contemporary universities – including Australian universities – emphasise the importance of both

teaching and research, including the benefits of the interplay between them. Crucial to the character of a university is intellectual freedom. In medieval Europe, a charter from the Pope ensured a university's freedom in relation to local ecclesiastical or political authority. Wilhelm von Humboldt's reforms were based on the ideal of 'freedom of research and teaching'. Intellectual freedom enables a university to pursue knowledge, and to teach, without fear or favour in relation to the state, the market place or powerful interest groups. This is a right, without which a university cannot be a university, and a responsibility, which calls on all members of the university to search for truth without succumbing to the pressure or attraction of special preferment, advantages or fashions.



A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

Faith and Reason

A Catholic university is engaged in the search for truth on the basis of a religious vision, the Catholic faith. Its task is to actively pursue the individual disciplines of enquiry, respecting the autonomy of their methods, and at the same time to provide opportunities for an integration of their results in the light of the beliefs and values of a religious tradition, through teaching and research in theology and philosophy and through interdisciplinary studies. As the Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, elegantly puts it, the task of a Catholic university is ‘to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.’⁴ To ‘unite existentially’ is not merely about uniting abstractions, but to unite faith and reason through the work and commitment of members of a Catholic university and of the institution as a whole, a unity which becomes embodied and lived out.

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How is this union of faith and reason expressed in a Catholic university?

- The search for truth is engaged in with confidence that the human spirit is invited by the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to respond to the wisdom, beauty and goodness inherent in creation. A number of ancient Catholic universities have as their symbol Mary as ‘sedes sapientiae’, ‘seat of wisdom’, showing Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, seated on Mary’s lap.⁵ The search for wisdom in response to the Spirit is also a hallmark of Australian indigenous spiritual life. As John Paul II emphasised in his speech to indigenous Australians at Alice Springs in 1986: ‘for thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your “Dreaming”, which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain for ever people of your culture, is your only way of touching the mystery of God’s Spirit in you and in creation. You must keep your striving for God and hold on to it in your lives.’⁶
- In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio, On the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (1998), John Paul II expressed their unity in this way: ‘Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that,

by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves (cf. *Ex* 33:18; *Ps* 27:8-9; 63:2-3; *Jn* 14:8; 1 *Jn* 3:2).⁷

- A Catholic university affirms that truth is not self-contradictory, in particular that religious and scientific truth do not contradict each other. Pope Francis speaks eloquently of this in his *Let us Dream*, speaking of John Henry Newman, whom he canonised in October 2019. Alluding to Newman's inspiring hymn 'Lead Kindly Light' (1833), which invokes the Spirit's guidance in perplexing and challenging circumstances, he writes:

Newman was convinced, as am I, that in embracing what often appear at first sight to be contradictory truths and trusting in the kindly light to lead us, we will eventually come to see the greater truth that lies beyond us. I like to think that we do not possess the truth so much as the truth possesses us, constantly attracting us by means of beauty and goodness.⁷

A Catholic university affirms that truth is not self-contradictory, in particular that religious and scientific truth do not contradict each other.

- It eschews arrogance and presumption in the search for truth, and shows this in research by a commitment to co-operation and a 'community of scholars' and in teaching by a willingness to assist, guide and mentor.⁸
- It affirms that faith in God, that our lives and the universe itself are essentially and ultimately meaningful and in God's providential care, can inspire and motivate our search for truth, to understand ourselves and the universe.
- This attempt to unite faith and the search for truth is not exclusive but inclusive. It gives a Catholic university its charter and *raison d'être*, but does not interfere with the methods and procedures of specific disciplines, nor the academic commitment of any member of staff engaged in the search for truth.
- This response to both faith and reason is lived out within a plural and global world. ACU seeks to respect and dialogue with the different faiths and world-views that are part of Australian society. It seeks to intensify and act on an awareness of the global human family that the Catholic church across the world can help to encourage. As Pope Francis emphasises in his *Fratelli Tutti, On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (2020): 'Together, we can seek the truth in dialogue, in relaxed conversation or in

passionate debate. To do so calls for perseverance; it entails moments of silence and suffering, yet it can patiently embrace the broader experience of individuals and peoples.⁹

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An ethical stance

A key aspect of the vision of a Catholic university is an ethical stance. Its search for truth includes scientific, historical, aesthetic, and other aspects of truth. Yet, since Catholic faith proclaims the dignity of the human person made ‘in the image of God’ (Genesis 1:27), and is founded in Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh (John 1:14), a Catholic university must give special emphasis to the dignity of the human person and its ethical implications. For Catholic faith, Jesus Christ reveals to us the truth and meaning of our humanity:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of the human person take on light. For Adam, the first human, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals our humanity to ourselves and makes our supreme calling clear.¹⁰

What is the meaning of our humanity? How does this engage a Catholic university? On the basis of Catholic tradition, this is expressed in Catholic moral and social teaching, which emphasises the dignity of the human person, solidarity and the common good. It also emphasises our need to care for planet Earth, which has been entrusted to us by God.¹¹ In his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*On social concerns*) (1987) John Paul II reflects on the virtue of solidarity, which is not merely:

a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.....Solidarity helps us to see the “other” - whether a person, people or nation - not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our “neighbour,” a “helper” (cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.¹²

Love of neighbour and a mission of care

Australian Catholic University expresses the meaning of love of neighbour through its emphasis on care for others. A key expression of this is its engagement in research, teaching

and formation in the caring, healing and teaching professions. It makes a major contribution to the Australian Catholic education and health systems, and other institutions in Australian society in these fields. It is also committed to legal, technical and business education, aspiring to form its students in the highest standards of ethical integrity and social awareness. Its emphasis on care for and dedication to others finds its ultimate inspiration in Jesus Christ, who taught that ‘whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ (Matthew 25:40)

Fundamental to its ethical commitment is an awareness of the ethical questions that arise in specific disciplines, in particular the ethical implications of scientific and technical innovations. Catholic faith affirms the goodness of scientific and technical ingenuity as part of our human identity made ‘in the image of God’, but is equally sensitive to the need for this ingenuity to be embraced by wisdom, by a vision of the integrity and fragility of the human person, human community and planet Earth, through which the fruits of technical ingenuity can contribute to the common good. It encourages its staff and students to enhance and pursue the common good with both wisdom and courage. It is alert to the ways in which the desire for power and wealth can distort and abuse the search for scientific and technical knowledge.¹³ It gladly profits from the potential of digital technology, but emphasizes the importance of face-to-face teaching and the collaborative character of

university life, since education is fundamentally about encounter and exchange between embodied persons¹⁴ in a University community.

Catholic faith affirms the goodness of this world, but also recognises that we live in a suffering world. It affirms that the Word-made-flesh shared in our suffering out of love for the world (John 3:16), and that Christ’s resurrection from the dead is an unending source of hope for the Kingdom of God, when ‘every tear will be wiped away’ (Revelation 21:4) and all the potential of creation be fulfilled and made manifest. This faith is a source of mission, of commitment to serve our neighbour and care for our earth.

ACU’s motto is the ‘Truth in Love’, and its mission is to fuse the search for truth through faith and reason with love and care for our neighbour and for creation.

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An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this

magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters.¹⁵

An inclusive mission

Australian Catholic University has its foundational identity in the Christian Gospel, but it affirms that love and care have their own powerful self-evidence. With gratitude and appreciation, it welcomes and affirms the commitment to academic integrity and care for others displayed by all its members, of any creed or none. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *Deus caritas est, On Christian Love* (2005), there are contexts when a witness to faith is not required, when love itself speaks:

Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love (cf. 1 *Jn* 4:8) and that God's presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love.¹⁶

Australian Catholic University seeks to offer all its students and staff opportunities for personal enrichment, growth and development, as well as

the individual attention and concern summed up in Christian tradition as 'pastoral care'. At the same time, it provides opportunities for specifically Christian formation to all staff and students who seek it, through campus ministry and a range of programmes and experiences that are explicitly concerned with Catholic faith, theology and practice. Its life includes a regular cycle of liturgical events and opportunities to participate in prayer and the celebration and reception of the sacraments. It welcomes the contribution of staff and students of other Christian churches and seeks to express and live out an ecumenical understanding of Catholic identity. It also welcomes the faith and commitment of members of other world faiths, affirms them in their own journey of faith, and seeks to provide opportunities for interfaith dialogue.¹⁷

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ASPECTS OF THE IDENTITY AND MISSION OF ACU: AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION

- 1** ACU is a university, dedicated to the search for truth and the dissemination of knowledge and understanding through teaching. It is committed to academic freedom in research and teaching.
- 2** It is a public and publicly funded university, based in co-operation between the Commonwealth Government and the Australian Catholic Church. As such it has responsibilities both to the Australian public and to the agencies of the Catholic Church.
- 3** It is a Catholic university, an embodiment of the tradition of Catholic universities that began in medieval Europe. As such, it affirms the compatibility and mutual enrichment of faith and reason.
- 4** Inspired by faith in Jesus Christ, it affirms the dignity of the human person, the common good, and the demands of solidarity and care of the earth. It welcomes and appreciates the contribution to its community and mission of all its members, of any religious creed or none, and seeks to respond with respect and generosity to a plural and global world.
- 5** It offers pastoral care to all its members, and Christian formation, together with participation in prayer and liturgy, to all its members who seek it. It affirms an ecumenical Catholic identity, and welcomes the commitment of members of other world faiths.
- 6** It is committed to care for others, within its own community of scholars and students, and to members of the broader community, especially those for whom its programmes of education, training and healing are intended.
- 7** It affirms and encourages the aspirations, methods and goals of individual disciplines, and at the same time pays particular attention to the ethical implications of scientific and technical innovation.
- 8** It seeks to recognise and support all its members, both staff and students, in their work and endeavours, recognising the fundamental equality of human persons and the contribution that each makes to the University.

THE NURTURE OF IDENTITY AND MISSION AT ACU

In order to support these eight key aspects of ACU's identity and mission, the University:

- Recognises that mission literacy education is an ongoing formative process in the union of human hearts and minds. Thus, the University provides formative learning opportunities in mission literacy for all staff. Unique to a Catholic university, and anchored in a values based discourse, these programs offer time and tools for staff to discern and deepen the personal and professional frame works through which they understand, express and align with the mission at ACU.
- Works continuously to align its internal culture to the values identified in its mission. The integration of its mission is key to all University operations, providing it with a distinct identity as both Catholic and inclusive: because it is a Catholic university, ACU welcomes all of good will who seek to act in truth and love as they pursue knowledge, human dignity and the common good.



REFERENCES

1. John Ritchie, *Lachlan Macquarie: A Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986), 184.
2. The 'binary system' was the name given to the administration of higher education in Australia prior to the reforms initiated by the Hawke government minister John Dawkins in the 1980s; it referred to the co-existence of both Universities and Colleges of Higher Education. Essentially, Universities were funded for research, Colleges for teaching. This distinction became increasingly inadequate, leading to the development of the 'Unified National System' from the late 1980s, through which the Colleges could also be granted University status, including a process of amalgamations in a number of instances.
3. John Hirst, *Australia's Catholic University: The First Twenty-Five Years*. (Australian Catholic University, 2015), Chapter 1, 'Brother Ambrose's Campaign' and Chapter 2 'The Planning'. Brother Ambrose Payne FSC had been principal of the Catholic College of Education Sydney and became CEO of the Amalgamation Implementation Committee overseeing the foundation of ACU.
4. John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1.
5. Mary as 'sedes sapientiae' is the symbol of, for example, the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, and the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. ACU has embraced this tradition through its John Fahey Memorial Chapel of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom at the Mackillop Campus, North Sydney, in particular the triptych of Mary Seat of Wisdom with Mary Mackillop and Saint Joseph, painted as a contemporary expression of late medieval Sienese art.
6. Address of John Paul II to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in 'Blatherskite Park,' Alice Springs (29th November, 1986), 1. Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, indigenous teacher and artist from the Daly River region, Senior Australian of the Year, 2021, conceives of this wisdom as the fruit of 'dadirri,' listening and deep contemplation.
7. Pope Francis; Austen Ivereigh. *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020.) Kindle Edition, 56.
8. As Isaac Newton, one of the greatest scientists, once said: "I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."
9. Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 50.
10. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 22.
11. Particularly emphasised in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, *On Care for Our Common Home* (2015).
12. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38 and 39.
13. In his *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis emphasises the dangers inherent in the 'technocratic paradigm': 'Never has humanity had such power over

itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used.’ (104) The Congregation for Catholic Education’s *Educating to Fraternal Humanism* (2017) also emphasises the tendency of the technocratic paradigm to lessen ‘a relationship of solidarity with the generations that came before us’ by downplaying ‘historical, intellectual and humanistic knowledge.’ (22)

14. The Catholic conception of the human person, inspired by faith in the ‘incarnation’ or ‘becoming flesh’ of the Word of God, emphasizes the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical dimensions of the person and their unity, so that human communication and community is most fully realized in ways which do justice to this multi-dimensional reality.

15. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), 183.

16. *Deus caritas est*, 31.

17. In this it aspires to follow the example of Pope Francis in his dialogue with Ahmad Al Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al Azhar University, embodied in their joint document *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (2019).



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