Sharing commitment to the common good

Australia’s only national, Catholic, public university, with six campuses across four states, celebrates strong links with religious orders which have served to improve health, education and human services in Australia for more than 150 years.

The continued sharing of buildings, staff and resources is supported by shared ideals which continue to make ACU National distinctive – ideals drawn from a rich Catholic heritage.

A number of current leaders of religious orders associated with the University’s foundation offered the following views on ventures and values the institutions have in common.

Priorress of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands Sister Rosemary Lewins OP was principal of Signadou Dominican College of Education in Canberra, now ACU National’s Canberra Campus, when a number of Catholic colleges of advanced education were amalgamated in 1991 to form the University. She became the Founding Dean of Students.

“ACU National is doing everything I would have hoped,” she said. “I have seen it closely from within. Its profile is important, and I am very positive about it.”

Sister Rosemary said she believed that having a Catholic university emphasised that “faith can be a part of ordinary life and part of education.

“I think to be able to look at ethics and raise questions of concern to our time is very important, and while other universities do it to an extent, ACU National can do it in a way that is part of the Mission,” Sister Rosemary said. “A sense of commitment to the common good, part of the Mission, is very important to maintain.”

The North Sydney Campus enjoys many links with the education and social justice traditions established by the Sisters of St Joseph, whose founder, Mary MacKillop, said, “Never see a need without doing something about it”.

Among the Sisters’ nearby buildings, Mary Mackillop Place accommodates some ACU National lectures and meetings. The Mary MacKillop Foundation, supporting people in need, provides valuable prizes and scholarships for Indigenous and other students, and director Sister Brigette Sipa RSJ greatly welcomes ACU National students as volunteers for the many programs she heads.

The Sisters of the Good Samaritan Congregational Leader Sister Clare Condon SGS praised the University’s continuation of their tradition of educating “high-quality” teachers.

“The Sisters are proud of the part they have played in the education of young people across Australia over the past 150 years,” Sister Clare said. “A significant part of that heritage has been the formation of teachers. In particular, now we see ACU National continuing this high-quality formation of teachers for Catholic education into the future.”
Sisters of Mercy congregational leader Sister Veronica Lawson RSM reflected on a century of service in Ballarat which continues through ACU National’s activities.

“We take enormous pride in the fact that there have always been Sisters of Mercy on staff at ACU National’s Ballarat Campus and its predecessor institutions,” Sister Veronica said.

“We also take pride in the developments at the University that have permitted the initiatives of our Mercy pioneers to flourish in new contexts for new times and in partnership with others who share a similar Gospel-focused vision.”

Marist Brothers Provincial Brother Jeffrey Crowe FMS believes ACU National has a “privileged role” in shaping the next generation of educators and youth workers, building on worthy traditions.

“Institutions such as ACU National are enormously important in researching and communicating the rich tradition of the Church but also in promoting conversation and dialogue with the next generation of religious educators on how to bring faith, life and culture into harmony,” Brother Jeffrey said.

“Education for us is about the nuts and bolts of successful schools and targeted social initiatives, helping young people develop their talents and achieve their ambitions. It is also about human formation in all its dimensions, something that demands active presence, simplicity of relationships, and a community setting.”

Although the University’s Melbourne Campus is now based in Fitzroy, Brigidine Sisters’ Principal Sister Helen Toohy CSB recalls the Brigidine Sisters providing the fledgling University with space from their teachers’ training college at Malvern and Chadstone.

“We have had a continuing relationship with ACU National since its founding,” Sister Helen said.

She felt that the University was “steeped in the best of the Church’s traditions, the best of learning and the best of social concern” and was pleased that theology and the concept of “faith seeking understanding” continued to be respected.

“At ACU National, young people are being deepened and expanded for a complicated world,” she said. “Life can be better. This is what Jesus taught.”

Marist Brothers Melbourne Vice Provincial Brother John McMahon FMS has praised the “strong relationship” with ACU National, strengthened further in 1998 when the University’s School of Educational Leadership gave approval for the establishment of the Marcellin Champagnat Postgraduate Project in Victoria, which offers part-time Masters’ studies to staff of Marist schools, with courses in Marist Studies administered by the Marist Brothers’ Congregation.

“Students find these studies to be particularly relevant to their day-to-day work in education,” Brother John said.

“The Marist Brothers are grateful for this opportunity to share some of their own resources in providing these academic opportunities for students within the framework of a well-respected Catholic university.”

Christian Brothers in Oceania Deputy Provincial Brother Peter Harney CFC reflected on how “the Christian Brothers Congregation, like the University, has had to adapt and change the way it operates and interacts with society in response to new questions that are now being asked of politics, education, religion and the justice system”.

Brother Peter described a tradition of responding sensitively and intelligently to the “signs of the times”, and traced changes embraced by both institutions during the past century, including optimism and openness following Vatican II in the 1960s, and more recently, appreciation of “the whole earth community, not just humanity”.

The Christian Brothers and the University, including the Institute for Advancing Community Engagement, were providing practical examples of this new cosmology in action, Brother Peter said, sharing “the challenging call to respond to our world so that all sentient beings have life and have it to the full”.

Presentation Sisters Congregation Leader Victoria Sister Maria Lazzaro PBVM said the Sisters’ long involvement in Catholic education had continued with the formation of the University, with Sisters serving as members of staff and supervising trainee teachers, youth leaders, community volunteers and field placements in Pastoral Ministries.

“Alongside this direct involvement has been the continued interest in and support for the development of the University as a key educational centre serving the vision and mission of the Gospel,” Sister Maria said.