

Priest and anthropologist who asks the tough questions to be awarded ACU's highest honour

Fundamentalism, conspiracy madness, and the culture of abuse and cover-ups in the Church are among the complex issues Fr Gerald Arbuckle SM has investigated as an anthropologist of 60 years.

Next week, Australian Catholic University will honour Fr Arbuckle's continual study of contemporary cultures with an honorary degree of Doctor of the University (Honoris Causa).

The honorary doctorate is in recognition of Fr Arbuckle's contribution to the academic tradition of the Church, and for bringing the interplay between faith and reason to bear on complex religious and social policy issues for the betterment of society. It will be conferred at an ACU Graduation ceremony in Sydney on May 18.

"The type of work I've done has often meant that I must struggle to academically and pastorally pioneer new ground. This can be an exacting task but a thrilling one. So I am most grateful to the Chancellor and Senate of ACU for this honour," Fr Arbuckle said.

A priestly scholar with an international reputation, Fr Arbuckle is a member of the Marist Fathers' community in Hunters Hill, NSW. As an anthropologist, he has been a consultant to global private and public healthcare systems, including being appointed to a NSW government Independent Panel to oversee the reform of the state's public hospital system.

He has also written 25 books on various anthropological quests including institutional aging and refounding, and maintaining the Catholic ethos in healthcare and schools.

"Since the early 60s I have been trying to unravel complexities of cultures, and to ask tough questions in order to open up the dialogue between theology and culture," Fr Arbuckle said.

Born and raised in New Zealand, Fr Arbuckle was a young priest when his far-seeing congregation's superior asked him to study social science to understand the world beyond the church doors. He graduated from Cambridge University as a cultural anthropologist – the only priest in his class - in 1963, years before the closing of the Second Vatican Council.

Fr Arbuckle said the focus of anthropology was the study of culture.

"Culture is often called a silent language in the sense that we are not always conscious that it influences our attitudes and behaviour," he said.

"So the anthropologist's task is to help people and institutions to become aware of these hidden positive or negative influences.

"When I first started anthropology, people were enormously surprised. It was a little-known discipline even in Cambridge in those days. It was considered a fringe subject, of little use to economists, investors, and others in the modern world. But not now. Its cultural insights assist people to understand hidden forces shaping their daily life, no matter what their role is in society. This doctorate acknowledges the helpful role cultural anthropology now plays in the study of society and the Church. I am most encouraged that this is happening."

As he approaches his 90th year on earth, Fr Arbuckle is nowhere close to retiring. Instead, he is working on his 26th book, a look into the dangers of conspiracy theories.

"The world is awash with these alarming theories today. Autocrats use them to gain and hold on to power. So what are they, why do they flourish in times of chaos, do the scriptures say anything about them? These urgent questions need pastoral answers," said Fr Arbuckle.

Fr Arbuckle will use his Occasional Address in Sydney next week to encourage ACU graduates to take inspiration from the popular parable of the Good Samaritan when responding to the ongoing human costs of the Covid pandemic.

"The pandemic was an illness, but it has catalysed enormous political upheavals in nations, and massive injustices in many parts of the world, and opened the way also for anarchy and populous figures to emerge," Fr Arbuckle said.

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MEDIA RELEASE

11 May 2023



“It’s in this (post-Covid) world we have to find some balance. The Good Samaritan story has acted as a moral foundation of western society over centuries. I’ll be reminding the graduates that their task is to re-own and live the Good Samaritan values of justice, compassion and mercy. In so doing they will help to maintain our democratic way of life.”

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